ONCE THERE WAS

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| CHAPTER ONE |

THE GIRL WHO SAVED A UNICORN

Once was, once wasn't.

A long time ago, in that forest that lies between the Alborz Mountains and the Caspian Sea, a girl went foraging for mushrooms.

It had rained the day before. The ground was soft and damp, and the air smelled of loam and moss. It was a good day for mushrooms, and the girl had nearly filled her basket with lion's mane and hen-of-the-woods when she heard a sound away off in the trees. It sounded like an animal crying out in pain.

There were leopards in the forest, and jackals and brown bears. But this girl didn't like to think of any creature suffering. So she set out into the forest in the direction of the sound, to see if she could help. A little way off the path, in a clearing in the deep woods, she found the source of the cries.

The unicorn was bleeding and scared, its leg caught in a hunter's snare. It was a huge beast, and very wild. The girl had never seen such an animal before, and she knew at once that it was special. She also knew that as soon as the hunter returned to check on his snare, the unicorn would be no more. So she

swallowed her fear and crept up on it, as gently and as carefully as she could. To calm it down, she offered it some of the mushrooms she'd picked. And when she felt it was safe to approach, the girl bent down and opened up the trap.

The beast seemed to fill the entire clearing with its long legs and its sharp, treacherous horn. The girl stood there frozen, too awed and frightened to move. The unicorn looked at its saviour for a long time. Then it took a cautious step on its injured leg towards the girl, lowered its massive head, and plunged its horn into her chest, right above her heart.

The girl fell to the ground, and as she did, a piece of the unicorn's horn broke off inside her. The unicorn watched her for another moment, then turned and loped off into the woods, favouring its wounded leg, and was not seen again for a hundred years.

The girl, bleeding and in shock, managed to gather enough strength to return to the village at the edge of the woods, where she lived. There she collapsed and was carried to her bed. She lay there for many days. At first no one thought she would survive. But after a day, the bleeding stopped. And after three days, the pain began to subside. Slowly the wound grew smaller and smaller, until all that remained was a crescent-shaped scar, just above her heart, and a little piece of unicorn horn, lodged between her ribs.

Time passed, and the girl became a woman. She married, and had children, and when they were born, some of them had crescent birthmarks above their hearts too. And so did some of their children, and their children's children, and so on. It's said, though no one can be sure, that some of the girl's descendants are still alive today, and that a few of them still carry that mark on their skin, where the unicorn first touched her.

And it's whispered that maybe, just maybe, there's still a little of the unicorn inside them.

| CHAPTER TWO |

THE WORK

I shouldn't have been working on reception.

A vet's is no place for an impatient person, and I was furious with everything and everyone in the universe. But Dominic needed a lunch break, and the techs were all busy, and as my dad would have said, *The world does not stop for our feelings, Marjan.* Which left me as the friendly face of our practice. So there I was, praying the phone wouldn't ring, and that the lobby would remain empty for the next half-hour, so that I could be angry at the world in peace.

Mainly I was angry about two things. The first thing was the clinic itself. As of three weeks ago, the West Berkeley Animal Clinic belonged to me. I'd never asked for it, and the first week of my sophomore year in high school wasn't exactly the best time to suddenly become the owner of a debt-saddled veterinary clinic. In addition to school, homework and what passed for a social life, I now had payroll, rent, utilities, insurance and a bunch of other responsibilities I didn't want. Including covering the reception desk so Dominic could take lunch.

And then there was the way it had happened.

This was my dad's clinic. He was a vet, and he'd owned the place for as long as I could remember. Dads don't normally just hand over their businesses to their teenaged daughters. But my dad wasn't normal. Anyway, he hadn't had much of a choice.

The police weren't sure exactly how he'd been killed. There was no murder weapon, but no one could figure out how a person could have done *that* with just their bare hands. I heard one of the first responders say that it looked like he'd been hit by a truck. But even that didn't explain the burns.

There were no suspects. There were no fingerprints, no footprints. There was no DNA, no hair samples or skin flakes or anything else you see in the TV shows. There was no security camera footage. There wasn't even a motive that anyone could guess. Nothing had been stolen from our house. Nothing had been disturbed, except in the room where my dad had died.

So that was the second thing I was angry about.

I'd been coming to the clinic for the past week. Mostly I kept to my dad's old office, which was quiet and small and felt safe in a way nowhere else did. Or I hung out in the procedure room, where I could put on a face mask and disappear, and all I had to do was pet the animals and keep them calm. The lobby felt exposed. I felt like a puppy in a pet shop window, only instead of a puppy, I was a wolverine, and rabid.

But there was no one else to do it, so I'd sat down in Dominic's chair, and dug my fingernails into my palms to distract myself, and told myself I'd be okay – not fine, not by a long shot – but okay, as long as I didn't have to talk to anyone.

I was telling myself that when the door opened.

She came right up to the desk, no hesitation, a heat-seeking missile with a happy face drawn on. I guessed she was in her

early twenties. Brown hair, delicate wire-frame glasses, brown eyes that locked on mine the second she saw me. A smile that made me feel a bit like a friend, and a bit like prey.

She didn't have an animal with her. Never a good sign, at a vet's.

"You must be Marjan," she said. "I'm sorry about your dad."

And she knew my name. Even worse.

"Who are you?" The edge in my voice could have cut bone, but her smile never even flinched.

"We've never met," she said.

"Did he owe you money?" I asked. "Because you'll have to talk to his accountant, and I can pretty much guarantee . . ."

She waved the question away, then reached into her canvas bag, drew out a business card, and set it on the reception desk in front of me. There were no words on it, just a symbol foil-stamped in bronze – a teakettle with a serpentine shape coiled inside it. I waited to see if she would explain what I was looking at, until it became clear that she was waiting for me to recognize it.

"No?" she said at last. I shook my head. She smiled again, a sad smile. "He didn't tell you. Is there somewhere we can talk?"

"About what?" I asked.

"Lots of things," she said. "Your dad. What happened to him." She paused. "The work."

The work.

The way she said those words stirred something warm and alien in my chest. Maybe it was just more anger – a nice vintage anger I'd been holding on to for a long time. Or maybe it was something else. Maybe it was curiosity.

Maybe it was hope.

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Sometimes, when they called his mobile phone, I'd pick it up. My dad hated that.

"Is Jim Dastani there?" they'd say, which always sounded weird to me. My dad's name was Jamsheed. 'Jim' felt like an especially pathetic kind of cultural surrender, because aside from being aggressively ordinary, it didn't even work. He was so obviously not a 'Jim'.

I'd make sure whoever was calling heard me shouting "DAAAAAD! It's for YOOOUUUU!" because that seemed about the most unprofessional first impression you could make on a client. My dad would come thumping down the stairs, two at a time. Whenever he was annoyed, he made a face that was kind of like a smile, if a smile were physically painful. To be fair, though, a lot of things looked physically painful when my dad did them – eating, laughing, sleeping. Which is probably why he didn't do any of those things as much as he should have.

Snatching the phone from my hands, he'd give me a stern look, like I was about to be in trouble. But I never was. What was he going to do? Ground me? You can't ground someone if you're not there to enforce it.

He'd take the call into his room, not a word to me. He'd shut the door, and no matter how hard I pressed my ear to it, all I'd hear would be murmurs.

The calls never lasted very long. He'd open the door as soon as they were over, hand the phone back to me, not angry or even annoyed any more. In his head, he was already packing, already leaving, already heading to the airport or the train station or wherever the hell he went.

"So, where to this time?" I'd ask when I really felt like being a brat.

If I was lucky, he might say something like "Somewhere warm", or, "It's a quiet little town." That's about all I'd get. Whether he was actually talking to me, or just reminding himself so that he packed the right things, was never exactly clear. And he might ignore me completely until the bag was packed.

Our ritual, the real ritual, happened at the door. He'd stop at the doorway, like he'd just remembered something, and he'd turn round. Always, I'd be there, waiting for that moment.

"Marjan," he'd say, "everything you need is—"

"I know." There was no need to go over it – credit card in the kitchen drawer, cash in an envelope next to the sink. Emergency phone numbers – the ones that actually called the local police and fire departments instead of the traffic police – taped up next to a business card for a local taxi service, and the number for the pizza place that delivered. Everything I needed was where it always was.

Then the promise. "I'll be home soon."

'Soon' could mean a day, or it could mean a week. I wouldn't know until it was over.

Then he'd put the bag down and hug me. I guess I used to hug back, when I was younger. Hard to remember. He'd hold me like that a few seconds, and then the apology.

"I'm sorry. One day . . ."

Right. One day this would make sense.

When I was younger, I thought all vets had clients like this. After Mom died, I started to figure out how weird it was. I used to get angry at him for leaving. Then, later, I got mean. I accused him of being all kinds of things. Drug smuggler. Spy. Had another secret family, somewhere across the country. Or maybe I was the secret family.

"It's just people who need my help," was always his

explanation. And because I'd never seen him care about anything more than he cared about his work, I believed him.

Then he'd say, "I love you."

Never really sure what he meant by that. He was always leaving when he said it.

Finally, the last look. The one where I felt like an animal on the table in the procedure room, like he was trying to spot the tumour, or the infection, or the worm in my eye. And then the little sigh of defeat, like whatever it was he'd seen was beyond his power to fix.

That's how he'd leave me, ever since I was ten years old – completely on my own, wondering what was wrong with me.

And in the end, that's how he left me, for ever.

That was the work.

I convinced Dr Paulson to lend me her tech for a few minutes to watch the lobby. Then I led the woman back to my dad's office and shut the door behind us.

The office wasn't really designed for meetings. The walls were too tight, and the desk was too big. You could fit two people comfortably enough, if one of them sat on the floor, which was what I usually did when my dad was alive. But this wasn't that kind of meeting, and so we both bumbled around the desk, shuffling the chairs so that we could sit, see each other, and not be too cramped against a wall or a bookshelf. I had the odd feeling that my dad was somehow standing between us, shouldering this way and that, making things even harder. But of course, that was impossible.

Finally we figured out how to both sit without bumping knees. The woman placed one hand on the desk, palm up, and smiled at me.

"Can I see your hand?" she asked.

I don't know what I thought she wanted my hand for, but the confidence with which she asked for it was enough for me to place it on top of hers, palm up. Before I could say anything, she had jabbed a needle into the tip of my index finger, and squeezed up a tiny red pearl of blood.

"Ow!" I said. "What the hell?"

It wasn't until I tried to pull my hand back that I noticed how tight her grip had become.

"Just a minute," she said calmly. "There's nothing to be worried about."

She dabbed up the blood with a thin strip of paper, which she then set on the desk between us. As I watched the blood spread up the paper, she let my hand go.

"Have you ever heard of the Hyrcanian Line?" she asked.

"Um, have you ever heard of asking before you stick someone with a sharp object? What was that?"

"A sterile needle," she said. "Promise."

She picked up the test strip and held it to the light. It was hard to say for sure, but it seemed like some kind of pattern was emerging in the places where my blood had bloomed. The woman smiled to herself, a smile of relief and satisfaction.

"I'm sorry about that," she said. "It won't happen again. Now, the Hyrcanian Line: Have you heard of it?"

I had not heard of the Hyrcanian Line.

"I'm going to assume, then, that you don't know anything at all," said the woman, "and that what I'm going to tell you will come as a surprise."

She opened her bag and took out a brown envelope, then slid it across the desk to me.

"I need you to go to England," she said. "Tonight."

"Excuse me?" I said.

"Everything's paid for," she continued. "It's all there. The only ticket available was first class. I figured you wouldn't mind."

"Are you joking?" She didn't look like she was joking. "Who are you? What's the Hyrcanian Line?"

She ignored my questions. "A man named Simon Stoddard will pick you up at the airport and take you to an estate in the Midlands. Does this make sense so far?"

"Sure," I said. "I fly to the other side of the world, where some guy I don't know takes me somewhere I've never heard of. Then what happens?"

"Then you'll meet a griffon," she said. "It's sick. You'll help it."

"A griffon," I said. "You mean, like a dog? A Brussels griffon? You know I'm not a vet, right? You know I'm fifteen."

"I know," she said. "And no, nothing like a dog."

I kept checking her face for signs that this was some kind of elaborate prank, but all she gave me was a half-hidden smile that seemed like it had been baked into her face. Finally I took the envelope and opened it. Inside was a plane ticket – first class, as promised – and a stack of candy-coloured British currency. All of it looked very real.

"A griffon," I said again. "What am I supposed to do with a griffon?"

"Meet it, examine it, make a recommendation," she said. "That's all. And then you'll come back."

"A recommendation?"

"You'll understand," she said.

"Who are you?" I asked. "What is this?"

She took off her glasses, folded them, and set them on the desk.

"This," she said, "is the work."

"Why should I believe you?" I asked. "Why should I believe any of this?"

"Because if you trust me, maybe I can help you find out who killed your dad."

Her face, playful a moment before, became suddenly serious.

"I don't know who it was," she said, in answer to the question my face must have been asking. "But I'd like to know. I'd like to help. We'd like to help."

"Who's we?"

She sat forward, resting her hands on the table. "Did he ever mention Ithaca?"

"Ithaca?"

"I know this is a hard time. And I know you have questions. Right now, it's better this way. We can talk more when you get back."

"Who says I'm going? I have the clinic. I have school."

"Of course you do," she said. She stood up to go, a movement that would have been dramatic if not for the tight quarters. She nodded at the envelope, its contents fanned out on the desk in front of me. "Well, hang on to all that, in case you change your mind."

Then she turned and walked out of the door.

Technically I *did* have the clinic. But I was pretty sure we would be out of business within months. When I looked at the numbers, I couldn't for the life of me see how they had ever worked. Even Dominic, who had managed the office with unwavering confidence for the last two years, was starting to remind me of an old shelter dog who'd given up all hope of ever being adopted.

And school, well. I hadn't been there since Dad died. I

wasn't really looking forward to going back. I didn't need my whole class looking at me and trying to figure out what to say.

Still, I collected the things the woman had left behind and put them back into the envelope. It was easier to be reasonable with myself when I wasn't looking at a stack of money and a first-class ticket to somewhere else. I stood up and walked back out to the lobby.

There was a picture of my dad on the wall. Dr Paulson had put it up after he died, after checking with me that it was okay. It was the same picture that he'd used for everything – the website, all the brochures that the medicine companies printed for us for free. I'd seen it a million times. He was wearing his white jacket, with a light blue button-down shirt underneath. His face was long and thin and the colour of chestnut. He had a serious expression, like someone in a picture from a hundred years ago who's never had their picture taken before. Eyebrows clenched together, mouth tight, thick black hair swept away from his face, his dark glaring eyes softened by long, delicate lashes. Jamsheed Dastani – a man of education and wisdom, a man of compassion, a man you'd trust with your pet.

It was a convincing illusion. If you really looked, though, the eyes broke it. They were heavy and haunted, the eyes of a lost soul. The picture's secret – the one you'd only figure out if you studied it a million times, like I had – was that he wasn't really looking at the camera. His face was tilted the right way, and the eyeline was close enough to fool almost anyone. But his gaze was really fixed on something far away and sad, just like it had been when he was alive.

I looked at the picture then. It was demanding my attention, like it had just cleared its throat, like it had something to

say. But it didn't say anything. My dad's eyes gazed out of the frame, looked past me towards things in the distance, things he never talked about.

It would, of course, be incredibly reckless to get on an international flight, bound for a mysterious destination, to administer care I was unqualified to give to a creature that didn't exist. No thinking person would ever do something so dangerously stupid.

I looked at my dad's picture until I couldn't stand it any longer. This was his fault. All of it. This clinic, this waste of time and money that was now legally my responsibility: his fault. This strange woman and her unreasonable requests: his fault. The fact that I was even considering them: his fault.

Someone had murdered him one afternoon, in his own home: his fault.

I walked back to Exam One, where Dr Paulson was just finishing with her patient. I knocked gently on the door, then opened it a crack.

"Something wrong?" asked Dr Paulson.

I'd always liked Dr Paulson. She was blunt, but in a way that felt compassionate. Our resident avian specialist, she loved all animals, but birds in particular. She had a pair of lovebirds named Tristan and Iseult, and an African grey named Hemingway that recited T. S. Eliot and Emily Dickinson with manic glee whenever she brought him into the office. She kept a copy of *The Sibley Guide to Birds* on her desk, and two framed prints from *Audubon's Birds of North America* hung on her wall. She even reminded me a bit of a bird sometimes – something still and patient and precise, a heron maybe. She was tall and slender and serious, but it wasn't that. It was the stillness – the way certain kinds of hunting birds can freeze and become part of the landscape.

That's how she seemed to me in that moment. Poised and alert, scanning for information.

"I think I'm going to go home, Dr P," I said.

That was it – I would go home and think about things in a rational way, and having done that, I'd see that getting on a plane to England with no idea who or what awaited me there was reckless and irresponsible.

"I'm sure we'll manage," said Dr P. "Everything okay?"

"Yep," I lied. "All good. I think I just need to rest a bit."

And stop thinking delirious thoughts about flying halfway across the world.

"You have to take care of yourself," said Dr Paulson.

"Oh, and I might take a couple days off."

Wait, what? Had I just said that?

"Of course," she said. "Whatever you need to do."

"Thanks, Dr P," I said.

I must have been making a weird face. It felt like too much work to be a normal face.

"Marjan?" she asked. "Are you okay?"

"Fine," I said. "I'm fine." I don't think I sounded fine.

"If you ever want to talk," she said, "I'm here."

She looked like she wanted to talk, which made me want to talk even less. The last thing I needed to hear was how someone else was handling the death of my father.

"Thanks," I said. "I'm good."

Before she could say another word, I drew back out of the room and shut the door behind me. I stopped one last time in front of the picture of my dad, and tried to stand so that he was actually looking me in the eye. But everywhere I tilted and cocked my head, he was still looking past me.

"If I die," I said to the picture, "it's your fault."

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I did go home, so that wasn't a lie.

Home was a fifty-year-old stucco house in the north Berkeley flatlands. From the street, it was a simple grey wall with two windows, a cement porch and a door, beneath a street light on a telephone pole and a maple tree that grew from a square of dirt in the pavement. My dad's Civic sat in the driveway, gathering leaves at the base of the windscreen. It hadn't been started since he died.

I was walking my bike up the steps from the street to the porch when I heard my name from behind me.

"Marjan, how are you, sweetie?" asked a warm voice, filled with care.

My next-door neighbour, a bustling woman named Francesca Wix, was now my legal guardian. She lived in a little old house that she'd inherited from her grandfather, with a revolving cast of foster dogs that my dad had treated for free, a year-round garden of fruits and vegetables, and an impressive collection of romance novels. She was three inches shorter than me, but her voice, toughened by years of peaceful protest, more than made up the difference. She wore bright, chunky ponchos with African designs, and big round glasses that made her eyes look like they were about to pop delightfully out of her head. When she wasn't phone banking or making protest signs, Francesca worked at an anarchist bookshop. I'd never been there, but I often wondered if they had a romance section.

She'd volunteered to be my guardian partly because she felt like she owed my dad for all the years of free vet care, and partly because she was the kind of person who volunteered for things. On the day the approval came back from the courts,

she brought us empanadas and Mexican Coca-Cola, and laid out her rules.

"Grief's weird," she said. "Do whatever you need to. You don't need to tell me or ask permission. But –" and here she paused, wiped a crumb from her cheek, and became serious – "no drugs."

Mostly she was too consumed with her dogs, her plants, and her anarchy to do much legal guarding. Still, she signed all the documents that needed signing, and occasionally she left food on my doorstep. Other than that, she stayed out of my life except to make sure, every time she saw me, that I was holding up okay, and not doing drugs.

"I'm fine," I said.

"You're home early," she said, pushing her glasses up so they rested atop her close-cropped afro.

"I'm tired." Yep, that was it. Tired. Definitely not on my way to do something incredibly stupid.

"Do you need anything?"

I shrugged and shook my head. There were many things I needed, but I wasn't going to get them from Francesca Wix. With a wave and a forced smile, I left her at the bottom of the steps and carried the bike into the house.

The inside of my house was as dreary as the outside. A little kitchen with a tired old electric range and a noisy refrigerator that was probably in violation of the Paris Accords; a living room where very little living had ever happened; and a dark upper floor with two bedrooms, one bathroom, and an extra room full of boxed-up stuff that we never used for anything.

Just a girl, coming home early. The fact that I was emptying out my backpack, and then filling it up again – some clothes, toiletries, a passport (never used) – didn't mean anything. Nothing to see here.

They'd found my dad in his bedroom. Someone had called 911 and then hung up. The front door had been open. The first day, the whole house had been taped off, and detectives had come and gone, gathering and cataloguing evidence. Then they'd packed up their stuff, handed me a receipt for the things they'd taken, shut his bedroom door, and disappeared. I hadn't opened it since.

I paused outside it. Right then it felt like that door was everything my dad had been in life. Closed. Silent. Full of dark and probably unpleasant secrets I'd so far managed to avoid.

I wanted it to stay closed for ever. And I wanted to kick it down.

My ears were ringing and my heart was pounding. My feet itched to move. It felt like my whole body was vibrating with electricity, with questions, with hunger. I had a bag in one hand and a plane ticket in the other. What was I doing?

Nothing about the next few hours felt real.

From the car ride to the airport – I sat in the back of a shuttle van in quiet, stunned disbelief that I'd even come this far – to the fact that the airline was willing to honour the piece of paper I handed them as if it were in fact a ticket, and a first-class one at that, I felt like I was walking deeper and deeper into a slow-moving fever-dream, until I was actually on a plane, watching as the doors closed and the world I thought I knew fell away outside the window.

I had no idea where I was going, and what would be expected of me when I got there. I had no idea how to prepare – or even if any preparation would help. When I thought back to my conversation with the woman, I wished I'd asked more questions, or asked the same questions over and over until she had

answered them. A *griffon*? Was that really what she'd said? Had I heard her wrong? And anyway, why me? What good would I be to anyone, least of all a griffon?

But for all the questions I wished I could ask her, there were a million more I wished I could ask my dad. They were buzzing and whispering in my ears and in my head and in my heart, all the time, every day. They made me angry, and the anger made me exhausted. And if I didn't at least try to answer them, they'd probably keep buzzing and whispering for the rest of my life. I'd probably be angry for ever.

Somewhere over Hudson Bay, the exhaustion overrode the anger and strangeness, and I fell asleep and dreamed about a story my dad had told me, when I was very young.