

# SPLIT

Erotic Romance Novel

## BOOK ONE

By Renata W Müller

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# Chapter 1

HANNAH

I feel like I'm burning up. My body is almost bursting into flames, but since the heating is switched off and I don't have malaria, something else must be causing the heat. Slowly, I regain a dreamy sort of consciousness; I'm not alone in the bed. The soft throbbing sensation coming from my loins wakes me up with sweet memories. River's naked body cautiously rolls off mine and, still half-dreaming, I feel his kiss on my lips. The mattress moves under me as he cautiously gets out of bed.

I open my eyes to blink listlessly, just to close them again immediately. The sunlight streaming in burns my eyes. I lazily turn to my side, pulling the blanket over my head. My woozy brain comes slowly back to reality.

As I clutch the corner of the blanket I feel something weirdly hard in my palm. I look down at my left hand, straining my eyes to see. A wide smile lights up my face as I spot the white gold ring with its round aquamarine diamond on my ring finger, and then the delicious memories of last night come rushing back to me. *Oh my God! It really happened. I'm going to be a bride!* A satisfied sigh escapes from my lips, and as my thoughts move to River, warm fuzzy feelings overwhelm me. I love him. He loves me. He is the only one who really knows me and knows how to deal with me.

Of course, our engagement was not a surprise. It was given. However, River did manage to surprise me with having everyone there. It had seemed like a cool, calm family dinner at summertime, the only difference being that Gran was unusually sentimental. I dare say I could see tears in her eyes. But I can't be certain. Rose, my future mother-in-law, kept true to form. I seriously don't know a more emotional person than her. I'm pretty sure she didn't even try to restrain herself.

Although she didn't hug me, she kissed River, like he's still in kindergarten. Until the 6-foot, 3-inch *little boy* had enough of it and picked her up on his shoulder to twirl her around in the living room. She was screaming, and Rachel and I almost peed ourselves laughing. Finally, Ian saved his wife from his son's hands. It's lovely to see him melt even after 25 years when Rose bats her big, violet cat-eyes at him. I can't deny those eyes! And River can't deny that they're related. He wields that same penetrating, deep blue gaze like his mother's.

What's more, Rose made chocolate-caramel-walnut cupcake gateau. The official celebration dessert of the Hailey clan. I feel horribly honoured. Ian brought the Veramonte Merlot Reserva from the basement. This also speaks for itself. Of course, for his son – for *this* son – there's nothing he wouldn't do. He's unbelievably proud of him. At least him!

In the end, Jamie didn't come. Not that I care. It would only have been a problem, I'm sure. Of course River invited his twin and it hurt him that he wasn't there, even if he didn't say it out loud. Rose was disappointed too, but she was silent. She didn't want another debate, didn't want to enrage Ian. Ian and Jamie in the same place is like a spark to dynamite. When Jamie is present, disaster is always on the horizon. That's why I said that I didn't care that he didn't come to the engagement party. Since Jamie doesn't live at home, he is only in contact with River and Rose.

In the end, the important thing is we held our engagement party without confrontation. River Hailey and Hannah Logan are now officially a team. I didn't hesitate for a moment

when he proposed. Somehow, I always knew he would be my husband. That it would be *him*.

I squeeze my ring-adorned hand to my chest and let myself daydream. I don't feel like getting up yet, so I close my eyes and curl up in a ball under the covers. It's Sunday, so I have nothing to do today. That is, I should do something, but I'm really not in the mood to pack boxes.

That suddenly reminds me of my friend Rachel. I have to call her! She was weird last night. She got a phone call, then left suspiciously early. I have to find out what happened!

I crawl out of bed with a deep sigh. Where the bloody hell is my mobile? I rummage aimlessly through my bag, dump its contents onto the dressing table, and spot it. An *'I love you'* message from River and a missed call from last night. Jamie? What the hell? I quickly check the time of call. 19:06. We had already started the dinner then. I have no idea what he wanted. You never know with Jamie! He has never been normal! I mean... I know it's not nice saying that, especially about him. Asperger's and everything. But he's driving people crazy! My future brother-in-law is a complication, trouble, and a mountain of problems all in one person. I wonder what I should do, but it brings up unpleasant feelings. I decide to call Rachel instead.

"How is the bride-to-be?" She jokes.

"A bit hungover," I say bitterly.

"I see! Your wedding night was that crazy?"

I roll my eyes. I knew she wouldn't let that one go. Rachel has known me since college. She knows how I work and that I'm not one to easily jump into bed, not even for River's sake. He went through all the motions, so to speak, until we got here. The truth is that that particular thing actually happened the day before yesterday. We tasted each other before, but we did not go beyond a certain limit. The engagement was the watershed. I'm 22. And no. I do not regret waiting until now. I did not plan it specifically, it just happened that way.

"Are you still there?" Rachel's shout pulls me back from my wandering thoughts.

"What wedding night, silly? It was just the engagement," I retort deliberately.

"So you just don't want to say that the hotshot left you all alone?"

"He has final exams on Monday."

"Shit, Hannah! Come on! This guy has been disgustingly studious. Someone should really take the stick from up his arse to relax him a bit."

"Shut up, Rach!" I grumble at her.

I know that River's not her favourite, yet today she is in an especially sour mood. She thinks the guy is too perfect to be true. She always says there must be some big issue lying in wait because it's impossible for someone to be so perfect. Of course, I know River is not perfect. But almost.

"You're being unfair to him," I shush my sulky friend.

"All right, forget it," she murmurs. "Anyway, your ring is beautiful. Did you see Rose's look when River put it on your finger? I thought we'd have to pick her up from the floor right there.

This remark reminds me of why I called her in the first place.

"What happened to you last night, Rach?" I ask, as I admire my engagement ring again.

"What do you mean?" She tries to distract me but I stay the course.

"You left pretty suddenly. Is there a problem?"

After a little silence, she reluctantly starts to talk.

"Problem? Why would there be? "

“You tell me!”

“Nothing. I got sleepy,” she responds curtly.

“At 9:30?”

“Hannah!” She lets out an annoyed sigh.

“I saw someone called you on the phone. Did that have anything to do with it?”

“Jamie called,” she mentions casually. “But that's besides the point. Anyway, I wanted to get the boxes ready for your stuff.”

“Jamie called you?” I ask, astounded.

“And what? Why would he not call me?” – She asks stolidly and I can almost see her shrug her shoulders and begin to twist her long blond hair around her forefinger.

“Well, I dunno. You two talk?” I raise my eyebrows, amazed.

“It happens. Sometimes.”

“And what did he want?” I persevere.

“Nothing special,” she huffs. “He just... asked about you and the engagement,” she answers reluctantly.

“What the...!”

“And he said wasn't coming.”

“But River wanted him to be there. He was disappointed.” I sigh with resignation. “Typical Jamie. He doesn't give a shit about anyone else.”

“Bullshit!” Rachel bursts out. “I think he just didn't want to make a scene. You know what happens when he and Ian are together.”

“I know,” I surrender. “Do you really think that's why he didn't come?”

“What do you think? He loves his brother and ... so they love each other.”

I take a deep breath. I know she's right. River loves his twin brother. From a young age he was the one who always understood and protected him, despite all his weirdness and strangeness. River was his only friend in kindergarten. He stood by him when the kids from school ostracized Jamie because of his bizarre behaviour. He fought with the older kids when they mocked his awkward brother. Riv often got in trouble because of his twin brother but the teachers couldn't do anything against him because he was an excellent student, and already a charmer. He always held his own even against their father. Then, after who knows which school hacking scandal, Ian finally threw away Jamie out of the house, River brought him the food that Rose secretly packed. And Jamie obviously admires his brother and looks up to him. They are not identical twins or anything, but still, they instinctively understand each other with almost no words. There is a special bond between them.

“Okay. You may be right. Anyway, he tried to call me too.”

“What? When?” She asks with an unusual curiosity.

“Before dinner, but I didn't hear the ring. You know, I still don't know what he wanted.” I shrug my shoulder.

Still with the phone in hand, I shuffle to my wardrobe and open it with a sigh. I run my free hand through countless clothes, and I think it's going to be an eternity before I'll get everything over to Rachel's. I have a lot of duds. Much more than I would need, but that's the thing: clothes are my work as well. I am a fashion designer after all! Since my friend is still stubbornly silent, I continue with my line of inquiry.

“I still don't know why you left so early yesterday. It's not just because you were terribly disappointed Jamie didn't show up to the party after all?”

I was one hundred percent kidding with my stupid comment. I lay down on the bed and

laugh at my own joke. Even if I try to be nice, I can't imagine that anyone who knows Jamie Hailey's exhausting behaviour would miss his presence at any kind of party. Rachel knows him through and through, so I don't understand why she's not picking up on it and laughing with me. She's really annoyed about something today! It's better not to continue to irritate her, so I decide to hold off. She seems to be thinking the same thing, because she suddenly changes the topic.

"When should I go for you? Have you started packing at all?" She asks accusingly.

Defeated, I run my hands through my hair and get up from the bed. I take a look around the room – it looks like a battlefield.

"Of course. I'm doing fine," I whimper, and Rachel's starts giggling.

"I can imagine, champion of brides. Or did you change your mind and still want to live with Gran?" She provokes.

"Not at all." I shake my head and I really mean it.

I decided to leave my childhood room and move in with Rachel. Not that I don't get along with Gran. We are pretty much on the same wavelength and I love her. I won't be far from her even now, it's just a few minutes from here to the new apartment. I felt it was time to stand on my own feet. Plus, it's not at all inconvenient that the apartment is located on the first floor, right above our newly-opened boutique. So, I reduced my work commute to zero. I just go downstairs with Rachel and we've already arrived at our 9-to-5. Wonderful! Will I miss the morning rush hour, and the scramble in the underground and on the bus? Negative.

"All right. Then get yourself together, darling! In half an hour I'll be there and I'm bringing a fresh supply of boxes."

"Half an hour?" I cry out, making it clear to Rachel that I haven't gotten anywhere.

#

I sigh, tired but satisfied, when the last box is finally in my new room. Of course, I still have to put everything away, but we did a lot of it today. Night fell before we made the trip between Gran's house and the shop (my new home) five times in Rachel's old school Mini Cooper. I love the green walls and the spacious square footage. This room is much larger than I'm used to. And the newest prized addition is the spacious wardrobe. River helped paint, not just here, but also down in the shop.

As a reward for our good work, Rachel and I pour ourselves a glass of red wine and fall into the chic little armchairs, which are normally for the customers, and proudly admire our new empire. We got a much cheaper rent on the corner of Covent Garden on Floral Street since we took the apartment above it in the package. Rachel was looking for an apartment anyway when we opened the shop, so it was the obvious solution. She has been unpacked for half a year and now I'm coming.

I admit I felt a huge lump in my throat when we turned around for the last time, and, looking back, I saw Gran standing on the doorstep. She did not cry. At least, not outwardly. I had no intention of doing it either, but I couldn't make it completely without blubbering. I know we aren't losing each other or anything, but still! This is a huge step for me. She raised me since I was eight. Right from the time that mom and dad died. Rather, almost exactly from then. Except for the horrific two-month period I spent at the Morgan's before I could move in with her.

I shiver. I don't even want to think about that time.

#

I get so sentimental when I look around the place, at the walls adorned with rustic bricks. The name of our own boutique proudly gleaming on the glass of the shop window: *Rebellious*. In the middle, on the precisely sized M mannequin, hangs my favourite bohemian wedding gown with the lace décolletage. I love it. The shop isn't too big, but it was perfect from the beginning when Rachel and I first launched our adventure. I can still see in my mind Gran's face in awe at the opening. *Look at yourself, Hannah Logan, she said so proudly. You have your fashion designer diploma in your hands. Your first collection is in the shop window and you just opened your own boutique. I am unbelievably proud of you, darling. And you can be proud of yourself, too. Your parents would be, too.*

Well, I really am proud of the collection. Ultimately, it's 95% my work. Rachel really just contributed a few suggestions. She is the manager and the businesswoman and I assumed the creative part. I won't deny it: I damn enjoyed it. Much better than if I had spent the time with orders, bills, and business meetings. That's why we complement each other so well. I create, she sells.

I was able rent the fashion store thanks to my inheritance I received from my parents' legacy on my 21st birthday. What can I say? The news hit me like a ton of bricks. Neither Gran nor I had any idea of the exact amount. Turns out, it was six figures. If I wanted to be morbid, I would say that a girl should have at least some benefit from the fact that her wacky parents kicked the bucket too soon in an avalanche accident. It sounds sour? I'm not angry at them. Not anymore. After seven years of psychotherapy, quite a few thousand pounds, but mostly many years of care from River Hailey, I can safely say I'm not angry at my parents anymore. Thirteen years ago, for reasons beyond me, they participated in a mountain hike in the Swiss Alps where they were buried under an avalanche. I do not blame them because they died in an accident that could have been avoided, and I do not blame them either for what happened to me after their death while staying with my foster family.

Okay. Let's say I'm still working on it, but I'm making progress. So, the inheritance. My father, after all, was not totally lacking in foresight, at least in terms of finances. The amount covered the cost of the store's rent and then some. It covered the material supplies necessary for the collection and ensured that Rach and I could start out with somewhat realistic salaries. After ten months, we were basically breaking even. A year after the opening, our income is now beginning to exceed our expenditures. In a word: SUCCESS! I am aware that without capital it wouldn't have been possible. At least, not so fast. We can call it an advantage bestowed on orphans and the abused, if you'd like. I don't give a damn! That's at least one privilege I deserve.

"To the new apartment and independence!" my friend and business partner raises her glass and winks at me playfully.

"To love and business success!" I answer ceremonially and take a big sip of wine.

Rachel giggles loudly.

"Girl, you're asking a bit too much. Those two don't usually go together."

"But I insist on both," I say sullenly and tap the side of my empty glass.

Rachel gets up and grabs the neck of the wine bottle to pour again.

"But if you had to choose, which would you prefer?" She persists. "Never-ending, overwhelming love or a spot in the Top 10 Forbes List of the year's most successful young

entrepreneurs?”

“Hmm,” I ponder to myself, but the answer is simple.

The sound of knocking comes from the front door, so both of us turn. Rachel rolls her eyes and my heart suddenly starts beating faster.

“You stay, I’ll let the overwhelming love in,” she proposes, since she’s already up.

The door opens and my sexy anthropologist-archaeologist pokes his endearingly handsome face over Rachel’s shoulder. His dark blonde locks fall across his forehead as he winks at me right from the doorway.

“What’s up, love? Are you gonna let me in or what?” He irks my friend in his usual way.

“Did you revise enough, hotshot? Be careful, because this level of intelligence is already bad for one’s health!”

“For whose health?”

“Asshole.”

“Don’t flatter me, blondie!”

I know Rachel hates being called blondie, but I intentionally do not intervene. I won’t even try to stop them. This is what always happens when they meet. After a few rounds of *pleasantries* and *polite gesturing*, everything’s all right. This is not real hate. It’s just ... kind of a dog-cat friendship. 99.9% of people adore River. Everyone is impressed with his charm and his cool, witty nature. Rachel is the only one who is not completely enchanted by River Hailey.

“Fuck off, Hailey!” She barks indignantly, but lets Riv take the wine glass out of her hand and drink straight from it.

“What are you ladies celebrating?” He asks as he glides behind me and embraces my shoulders.

“Are you serious?” I blink insolently. “We’ve been hard at work moving since noon.”

“I’m sorry, Hannah, I was studying the whole day. I had no idea you wanted to move everything today. If I’d known, I would’ve helped”

“Oh, sure,” Rachel says, rolling her eyes as she marches to the back, into the office.

Suddenly I gasp, because this lunatic is pushing me down, armchair and all. I scream, both of my legs in the air, totally helpless. He leans on me with a theatrical look about him, grinning and kissing me. I can hardly get any air and hold tightly to his neck.

“Tell me you forgive me,” he whispers into my mouth but doesn’t let me answer as his kisses get hotter and more intense.

He clutches me and holds me tight, so much so that I am falling out of my chair. As his mouth adheres to mine, a heat rises in me and I suddenly want to continue where we left off last night. I feel like I wouldn’t mind letting him tackle me in the middle of the shop and make me his. There’s a fire in me, and I feel it in him too. His hand moves down to my waist, and I start going crazy. I cling to his lips. I want more, but he slows down the pace. He gently pulls away and softly caresses my chin. I’m staring at him, panting and confused. Shit! I completely forgot we are not alone. *It’s good that at least one of us is aware!* runs through my head.

“So I guess you forgive me,” he laughs at me playfully.

“I wasn’t angry,” I shrug my shoulders, but I’m still under the influence of the recent kiss.

He bends towards my ear and whispers in a sensual voice, “So, will you show me your new room, Miss Logan? I’m quite curious.”

“If you insist. But you have to put me down!” Giggling, I squirm in his arms because I’m still suspended midair.



I get one more quick kiss, then he puts me back on my feet. He rights the armchair and grabs my hand, pulling me to the stairs leading up to the first floor.

“Rachel!” I shout on the way, and my friend pokes her blond head out from the office door. “I’ll see you tomorrow at 8:00. I’m starting, as we agreed.”

“I have to be at the bank at 8:30, so make sure you are here!” She winks at me conspiratorially, like someone who is sure that I’ll have an exhausting night.

“For sure!” I heave with laughter, but then River chimes in.

“Good night, blondie! And don’t get emberressed if we’re too loud. The walls are thin.”

Rachel throws him a murderous look, and instead of a verbal answer she raises her middle finger. I gawk disbelievingly at River. Why did he have to do this now? He knows very well that Rachel just broke up with her boyfriend, and it was pretty rough. Since then, she has been alone, and she’s currently in the midst of an I-hate-men phase. Damn it! Maybe that’s why she disappeared so early from the engagement party yesterday? Maybe it hurt her to see all of our lovey dovey-ness. How stupid I was not to think of that!

In front of my room now, I shove River through the door and get angry. “Was that really fucking necessary? You know all about her situation with Dylan right now. Why are you being a jerk to her?”

“Baby, I was just kidding. She knows it, too. By the way, they will totally get back together,” he says this so naturally, like he has inside information on the private life of my friend.

I wrinkle my forehead and shake my head. “How can you be so sure?”

“I just think so.” He shrugs his shoulders flippantly and smiles as he looks down his nose at me “Intuition.” He approaches me and embraces my waist.

“You and your intuitions,” I sigh when he bends toward me and starts to push me onto the bed amidst all the boxes. He slides his palm to the nape of my neck, causing a warm tingle to run up my spine. He sensually whispers into my mouth:

“I don’t care about your friend. Now I have quite different kinds of intuitions.”

“Really?” I pant.

“I can’t think about anything else since the last time,” he whispers and slowly takes my shirt off, then takes his off too.

I eye him greedily for a few moments, then press my palm against his stomach. It is undeniable that regular water polo trainings have a particularly beneficial effect on a man’s body. River and Jamie started to play water polo as kids, and both of them were natural talents. The difference was that Jamie never became a true member of the team, given that he was not able to fit in with the other boys in a way that could make him a useful member of the team.

His inability to act like a team player can obviously be traced back to his illness. When he was in the water, he was so focused he didn’t even look at the other players. He avoided eye contact and only saw one thing in front of him: the goal where he had to throw the ball. His memory was impressive and he exploited this virtue in the water. In the heat of the moment, he mentally ran through how he had acted in particular situations before, and in turn how the others reacted, and this helped him to use the situation to his advantage. As if he had the ability to anticipate what the goalkeeper will do. He refused to pass the ball and cooperate. They kicked him off the team, but he’d continued to go, mostly to swim. At least there he could follow his own rules, no one disturbed him, and he didn’t annoy the others. Then he later discovered running, which proved to be a perfect sport for an Asperger’s-Afflicted

person.

River still plays polo. Of course, it's not at a professional level, but they train twice a week. And I'm now the lucky one who gets to reap the fruits from this endeavour. I'm not superficial. I love everything in him. Yes. Everything, even his chiseled, naturally masculine torso. Does he know how hot he looks? You bet!

He lies on his back and pulls me with him. I almost fall on him, and he laughs. I grab his bare shoulder and start to slide my hand provocatively across his chest. I'm so turned on I'm almost bursting, but he still seems calm and considered in comparison. How does he do that? His face is so close to mine that I can clearly see the sensual desire in his deep blue eyes. He moves slowly: his hand traces along my neck, starts down my chest, and finally glides to rest on my hip. I undo my trouser button and his wandering fingers slither under the lace. I moan, and he smiles at me.

"You're unbelievably beautiful. I love this here," he says and wraps my dishevelled ponytail around his wrist. He buries his face in my hair and sighs deeply. "Did you regret it?" He asks, looking searchingly into my eyes. I stare back at him, agape.

*Huh? Regret? That we slept together? What the hell is he talking about?* I know that he loves me and he wants to take care of me. But for heaven's sake, we've been together for an eternity. And I love him too. We are engaged and are getting married. Damn it, I'm more than ready for sex. The first time he was very attentive and tender, which I appreciated. Truth be told, it did hurt a little, even though Riv was cautious. Or rather, it was quite unpleasant. But in any case, there were no fireworks. Not that I expected anything different. Sex is a game that is improved with practice and experience, and we are beginners for now. But now he needn't be so cautious! Doesn't he see, doesn't he feel, how much I want it? Maybe I should make it clearer!

"Not at all," I answer firmly, and to prove it I undo his trouser button and purposefully pull down his zipper.

He laughs. I love his laugh, but I'm turned on so much that I can't appreciate it at present.

"You're a greedy little one," he whispers into my neck and lifts himself up so I can finish my stripping action.

"I hope you don't mind!"

"Not at all, just...ohh, Hannah!" He groans with wide eyes when I touch him.

He presses himself against me and turns me on my back. *Finally!* I smile contentedly to myself. There's no doubt, he wants me badly. He's all in now, and it's not just that I can see it, but his hardness is pressing up against my belly, telling me too. It's not time for conversation. At least not now.

#

Ten minutes to eight. River is behind me in the bathroom, arms around my waist as he nuzzles my neck. While I brush my teeth, I see his terribly satisfied, smirking face in the mirror. How is it that men look just as good first thing in the morning as they do the rest of the day? I put in considerable effort every morning just to make myself presentable. Frizzy hair. Sleepy, dull eyes. Ugh.

"I won't have time for lunch, but see you at the dinner, alright?" He purrs into my neck. "I hope you don't mind."

“I don’t know if I’ll have time for dinner, but don’t worry, I’ll find myself some company for lunch.” I’m intentionally teasing him, and he pokes his fingers into my side.

The bastard knows I’m terribly ticklish and, of course, he takes full advantage of it. Shrieking, I spit out to my toothpaste and pray for reprieve. River turns me towards him, wipes the foam from the edge of my mouth and kisses me.

“So then...?” He asks expectantly, eyebrows raised mischievously.

“Okay, fine. But now get outta here, I’m gonna be late because of you! Rachel’ll bite my head off if I can’t manage to arrive on time to the shop from one floor up.” I laugh loudly when he tickles my side again.

“See you at seven at the Highlander!”

#

I already see the light at the end of the tunnel. All my stuff has long since been put away and my room doesn’t look like a bomb went off in here anymore.

Yesterday, as I unpacked the last boxes, a strange thing happened. I found my very first diary. I don’t know how others are with this, but I started to write in a diary early. I was around eight years old, not long before my parents died. As I flipped through it again, I was immediately drawn into it. Of course, I couldn’t resist reading it.

This was the last entry before their death:

#

### *Diary entry, January.1989*

Mom and dad are going to Switzerland. They asked me if I’m mad I can’t go. They’re going for five days, and I have school. Mom said Gran will come from London to take care of me. And she said if I behave I can have a sleepover one night with Iris if Gran says it’s ok. Pretty awesome! Dad said he’ll bring me a gift from Switzerland. Chocolate or a chocolate fondue set or something like that. He said that they make really good chocolates there. Five days is not so long and I’ll have fun with Gran.

#

I just can’t put down my old diary.

Ever since I stumbled upon it, I feel this constant urge to read it all over again. It’s a terribly strange feeling to delve into the mind of my primary school self and relive all the stuff that happened back then. Even yesterday, instead of going dancing with Rachel, I curled up in the armchair with a latte and read my old diary as I waited for River. I know I shouldn’t do this because it’s basically a form of self-torture, but I can’t resist it.

When Riv came through the door last night, he didn’t understand why I was crying.

Well, this is why:

#

*Diary entry, February 1989*

Why don't they let me go with Gran? I want to go to Gran! Mrs. Morgan is nice, but she's always tired. Today Mr. Morgan came home for dinner. I'm not going to dinner. And I don't want to go into his office anymore to bring him tea. The long-haired lady from the child services office says everyone here is nice, and I have to be well-behaved for them I hate Mr. Morgan. Only I can't say it to anyone. It's a secret.

#

"Hannah, not again! Put away that damn diary! I can't even stand seeing you reading it all the time."

River caught me reading the diary again. He's so sweet. I know he's afraid and doesn't want me to lose myself in it again. But he shouldn't worry so much! I'm not the same confused little girl I was then. As the young woman I am now, I'd fucking kick Mr. Morgan's ass, that's the god's honest truth. It's depressing, all the stuff I scribbled back and forth. I didn't even remember that it was actually Jamie whom I met first, and only later River.

For example, this is one of the first entries after I started my new school:

#

*Diary entry, April 1989*

The new teacher doesn't mind that I don't talk to anyone. She told the other kids in the class to leave me alone, because when I have something to say, I'll speak for sure.

Well, she's very wrong. I will never talk to anyone again. And the headmistress told Gran that I should go to some kind of pfis-psic ... I checked the dictionary: psychologist. It's stupid! Why? I know mom and dad died. I know they will never, ever come back. There's no reason for me to talk! And they're bugging me about eating.

Oh yeah, the teacher sat me next to a brown-haired boy in the class. We can't just sit anywhere we want. The boy's name is Jamie and he's the bad kid in the class. The teacher scolds him every five minutes. He can't calm down, he keeps moving around and can't pay attention. And he's staring at me so stupidly, so closely. I tried staring back at him scowling, as hard as I could. He didn't stop. The teacher told me to tell her if Jamie hurts me. I hate this school. Everyone is stupid. Why can't they just leave me alone? I want everyone to leave me alone!

#

*Diary entry, May 1989*

I don't care what they say at school. I won't talk!

The doctor, or rather the psychologist, wants me to talk too. I know what she wants. She wants me to tell things about Mr. Morgan. And about what happened there. But I don't want to talk about it. Never!

Only Gran doesn't make me. But she hugs and kisses me lots. She thinks I don't see her crying in secret. But I do. I just don't know if she's crying because of me or mom and dad. I love her, I just can't tell her. I'll draw something for her.

I'm still sitting next to the bad kid in class, Jamie. I think he doesn't mind that I'm not talking. Anyway, he always talks about the same thing. He doesn't even care that no one is listening to him, he just keeps talking about cars. Even during the lessons, when the teacher asks about something else. The teacher scolds him all the time because he never looks her in the eye when he talks to her. He gets a lot of time outs. He's weird. I hope she moves me away from him!

#

### *Diary entry, June 1989*

So there are two Jamie's. I mean, he has a twin brother.

Today I saw him in the backyard. They are not exactly the same, but they are similar. The other one is named River and he's not as stupid as Jamie. He's not in our class, he's older than me. Of course, since they're twins, both of them are older than me, only Jamie was held back because he was a bad student. That's why he's in my class. They just moved to London two years ago too. Before, they lived in Ireland, in a place called Hollywood. I looked at the map and it really exists. Hollywood is very close to Belfast. It must be beautiful.

#

### *Diary entry, July 1989*

Jamie's driving me crazy. He's always talking about stupid cars, and he doesn't realise that nobody cares about them. I try to leave at playtime and run away from him, but he follows me and bugs me. I hate him!

Today in the long playtime, he sat next to me again. Then his twin brother came and joined us too. River is very nice and he's funny too. He asked, "Why don't you talk to anyone? Cat got your tongue?" I started to smile a little and shook my head. Jamie just stared at me so hard he even forgot to shut his mouth. He had a very stupid face. Then he got up and came up real close to me. He stared at my face and tried to open my mouth to see if the cat really did get my tongue. How can anyone be so stupid?! I pushed him away and screamed.

Fortunately, River stopped his brother and put his hand on his shoulders to calm him down. He started to explain to him that the cat thing was just a saying. River is very smart and I have no idea why, he is really so patient with him. He also said that Jamie doesn't really understand things like "Cat got your tongue," He always has to explain it to him.

Jamie is very tiring. Kids don't want to play with him because he always wants to decide what to play. He knows the makes and models and license plate numbers of all the cars outside in the school car lot. Plus he knows everything about computers. Mr. Brown sent him

out of the IT lesson yesterday because he was doing something with the computers that made all the machines in the school shut down. Jamie kept explaining something no one understood. Mr. Brown sent him to the headmistress.

#

I'm sitting in the store with a piece of paper and pencil in my hand, with a new sketch plan in my brain. Meanwhile, I wait for the lady with the glasses to decide for forty-five minutes whether the blue or pale green cardigan suits her better. I gave up after half an hour, but Rachel is resolute. I can see the bloody heroism on her face: 'Either with the cardigan in your bag or not at all!'

The door opens and a middle-aged man, dressed in a surprisingly refined style, enters. His long, blond locks fall across his forehead as he slowly looks around in the shop through squinting eyes. His steel-blue glance is so critical that I almost think that he's here for an inspection. His eyes rest on me and he finally smiles, then walks towards me elegantly and holds out one hand in greeting.

"I'm Aksel von Staffeldt from Fashion Trends. Are you maybe Miss Hannah Logan?"

I'm so shocked I can't even speak. I just nod oafishly and hold out a trembling hand. *Holy shit! From Fashion Trends?! I glanced awkwardly at Rachel and saw that her jaw had dropped nearly to the floor as well.*

"The magazine is interested in your shop, Miss Logan. We were thinking of publishing an article with some pictures in our next issue."

Since I still can't speak, it's possible the guy thinks I have some mental disability. Rachel, fortunately, collects herself faster than me and appears next to us, leaving the client with the cardigan-dilemma. She puts on her sexiest smile and holds out her hand.

"Rachel Bowles, Miss Logan's business partner. It is a huge honour for us to be of interest to your magazine. We are happy to answer your questions Mr ..."

"Von Staffeldt," replies the Scandinavian-looking journalist, eyeing my fiery friend with interest.

"Right. Hannah?" Rachel whacks my side, and I finally awake from my daze.

"Oh, yes, of course. We are so very happy. This ... that's wonderful! But how did you find us?"

"You studied fashion design, right, Miss Logan.?" He moves on without answering.

"Hannah. Please call me Hannah! And yes, I went to the Fashion & Style Design College, and Rachel, ... Miss Bowles studied fashion management."

"Useful combination." He nods with conviction and once more looks around in the shop carefully. Halting his gaze in the middle of the shop, he focuses his attention on the mannequin in the wedding gown.

With his eyes narrowed, he steps closer and glides his thin fingers slowly over the refined lace. He nods admiringly, and Rachel seizes the opportunity.

"All the pieces here are Hannah's own design. From design to execution, we do everything ourselves."

"Nice, very beautiful." He turns to us again, and I unconsciously hold my breath as he looks at me with his critical eyes. "If I'm not mistaken, you model too, Hannah."

"Lately less often." I answer with sincere surprise. *How could he know?* "Most of my time

is occupied by design and business. I only take modelling gigs in very exceptional cases.”

“I understand.” He nods agreeably, then his face brightens. He looks at us, spreads his arms, and asks with a smile: “Well, ladies, when could we do the interview? And I think it would be very useful in this case to take the accompanying pictures right here. When can I call the photographer?”

With a huge grin on his face, he looks at us expectantly, but we, instead of answering – like rank amateurs – hug each other and start jumping and screaming like nitwitted teenage girls. We are both perfectly aware of what an illustrated article in Fashion Trends means for our business. We're on our way up. I just don't understand: why us exactly? How the hell did he find us in the first place?

#

### *Diary entry, November 1989*

Today I spoke again. I didn't plan it, it just happened.

We were in the dining room when a fourth grader, Norman Price, came up to me with his friends and started making fun of me. He said that I'm mute like a dead fish and I'm just as wacko as the Hailey twins I'm friends with. Jamie jumped up and simply hit him. Norman's nose began to bleed and he jumped on Jamie. Then River tried to get in between them, but they all fell to the ground and continued fighting all on top of each other. Norman's friends got into the fight, and I just stood there, truly like a dead fish now, and didn't know what to do.

The on-duty teacher, Mr. Cox, tried to separate the boys. When he saw Jamie, his face flushed beet red and he began to shout, but only at him. He said he should have known Jamie Hailey is behind this again. It was pretty unfair because it wasn't because of him. He started the fight, but Norman Price started the whole thing with the teasing. That was what River wanted to tell the teacher, but Mr. Cox didn't pay attention to him because he wanted to grab Jamie and take him to the headmistress's office. Jamie ran and hid somewhere in the school, and no one could find him all afternoon. They were looking for him a while, but then River said it was better to leave him because he will come out if he wants.

In the afternoon we found him in the garden shed behind the school. River admitted he knew where his brother was, he just didn't want to tell the others. Jamie really was there, hiding under old bags, firewood, and other stuff. There was a lot of dirt, and it was stinky. River begged him for hours to come out, but he didn't want to. I saw he was very sad and he didn't know what to do. He said Jamie will be in big trouble when they find out at home that he had another fight at school. All three of us sat there for awhile, and then River asked me if I would try to get him to come out. I didn't think much, just told him that it would be good if he would come out because it's pretty cold out and I'm getting cold, and it's pretty stinky in this shed. He came out, but didn't look at his brother, just stared at me. River made sure there were no teachers nearby and then we went home.

I had dinner at their place for the first time. It turns out we live on the same street, only at opposite ends. Their house is the most beautiful and the largest on the street.

#

“My heavens! Look at you, girl!” Gran claps her palms when I show her the four-page article in Fashion Trends. “You didn’t say the article would come out so soon. And with these pictures?”

“I didn’t want to make too much out of it.” I shrug my shoulders, but I’m on cloud nine.

My bohemian lace wedding gown gleams in a giant spread in the middle of the magazine. And Rachel and I are glowing in the photos in my different dresses. The article is very thorough. Mr. von Staffeldt has done a perfect job and, last but not least, he has been very grateful for the collection. He and the photographer are seasoned professionals in their fields.

I really nearly laughed my face off when Rachel raced out to the newsstand on the corner in the morning, in her bathrobe, complete with disheveled hair, just to get the newest issue of Fashion Trends. She returned with three copies. We hardly believed it when we saw that they gave four full pages to our shop. This is a huge thing, because this magazine is a true authority in the fashion industry. I can hardly believe our luck.

Rachel and I started celebrating already that morning with a bottle of champagne. Gran made my favourite food, salmon fettuccine, for lunch, and delivered it freshly-made to the house – that is, to the shop. I love it!

I have no idea what the future brings, what kind of reactions we’ll get from the article. But one thing’s for sure: appearing on four pages in Fashion Trends is a gigantic advertisement in itself.

#

### *Diary entry, March 1990*

Today I had lunch at the Haileys’s again. His mom, Rose, can cook really well, but of course she’s not as good as Gran! I would rather have stayed at home because the mood was shit at their place! Of course it’s because of Jamie, again.

Miss Dufort, the French teacher, gave him a warning. She said that Jamie is an evil, maniacal kid because he laughed at one of his classmates who had fallen in volleyball and broke his wrist. Of course Jamie didn’t play with the others, because the boys didn’t let him onto their team. He just sat there on one bench alone. Miss Dufort was the person on duty in the yard when the incident occurred. Well, it looked to me like Jamie really did smile. It was really not nice of him, but according to River he doesn’t think it seriously. River says he often smiles when he doesn’t need to, and sometimes has a sad face when he should laugh. Well, I really don’t understand that. River says he doesn’t understand either, but it’s just the way it is and it’s okay.

In any case, Mr. Hailey took off his belt and after lunch took Jamie into the bedroom for a thorough whacking. I felt sorry for him. But I think River felt even more sorry for his brother. There were even tears in his eyes when he heard him screaming. Mrs. Hailey stopped him from breaking into the bedroom to save him.

#



*Diary entry, June 1990*

We've been looking for Jamie all day. River has looked in all his usual hiding places, but nothing. Nobody plays with him at school. Everyone avoids it because he behaves so strangely and the teachers say he is a "black-humoured, naughty child".

I don't like him either. I'm only spending time with him because he's River's brother. He loves him and defends him all the time. He's very weird. He's like a two-legged lexicon when it comes to cars and computers. You can't stop him if he starts to blabber on about them. It's terribly boring. But he often does River's math and computing homework. That's nice, at least!

River says Jaime's in really big trouble now. The headmistress called Mr. Hailey into the school. During physical education we had to climb a rope, but Patricia Koslowski couldn't even get up an inch and many people laughed at her. Of course, not out loud, just secretly, so that the teacher didn't notice. But then Jamie said loudly that Patricia Koslowski can't climb the rope because she is terribly fat and the weight of her ass is three times the ideal weight of her age. I mean, seriously! With those exact words, loudly, like it was no big deal. Everyone stared at him, but he just looked back at me with an expressionless face as if he didn't understand what the problem was. Patricia waddled away screaming, since she can't run because of her weight. Mr. Dempsey got red in the face and took Jamie by the ear to bring him to the headmistress's office. He was locked in there until the end of the teaching day. After being released from school, he disappeared.

I don't know how anyone can be such a big jerk. Well, Patricia Koslowski is fat and it's clear that's why she can't climb the rope, but only Jamie is stupid enough to say it out loud within earshot of the teachers. Anyway I never make fun of her, because Gran always says that before I hurt somebody, imagine how I would feel their shoes. I know exactly how it feels to be made fun of, but I didn't say this to her.

River, of course, protects his brother again. He says that Jamie doesn't say things like that to be mean. So why does he say them at all? And now we've been looking for him for hours, he's disappeared without a trace. Mr. Hailey said that it's better for him not to come home because he will get a beating he will never forget.

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