



The Ambassador's Wife: A Novel

By Jennifer Steil

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From a real-life ambassador's wife comes a harrowing novel about the kidnapping of an American woman in the Middle East and the heartbreaking choices she and her husband each must make in the hope of being reunited.

When bohemian artist Miranda falls in love with Finn, the British ambassador to an Arab country, she finds herself thrust into a life for which she has no preparation. The couple and their toddler daughter live in a stately mansion with a staff to meet their every need, but for Miranda even this luxury comes at a price: the loss of freedom. Trailed everywhere by bodyguards to protect her from the dangers of a country wracked by civil war and forced to give up work she loves, she finds her world shattered when she is taken hostage, an act of terror with wide-reaching consequences.

Diplomatic life is a far cry from Miranda's first years in Mazrooq, which were spent painting and mentoring a group of young Muslim women, teaching them to draw in ways forbidden in their culture. As the novel weaves together past and present, we come to see how Finn and Miranda's idealism and secrets they have each sought to hide have placed them and those who trust them in peril. And when Miranda grows close to a child who shares her captivity, it is not clear that even being set free would restore the simple happiness that once was hers and Finn's. Suspenseful and moving, *The Ambassador's Wife* is a story of love, marriage, and friendship tested by impossible choices.

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Editorial Review

Review

“A novel of love, deception and consequences. . . . Richly imagined. . . . Harrowing and brilliant.”

—*The Seattle Times*

“Thrillingly suspenseful and deeply sensuous. . . . Steil deftly conducts us into the private and public rooms of the diplomatic world, the complicated aspirations of modern young women living behind the veil, the unfolding of a very private love story—and best of all, into the consciousness of the fiery and idiosyncratic artist who becomes the ambassador’s wife. Captivating, unforgettable.”

—Janet Fitch, author of *White Oleander*

“Cultural binaries fuel this well-plotted, gripping novel.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“Beautifully written. . . . Descriptions of [Miranda’s] artistic life signal Steil as a masterful storyteller from the book’s first pages.”

—*Nashville Scene*

“A multilayered novel that provokes discussion but also entertains.”

—*Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*

“While the story may resonate in a special way for the wanderers among us, this book is for every reader looking to disappear into a well-crafted and winding story. . . . [Steil has] a gift for writing inner conflict just as engaging as the visible kind.”

—*Chicago Literati*

“A gritty and ground-level thriller by an author who is herself the wife of a diplomat,”

—*Literary Hub*

“[An] excellent debut novel . . . packed with ample suspense to keep the pages turning.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“A fast-paced novel of marital love and the bonds of women’s friendships against the backdrop of intrigue in the Middle East.”

--*Booklist*

“Jennifer Steil’s memorable heroine confronts the confines of privilege, the fear of death, the temptations of the white savior complex, and the limits of cross-cultural connection in this detailed, thoughtful debut.”

—Joy Castro, author of *Island of Bones*

“*The Ambassador’s Wife* illuminates a very intimate, and feminine, face of terror. Jennifer Steil has lived among artists, journalists, diplomats, and women desiring empowerment in one of the most terror-ridden corners of the Middle East. This is a story only she can tell, and she does so with great clarity, phenomenal insight, and wondrous grace. The rarest of books, this is a thriller about the heart.”

—Moira Crone, author of *The Ice Garden*

“Be warned: once you embark on this hypnotic magic carpet ride of a book, you won’t be able to stop. Jennifer Steil is a modern-day Scheherazade, who seamlessly weds lyricism, mystery and a reporter’s eye for detail. *The Ambassador’s Wife* is as deeply compassionate as it is thrilling.”

—Jillian Lauren, author of *Some Girls: My Life in a Harem*

“An extraordinarily timely tale, completely gripping. . . . So much of the background, too, was familiar to me as a diplomat’s wife. I loved the book. I wish I had written it!”

—Brigid Keenan, author of *Diplomatic Baggage: The Adventures of a Trailing Spouse*

About the Author

Jennifer Steil is the author of *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*, a memoir about her experiences running a newspaper in Yemen. She lives in Bolivia, where her husband is the European Union ambassador.

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AUGUST 9, 2010

Miranda

Miranda watches her left hand move across her sketch pad as if unsure of its destination. Up it swoops, leaving a sooty trail across the thick white paper. Then across to the right, down again, across. A frame. The pencil lifts from the page for a moment, hovering in midair as her eyes turn toward the window. Dawn arrives abruptly in Mazrooq, the sky slipping from black to gold in the few seconds it took Miranda to pour a cup of coffee. Their garden is already gilded, its vast lawn glittering with last night’s rain, its neat rows of flowers unclenching and tilting toward the sun. Along the periphery is a procession of crooked trees, leaning against the iron spikes of the gates like tired sentries. Bougainvillea crawls up the walls and thrusts its blooms through the bars, unwilling to be contained. Across the far end of the grass stretches the pool, as yet undisturbed by morning swimmers. The sky, as always at this hour, is a relentless, cloudless blue.

Miranda’s view of this paradise, this oasis of theirs in this desert country, is partitioned into eight nearly equal parts by wrought-iron bars. Painted white, they form a lacelike scrim across the window. The ornate metal curlicues strive to disguise their utilitarian nature, but fail.

Her hand has gone back to work. The iron bars unfurl across her page, but as they would be seen from outside. For behind the bars is not a garden but a girl. A woman, vivisected, her head framed here, her heart here. Here her hand and here her mouth. Drawing, Miranda often feels like an adolescent toying with a Ouija board, wondering to what degree she subconsciously controls the movements of its indicator. Simultaneously creator and conduit, she can rarely predict exactly what will emerge.

So absorbed is she in her puzzle pieces that she doesn’t hear the alarm at first. How long has it been buzzing? She hasn’t yet touched the mug of coffee on the table in front of her, or made Finn’s cup of tea. Barefoot, she runs down the hall to their bedroom and lunges for the alarm on Finn’s bedside table. Why had they set the alarm? They have a child. They do not need an alarm. Then she remembers: The policemen. The policemen are still here. Which means she has to dress for breakfast.

Pausing by the bed, she listens. Nothing. Cressida still safely asleep. “Sweetheart.” Gently, she shakes Finn’s shoulder, kisses his eyelids.

“I’m awake,” he says.

“Clearly not.”

“I am, I’m wide awake.” He says this without moving, without opening an eye. Finn is not a morning person. On weekdays he rises at 6:00 a.m. to eat breakfast before heading to the embassy by 7:30. But on weekends he’ll sleep all day if she doesn’t wake him.

“I’ll get your tea.” In the little private kitchen between their room and Cressida’s, where she habitually spends the first hour of the day with her sketch pad, Miranda brews a mug of Earl Grey. Finn won’t drink her coffee; she makes it too strong. After leaving his tea on the side table by his still-motionless head, she returns to the kitchen for her own mug.

At best she gets an hour of blissful solitude, but today she has only twenty minutes before she needs to scramble into a sundress. She rarely has the luxury of solitary mornings once she leaves the relative privacy of their upstairs suite. By the time she slips down the marble staircase, their Ethiopian housekeeper, Negasi, will be busy in the kitchen, slicing mangoes and melons, peeling pomegranates, and brewing coffee. Birdlike Desta will have already begun polishing the downstairs bathrooms. And Yonas and Semere will be pulling up weeds in the flower beds and tending to their vegetable patches. Miranda wouldn’t have thought much would take root in the cracked earth of this arid city, but their figs, lettuce, broccoli, tomatoes, and rhubarb thrive. By the time Miranda and Finn have finished their muesli and fruit, swallowed the last of their coffee or tea, and wiped their mouths with the rainbow-striped cloth napkins, Teru will be in the kitchen, slowly turning the pages of their cookbooks as she writes her shopping list.

Though often deprived of solitude, Miranda is awash in other luxuries. She doesn’t have to cook. She doesn’t do her own laundry. And best of all, she doesn’t have to leave the house unless she wants to. She can paint all day. Or play with her daughter. Or stare out the window and daydream.

But there’s no more time for dreaming today. Miranda finishes her coffee, then pads to their bathroom to brush her teeth. There are two sinks, two cabinets, two toothbrush holders. His and Hers everything, plus a bath (Hers) and a shower (His). She wakes up every morning and cannot believe this is her life. Sitting on the toilet, she thinks, My god, I live here. Even after three years, it still hasn’t sunk in. Though it should, when she has a choice of seven or so toilets to use. Still brushing, she wanders down the hall to their daughter’s room. Cressida lies on her back in what Miranda refers to as the “surrender position,” her arms thrown above her head and her chubby knees splayed open. Insulated from the chill of the desert night by her blue-and-white checked flannel pajamas, she breathes deeply, her round little tummy straining against the buttons at regular intervals. She is a good sleeper, Cressida. Has been from her fourth month, when she began sleeping through the night. Miranda was prepared for years of interrupted nights, but it hasn’t happened. She finds herself keeping this information from other mothers, feeling guilty for having such an easy child. And not only does she have an easy child but she has help whenever she wants it. She makes a mental note that she must never allow herself to complain about anything, ever again.

Back in the bathroom she washes her face with frankincense-scented soap and runs wet fingers through her tangled curls before Finn finally staggers in, spiky-haired and sleepy. “Policemen this morning,” she reminds him. “Last day!”

“Romantic dinner for two tonight, then?” He smiles, his arms circling her waist.

“I wish. But you’ve got the EU ambassadors tonight, remember?”

“Damn ambassadors.”

“I don’t know. Some of them aren’t so bad.”

Finn turns her to face him, and she presses her cheek against the soft hairs of his chest. She has never felt so lucky.

Currently, there are three policemen--Scotland Yard hostage negotiators--in their guest rooms. Not the kind of company she’d had in her old life. In her old life, in the house she’d once shared with VÍcenta in the Old City, she had taken in students, writers, photographers, rock climbers, adventurers, and the occasional tourist. They filled the void VÍcenta left in her wake. Her guests came from all over the world, drifting in and out of her house, staying for days, weeks, months. Sometimes one of them would make dinner. Sometimes one would share a bottle of bootleg Scotch. But they were generally self-sufficient souls, content to wander out to the souq for a plate of beans and bread or to pour themselves a bowl of muesli for dinner.

Here at the Residence--a shiny white fortress in a city of gray rock--their company is of a different caliber: ministers, policemen, intelligence officers, politicians, journalists, academics, businesspeople, development workers, and military officers. And they all require three full meals a day plus tea and biscuits, guidance around the city, hours of polite conversation, an open bar, and usually, protection. They occupy the five en suite guest rooms, furnished with an eclectic mix of British and Mazrooqi beds and bureaus, and decorated with mismatched curtains and carpets chosen by a succession of ambassadors’ wives with divergent tastes. “It’s like a high-end bed-and-breakfast furnished by someone’s eccentric but wealthy aunt,” Miranda once said to Finn. None of this bothers her; she loves the constant flow of new faces.

Alastair is the most senior of the current three cops (Miranda had to know this sort of information in order to figure out who got the “Minister’s Suite,” their largest guest room), then Mick, and then Gary (called Gazza). They’ve been living in the Residence for nearly three weeks now.

Police and military officers are Miranda’s favorite guests. Which surprised her, given her lifelong bias against anything to do with the military-industrial complex. But the British officers she has met since moving in with Finn have been kinder, more polite, more interesting, and more articulate than just about anyone she has ever met. The night Alastair, Mick, and Gazza arrived, she entertained them in the front sitting room alone for several hours while they waited for Finn to return from the embassy. As the pistachio shells piled up on the glass coffee table and the gin glasses were refilled for the third time, the men leaned back in the arms of the fat, white sofas and regaled Miranda with stories of hostage situations in Iraq, Nigeria, even back home in Britain. Miranda had forgotten that the West had its share of hostage takers. They avoided discussing why the policemen had come. Miranda knew she shouldn’t bring it up without Finn around, and the police didn’t broach the subject themselves. Of course, she couldn’t help but notice their bulging bags of equipment. Mick had snapped his open while she was in the kitchen preparing tea, and as she came back through Miranda had caught a glimpse of latex gloves and plastic bags stamped with the words forensic evidence.

“We had a suicide once, a man threatening to drive off a cliff in England. A high cliff. He’d had some sort of domestic dispute with his wife, been arrested the night before, and spent the day in the bar drinking,” said Mick. “Had a bottle of wine with him, if I recall correctly.” Mick had been talking to the man through the window of the car, trying to convince him to get out and live another day, without making much progress. The man had become sullen and silent, refusing to speak. But one of the car doors was left slightly ajar. With his gloved fingers, Mick quickly pried it open, leapt into the car, pulled the emergency brake, and grabbed the keys. The would-be suicide was apprehended and taken to a psychiatric institute. “I got an award for that

intervention,” said Mick, “even though it was probably one of the daftest things I’ve ever done in my career. Who gets into the car of a man about to drive off a cliff?”

“If I were your wife I’d kill you,” Miranda said.

“She tried.”

The policemen, who travel constantly in and out of the UK, have just come from Uganda. “Tough on a marriage,” said Miranda. Gazza said his wife was in the same line of work. “Doubly tough, then.”

“Yes and no.???. At least she understands what I’m doing.”

It’s not the time away that causes problems, said Mick, but the shift in priorities. When he got to Baghdad in 2003, he had telephoned his wife to let her know he was okay. Shells were exploding all around him as he dialed, standing in a building missing a wall. His wife was crying when she answered the phone. “What is it?” he’d asked, alarmed. “The Hoover!” she’d wept. “It’s not working!”

Mick hadn’t known what to say. “Do you know where I am?” he’d finally asked. “This building is missing a wall. People are dying all around me. But hey, with the hazard pay I’m getting, you can buy a new Hoover!”

They all laughed at the Hoover story, but Miranda wondered how long a marriage could last between people inhabiting such radically different mental spaces. The story reminded her of a New York firefighter’s description of the collapse of his marriage after September 11, 2001. He was no longer able to work up an opinion on what kind of curtains to hang in the living room.

Miranda and Finn found the policemen’s stories so engrossing that they all lingered at the dinner table over glasses of port until 11:00 p.m. It wasn’t merely that these men had such captivating stories of their own; they took an interest in the people around them, asking endless questions about Mazrooqi culture and politics, Miranda’s work, and Cressida’s latest milestones. It was amazing how few politicians and diplomats asked them anything at all. Why was it that police were reliably better conversationalists than ministers?

Eight days before the policemen arrived, seven foreigners had disappeared in the northern mountains: a Dutch family of three, a German, two Brits, and a Frenchwoman. The group had been working for Muslim Mercy, providing food, shelter, health care, and education for those displaced by ongoing tribal conflicts. On a Friday afternoon, they had set out for a hike up a river valley, or wadi. They never returned.

The first challenge was that no one had yet claimed responsibility for their disappearance. Hostage negotiators need people with whom to negotiate. So for their first few days, the policemen found themselves with time on their hands. They questioned Finn about the country’s culture and history; they headed out for secret meetings with German, French, and Dutch intelligence. And still there was no word. This was unusual. Kidnappings here were usually the result of a tribal dispute. Tribes took groups of foreigners hostage in order to pressure the government to force a rival tribe to release some of its prisoners. These hostages were treated with warm hospitality. They were fed large meals of goat and flatbreads, given the best blankets, and returned after several days or weeks unharmed, as a result of mediation. Only rarely have kidnappings turned violent. But Al Qaeda has been gaining strength in the region, says Finn. And they have an entirely different style of kidnapping.

The disappearances have aggravated the mounting tensions between the North and the South, with the government (located in the wealthier South) blaming the unruly northern tribal leaders, who deny any knowledge of the captives.

Several weeks have now passed without progress, and the men can no longer justify their absence from the UK. So until there are further developments in the case, the three policemen are heading home.

Dinner with the most recent visiting minister, in contrast to dinners with the police, had been a colorless affair. All the Arab ambassadors were invited, so that the Minister could solicit their views on local politics, particularly on the increasing friction between North and South. A civil war would prove disastrous, as civil wars typically do, and the UK was anxious to support mediations in order to prevent it. Miranda had plenty to say, having lived in the country for several years, longer than most of the men at the table (including Finn), but as the Minister hadn't come to get her opinion, she kept quiet. Besides, she could never hope to be as eloquent as Finn, who was doing admirably at articulating the challenges they faced. Still, her legs twitched violently under the table and she sat on her hands to restrain herself from shattering a wineglass just to break the monotony. Everyone was repeating the same tired litany of the country's problems, but failing to suggest solutions or a way forward. She got depressed about this. As the crème caramels were delivered to the table, she could stand it no longer.

"Look," she said. "We all know what the problems are." The corrupt government siphoned off oil money that could be directed to public services, brokered illicit arms deals, and starved its people. Hardly any oil money made its way to the resource-poor North, where unemployment was soaring and anger over state corruption was festering. Rot, dishonesty, and betrayal ran so deep that northern rebels could often purchase weapons directly from government forces. Water was increasingly scarce, and at least two cities could run out of it entirely within two years. More than half of the population was illiterate. The press was censored. Women had few rights. Sure, they were allowed to work, drive cars, and travel unaccompanied by men, unlike in other parts of the Middle East, but they couldn't choose their careers or their husbands. Terrorists were allowed to operate training camps in remote areas (mostly in the North) as long as they didn't blow up any of their fellow countrymen. Conflicts raged off and on between government forces and northern rebels. Foreign companies had to negotiate separate deals with the government and the tribes for permission to operate in certain areas, or risk finding their offices suddenly surrounded by armed men.

The Arab ambassadors looked up in surprise at hearing a female voice, before staring back into their coffee cups, but the Minister's head swiveled toward her attentively as she continued. "We know all of this; we have known all of this for years. But what are we going to *do* about it?" Only then did she allow herself a glance at Finn, who was smiling slightly while also managing to convey that she should stop there.

"Exactly," said the Minister, smiling. "So, *gentlemen*, what shall we *do*?"

Over coffee in the sitting room, the visiting Minister told Miranda that he had had a similar conversation ten or so years ago—about Iraq. Leading Finn to suggest—with a completely straight face—that the British start planning to liberate the country from its ruthless and immoral president. "It worked out so *well* in Iraq," he added. Even if he wanted to, said the Omani ambassador, this president couldn't fix things. While a totalitarian despot, he still fell short of Saddam's absolute domination. When several ambassadors claimed that the country's problems could not be solved with money, the head of the World Food Programme chimed in to say that they certainly couldn't be solved *without* money. The country director of the World Bank added that many reforms just had to wait for the country to become magically secure or for its economy to turn

around. But we can't wait for that! cried others. By the end of the night, Miranda noticed that the World Bank director was asleep in his chair. She was relieved when they could finally tuck the jetlagged Minister into bed and stay up for another port with the cops.

With the morning light slanting through the bars of her dressing room window, Miranda stands in front of her closets, contemplating her wardrobe. She still cannot get over the fact that she has an entire room in which to dress herself—a room that serves no other purpose. It was particularly ridiculous when she first moved in, with the two suitcases she had been living out of for the past few years. One of the things she had loved about living in this country was that she never had to think about what to wear. She could live in a succession of long black cotton skirts with long black cotton blouses, or jeans and a T-shirt under an *abaya*. It was so simple.

But everything changed when she moved in with Finn and was suddenly hosting dinner parties for high-ranking officials. At first, she had borrowed a few dresses from her friend Marguerite, the French ambassador's wife—the only ambassador's wife even close to her size, corpulence being part of the job description—before going on a shopping expedition to Dubai, the fifth circle of Hell as far as she was concerned. Despite the profusion of clothing stores in the sprawling malls, it was nearly impossible to find a single dress, skirt, or even a pair of jeans not pasted with sequins and spangles. Arab women love glitter, the flashier and gaudier the better. They also favor synthetics, such as rayon and polyester, despite the unsuitability of these materials for sweltering climates. Perhaps they were simply cheaper. Still, Miranda had managed to find enough cotton clothing to keep herself covered until her next trip to London, when Finn had patiently spent an entire day with her choosing outfits.

But she doesn't need to dress up for breakfast with policemen. Her gym clothes will be fine, as long as she isn't leaving the house. She slips on a camisole and shorts. These are British policemen; there is no danger of shocking them with the sight of female skin.

When she arrives in the dining room, Alastair is already at the table, tucking into a bowl of porridge. As she slides into her seat, Negasi bustles in with baskets of toast, her rows of stubby black braids tucked under the Japanese poppies scarf Miranda had brought her from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. (Every morning she asks Miranda and Finn if they want toast and eggs, though they never have anything other than fruit and muesli on weekdays. Miranda gets the feeling she is almost relieved to have guests, so that she can *cook* something.) “Good morning, Madame,” says Negasi, smiling. Miranda has been trying to get her to stop calling her Madame ever since she moved in. “Miranda is fine,” she said. “Even Mira.” She doesn't feel old enough to be a Madame, even at thirty-nine. But though Negasi always smiles and agrees, she can't seem to get her lips to form Miranda's name.

“Good morning, Negasi! Good morning, Ali.” Negasi hurries to pour carrot juice into her glass.

“Morning! Looking forward to getting rid of us?” Alastair smiles, bits of oat stuck to his upper lip.

“Of course not. Whom will I be able to bore with my political rants?”

“You'll miss us, then?”

“We'll cry ourselves to sleep every night.” Miranda smiles and pulls her napkin into her lap. Finn appears a few moments later, showered and dressed in one of his gray pin-striped suits and a blue tie with tiny sheep

on it. It is one of Cressida's favorite ties.

"She's awake," he says to Miranda, before greeting Alastair and pouring himself a cup of Negasi's coffee.

"I'll go up." Miranda is still breast-feeding two or three times a day, though Cressida is nearly fifteen months old. She never thought she would nurse for this long, but it had been such a struggle to make the breast-feeding work in the beginning that now that she has it figured out she wants to do it forever. The first few months had been torture. Her nipples had cracked, bled, and succumbed to thrush. Against her affronted flesh, Cressida's lips had been razor-sharp blades. The brush of a soft cotton T-shirt had left her weeping. But she'd persisted, motivated by the health benefits and the threat of having to wash and sterilize bottles every day, until finally, miraculously, the two of them figured it out.

Upstairs, Cressida is standing in her crib, a new trick. She still doesn't have much hair, just a strip of wispy black curls down the middle of her scalp, a milquetoast of a Mohawk. Her eyes have turned from blue to a dark phthalo green, framed by eyelashes so long they brush the tiny bones of her eyebrows when she opens them wide. "Bob bob bobobob BOB!" she cries as Miranda enters. "BOB BOB!"

"Morning, sunshine!" she says, lifting the little girl into her arms. "And how many times have I told you not to call me Bob?"

Just as Cressida is finishing nursing, Finn calls from downstairs. "Come say good-bye!" She slides the straps of her camisole back up over her shoulders and hefts Cressie onto her hip. Downstairs, Negasi rushes to take the baby, enfolding her in a patchouli- and perspiration-scented embrace. Miranda had initially felt uneasy about asking their housekeeper to look after her daughter—it wasn't part of her job description, after all—but Negasi adores the child, often prying her from her mother's arms to rock her, singing in her lilting Amharic. When Miranda tracks her down in the kitchen to retrieve Cressida, Negasi pleads for a few more minutes.

The men are lined up in the hall with their black cases. "We can't thank you enough for putting up with us, Miranda," says Mick.

"Any longer and Ali here might have gone native," adds Gazza.

"You're welcome anytime." The bland words of diplomacy slip off her tongue so easily now, though this time she means it.

"I hope we won't have reason to come back anytime soon. Though we may not be able to keep Alastair away."

Miranda stays in the doorway as Finn walks the men down the garden path. Bashir and Yusef emerge from either side of the front steps to escort them, their eyes scanning the surrounding rooftops. The rest of the team waits in the armored cars, already humming in the drive. Finn jogs back to kiss her one last time (surprising Yusef, who has to leap out of the front seat and jog back with him). "See you tonight."

"At an undetermined time?"

"As usual."

Finn cannot ever call her from work to say what time he is coming home. They have to assume that all their phones are tapped, and thus it would be dangerous to disclose the ambassador's whereabouts. Sometimes Finn calls to say he will be late, but never exactly *how* late. "Dinner or no dinner?" she asks. "Dinner," he

always replies. Though it isn't unusual for Finn to have dinner at 10:00 p.m. This didn't used to bother her, but since the most recent attack on the US embassy she finds herself unable to focus on her work after 6:00 p.m., when the sun plunges behind the minarets. Her ears strain for the roar of his convoy as she prowls the upstairs, peering out of each of their dozens of windows in turn, seeing nothing but the night.

"Have a happy day, sweetheart. And don't forget, the bug men are coming this morning!" he whispers, before jogging back down the path and climbing into his forest-green Toyota Land Cruiser. She had almost forgotten. Two Brits are coming this morning to sweep the house for electronic bugs. "Seriously?" she had said when Finn told her. "How would bugs have gotten in?"

Just about anyone in this country is bribable, Finn had said. Even their own staff members could be persuaded to settle a bug into a potted plant if it meant feeding their family back in Ethiopia for a month. This had startled Miranda. She couldn't imagine anyone more loyal than Negasi. Or Teru. Or even Desta. Could they really so easily be bribed? Then again, she probably also couldn't conceive of the poverty of their families back in Ethiopia. Betraying an employer might feel fairly minor next to keeping a small child alive. "But we've been here three years!" she'd exclaimed. "The Mazrooqis might already know our darkest secrets."

"It's not routine," he said. "But with the increased security concerns, we want to make sure we are crossing all of our T's. Chances are, though, your secrets remain dark."

The bug men arrive at 8:00 a.m., half an hour after Finn's convoy pulls out of the gates. Miranda is in the kitchen discussing the evening's menu with Teru when she hears the growl of their armored car. Cressie sits in the middle of the metal counter waving a wooden spoon, occasionally whacking a cookbook. Miranda leaves her there with Teru to run to greet the men, pulling the door to the kitchen shut behind her; the staff are to be kept away from the rooms being swept.

The bug men strike her as young, possibly not out of their twenties. One is tall and blond with the lean musculature of a surfer, while the other is stout with a shaved head and round belly. He wears a tiny Union Jack stud in his left ear. They lug in a series of heavy black suitcases, dropping each with a thud on the floor of the sitting room. "Do you mind if we start in here?" the blond one says, glancing around. "Start wherever you want," says Miranda, slightly self-conscious in her shorts. "Tea?" The offer has become reflexive. No one enters the Residence without having a mug of English breakfast thrust into his or her hands.

"Yes, please!" The bug men settle into the living room and get to work. Miranda closes the door before the staff becomes inquisitive. When Gabra arrives to play with Cressie outside, Miranda grabs a water bottle and trots to the gym at the end of their garden for her morning run and swim. She doesn't love the treadmill, but running outside is out of the question. No one in this country runs, except at gunpoint. Women least of all. It is one of the things she misses most about life in America. At first the Residence staff were bewildered by her daily workouts, but after three years they have grown accustomed to her peculiar Western habits.

When she returns an hour later, her hair damp from her laps in the pool, the bug men are still at it. She creeps by them, wrapped in Finn's blue-and-white-striped terry-cloth dressing gown. The fat one is waving a wand across the surfaces of furniture while the blond stares at a laptop screen. When they finish with the living room, they move on to the dining room and Finn's office—the rooms where interesting conversations are most likely to take place.

Finn is scrupulous about discussing sensitive information with Miranda only in designated areas. They do not talk about his work in bed or at the dining table. When he wants to share something particularly

intriguing, he takes her into the stairwell, and they walk up and down the stairs from floor to floor, whispering. Or they take a walk in the garden or around the top floor, moving quickly from room to room.

Miranda showers and changes into walking trousers and a blue cotton men's shirt, twisting her unruly curls into a knot. She's lacing up her hiking boots when her cell phone rings. Finn. "Hello, sweetheart."

"Is today your hike?"

"This afternoon. Why? Is it still okay?" Her spirits sag at the prospect of another day locked inside. With the new security restrictions in place there is hardly anywhere she is still allowed to go.

"Of course, I just . . . You're not going too far?"

"Not even crossing a checkpoint. Tucker says it's perfectly safe. It's near the president's village."

"Who's with you today?"

"Not sure. Whoever isn't with you, I guess. Mukhtar?"

"Your favorite."

"Well, he's the only one who ever asks me questions. He takes an interest."

"Not too much of one, I hope."

"Finn! You do realize I used to do this every week. *Without* a bodyguard."

"But that was before you were an ambassador's wife."

"When I was just an ordinary mortal."

"A very bewitching ordinary mortal."

Miranda smiles at her phone. "I'll see you tonight, okay? By the time you get home I'll even have all the pistachios in bowls."

"That's what the staff are for, sweetheart. Put your feet up."

By the time she gets downstairs, Gabra and Cressie are outside playing on the front lawn. Dressed in an oversized embroidered Ethiopian shirt (a gift from Gabra) and a floppy flowered sunhat, Cressie is teaching her teddy bear to do high dives from the edge of the dried-up stone fountain at the end of the garden. She is a fortunate child; few other children in this city have lawns—or any outdoor space. Miranda thinks of the children in her old neighborhood, who play their games in the streets, barefoot and unsupervised, dodging cars as they kick small rocks across the cobblestones. When she lived there, they would chase after her as she made her way around the markets, buying tomatoes and tiny greenish raisins, their ranks growing at every intersection. "*Soura, soura!*" they'd cry, making picture-taking motions with their hands. Or "*Qalam, qalam!*" Why these children were permanently fixated on pens was a mystery to her. She understood why they wanted her to take their photographs (and she often obliged). They wanted to see themselves in a way they normally couldn't. Many had never seen a mirror. They would stare in silence at the photo in her

camera, wrapping filthy fingers around it to pull it closer. But why the pens? She never saw them using pens, even when she was in their homes.

“Mummy, Mummy!” Seeing her approach, Cressie totters across the lawn, falling on her face every few steps when she catches a foot on the spongy turf. Their grass is inexplicably springy, sinking beneath every footfall, tugging at the heels of shoes. When the embassy staff gathers to play badminton someone always ends up twisting an ankle. Not that that deters anyone. The British must have their bit of lawn, and where else could they find a patch of green? Yonas and Semere spend half their day on the turf, tenderly watering, weeding, and mowing. If Cressie could learn to walk on this, thinks Miranda, she’ll be able to walk on anything.

“Hello, my love.” Miranda swings her daughter up into her arms. “Have you had a happy morning?” Cressie is heavy and hot. Miranda presses her close, kissing her chubby cheek until the little girl squirms to be let down. To Miranda’s dismay, she has never been a cuddly child. She tolerates the occasional embrace, but is impatient for it to end so that she can get on with whatever she is doing—collecting flower petals or pretending to make porridge for the bears (even Miranda says porridge now instead of oatmeal, as well as anorak, chuffed, knickers, biscuit, and dual carriageway. Finn’s language has been slowly colonizing hers) or sending her small plastic cows on a Tupperware boat down a pot-holder river. She is a perpetually busy child.

Gabra updates her on the minutiae of Cressida’s day thus far as they walk toward the house and wander back to the kitchen to see what Teru has left them. Miranda sets Cressie on the floor to open the refrigerator and peers inside. As requested, Teru has made a Thai salad, strips of tofu, carrot, and cucumber in a peanut sauce. Every morning, Miranda picks something out of a cookbook, and every afternoon it appears in the refrigerator. This never ceases to feel miraculous. Gabra has chicken, rice, and Ethiopian injera bread, her favorite. Miranda invites Gabra to join them in the dining room, though she knows it’s pointless. Gabra would rather stay with Negasi and Teru in the kitchen.

It was an awkward adjustment, eating separately from the staff. At first Miranda took her meals in the kitchen, wanting to be egalitarian, wanting to be their friend, feeling lonesome in the empty Siberia of their dining room. She didn’t know how she was supposed to relate to staff, having never even had a housecleaner. Servants were people she thought of as existing only in fairy tales and Hollywood. But eventually she realized how uncomfortable her overtures made them. The kitchen was their province. They didn’t know what to do with her when she was underfoot, interrupting the flow of their work. She was the Madame, and therefore she belonged in the dining room.

Negasi, Teru, and Desta were a seamless team. Whenever Teru had a particularly large dinner to make, Negasi and Desta would be in the kitchen, juicing limes and slicing carrots. Miranda admired their effortless choreography, the way they never discussed who would do what but sensed what was needed. At night when they had large dinners, all three women worked together serving the drinks and food, not one of them leaving until the kitchen once again looked as though it had never been used.

Now, Miranda has adjusted to her solitary meals. She reads, listens to music, or plays with Cressie. A relatively recent issue of *ARTnews* lies open next to her plate. Miranda hasn’t managed much more than a glance at the headlines, though she’s had the issue for two months now. Today, Cressie sits in Miranda’s lap as she eats, pulling strips of cucumber and tofu off her plate. When she’s mopped up the last drops of peanut sauce with a tomato slice, Miranda carries her plate to the kitchen and leaves it in the sink. She hasn’t washed a dish in three years. *Don’t get used to this*, she reminds herself every morning. *This is not real life.*

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