

**THE MEMORY
OF BLOOD**

One night in Paris

POV: ALDEN RIGBY-WILLIAMS

Could he *feel* her breathing? Was it even possible to hear it over the beat of the horses' hooves? Wrapped inside the carriage together, the entire world seemed to rise and fall with her breath. Their shared breath. In and out. Up and down. Hypnotic. Intoxicating. Consuming. It was as if her breath was fluttering under his skin.

It was strange to be alone, just the two of them. After the grand spaces and whirl of summer at the Chateau, the intimacy of the carriage was overpowering. Alden was intensely aware of the length of seat separating their bodies. A seven-inch ocean that could be crossed by simply reaching out his hand.

At one point he imagined he could feel the warmth of her thigh against his. Radiating out from her skirts, across the cushions towards him. He lay his hand on the seat, absently letting his fingers stroke the velvet, as if that could somehow pull her to him.

Outside the coachman urged the horses on and they lurched forward. Alden looked out the window. Fields rolled past, sun-faded golds. Wheat being harvested, chaff blowing in the air.

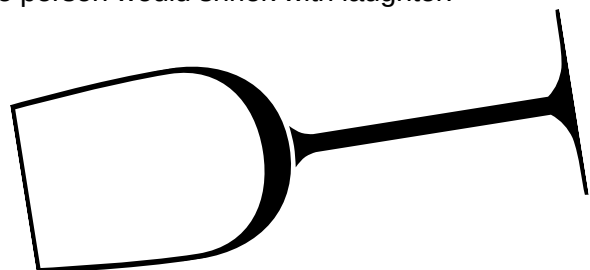
Mina, Mina, Mina. What was she thinking, he wondered, a question so familiar he barely noticed its presence. What was happening inside her head? Did she think of him?

Turning back from the window, he watched her out of the corner of his eye. Her hands resting calmly in her lap. Did she have the slightest clue to what was roaring inside him?

The roar of her. Fuck. His head was full of it. Her laughter, how she smelled. He'd find himself thinking of the skin on her neck. He would be doing something – reading, working, walking down the street – and suddenly a piece of her would float, entirely unbidden, into full frame. The creamy nape of her neck; that downy indent under her ear where his lips would fit so perfectly.

Perhaps it was stupid to fight it. Mina was part of him. Heart and blood and bone and air. Her grip was absolute. Boundless. Like a fever burning through his veins.

Good lord. These were the words of a madman. A lunatic fit for Bedlam. If these thoughts were outside his head, written down on paper, any sane person would shriek with laughter. He'd laugh himself.



Did *she* think of him? Not as her friend, not as her colleague.

Alden knew she thought of Ty. The boy who came from where she did. It made sense: Mina and Ty shared common ground; an upbringing. And they were the same age.

Oh yes, that other far-too familiar question. Was he too old for her? He was older. Older than Ty, older than her. Much older. But she was wiser. And what were years? What was time? In the scheme of love, the maps of hearts and devotion, was the mere date of birth a north star to be navigated by?

Alden sighed.

Outside the window, Paris was suddenly around them. Jutting spires and wrought-iron baroque. The carriage clattered down wide boulevards to the grand apartment in the Marais quarter where they would be staying for the evening. The housekeeper showed them to their rooms.

At dinner they sat at a long, polished table, peering at each other through intricate candelabras. The housekeeper had laid their settings at opposite ends of the table. The length of table meant they had to raise their voices to hear each other.

Alden watched Mina lift a green bean to her mouth, remembering the first meal they'd shared. Even then, smudged with charcoal and in that ripped dress, just seventeen, not much beyond a child, Mina had been exquisite. Always. So brightly she shone. And here he was, ridiculous and fumbling in the dark. Obsessed with her imagined thoughts.

'So tomorrow we'll tour the city,' he said.

'Pardon?' she asked.

'Paris, we'll take the coach out. In the morning.'

'Oh yes, but Alden, I'm quite happy here with the books.'

'Ha, no chance. We promised Claudine you would see the Louvre and at least some of the city. It's not worth either of our lives if you don't.'

Mina laughed in agreement, 'And then we set sail for England on the evening tide?'

'Yes. Back to Berkeley Square.'

After dinner they moved to the drawing room. They threw open the balconette doors and blew out the candles so they could best take in the view. Alden pulled their armchairs up to the balconette railings. Before them Paris was a sea of tiled rooftops and gothic, charcoal-dark steeples.

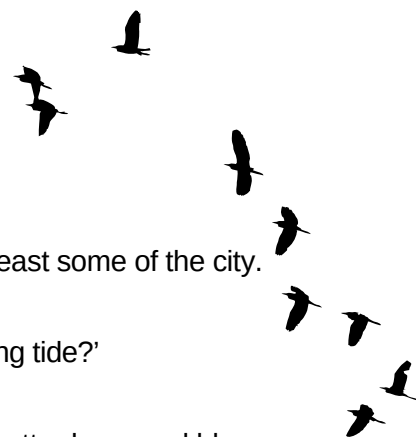
'Oh Alden, all the lamplights twinkling across the city look like fireflies.'


'It is pretty.'

Later when they stood for bed, they both reached forward to close the windows. Mina's arm brushed Alden's, her skirts wrapping his legs.

After fastening the lock, Alden turned back towards her. She was close. Much closer than he'd thought. Rather than stepping back a respectable distance. She held her ground. Their eyes were now just inches from each other. He saw the detail of dark lashes.

Her hand came up to his face. He held his breath as he watched her. Softly, softly enough to be his imagination her fingertips lingered. Slowly drawing down to his mouth, tracing his lips.





He could smell the wine on her breath. Flint and blackberries. The jasmine of her perfume. The musk of her. He inhaled deeply.

Was this really happening? Here in this attic room, in his brother-in-law's apartment. None of this was meant to happen. All of this was meant to happen. Would it happen? Could it happen? How could it not? Was it wrong? Was she his to have? Whatever was happening, Alden knew it was for him to stop it, *but I cannot*, he thought. *I cannot*.

His body ached. His chest a grasping hungry drum. Every breath in it, held and racing, swirling, beating hard. Around her light, he was a clumsy moth. He had waited so long.

'Do you know what you're doing?' he asked.

She lifted her face up to his, looking him full in the eyes, 'I think so,' she answered.

He kissed her then. His arms encircling her waist, pulling her to him. What else could he do? She kissed him back.

They kissed and it was everything. *A thousand Minas spun. Mina laughing in the garden with his sister. Mina practising her bow and arrow. Mina running in, her hair damp and messy, from the summer rain. Mina standing on the bow of a ship, wind in her face. Mina fierce and furious, telling him about the mills. Mina as he first saw her, standing outside the Mercers three years ago. Oh Mina. Even her name was a sigh in his heart.*

Her hands were around his neck. Her body pressed tight against his. She pulled at his cravat, tugging it loose. Then her fingers were at the buttons of his waistcoat.

His hands shook down her hair, letting it fall in silky tangles over her shoulders. He kissed her neck: sweeter, softer than he'd imagined all those times.

He pulled back, summoning his last stores of restraint. Forcing his eyes open. To meet hers. He held her away.

'It might be better to wait.'

Her lips parted in a smile, 'For who?'

His whole body stiffened, any facility for proper gentlemanly behaviour gone. He leant down and lifted her up. Carrying her down the corridor. Her skirts rustling along the wall. Her face nestled against his neck. Whatever the consequences, they would face them together. Whatever she wanted, he would make it so. All that he was, he would share it with her.

'Have you done this before?' he asked.

'Yes, once.'

He told himself he would be gentle; he would take it slow. But when he laid her down across the bed. Her body bathed in the light from the window, cool and milky in a slanted square of moonlight, it is him that is shy.

