

CHAPTER 1

When Nick met Sassa, he was pulled in by an unusual light in her eyes, old and familiar, a beacon and a badge for those deft enough to notice: the color of home.

“More tea?” he asked.

“Yes, please.”

Nick unwound his body, stood, stacked Sassa’s cup on top of his, and ambled across Joe’s Artful Coffee to one of the baristas. He picked up six different tea jars and sniffed each. Pointing to one on the end, he said, “I’ll have a large tea and a cappuccino with two shots of espresso.”

As he waited, he studied a picture on the side wall of the John and Yoko bed-in. In a sunlit room, they sat on a mattress with their legs crossed. Two handwritten signs, “Hair Peace” and “Bed Peace”, were pasted above them on the windows. A Schwinn bike rested directly in front of them. Did anyone get that much sun anymore?

He looked over at Sassa, thumb-typing on her phone. Sassa Vikander had long, straight blonde hair that draped her shoulders and danced on the tabletop like two expertly controlled marionettes. She had creamy white skin that framed her smile perfectly. Her eyes reflected fractal blue, so much so that he imagined strangers stopping in their tracks to stare, compelled by the color and movement.

At least that’s what he’d done when, only an hour ago, she stepped into the café largely unknown. A friend of one of his employees. A New Yorker for half a decade. At twenty-eight, a year younger than him. Dressed in sixties

vintage clothing—a royal blue mini-dress with a black jacket, a black fedora, a black pearl necklace, and black leather boots up to her knees—she had arrived from a safer time.

Then, early in their conversation, a flicker and the sweetest sadness. Like a character in a Bergman movie, Sassa didn't have much emotional time left and, without help, would soon fade into that hopeless place he'd dreaded for so long. A place where recovery was impossible. A place where she would replace her badge of defiance, of hope, with one of submission. A place where the beacon would be smothered as weight stole her away from love. Scared for her, he'd inexplicably blurted all of this out, as if he had no choice, as if the feeling, disproportionate, had a mind of its own. She'd almost walked out on him. But with his promise of a restart and another tea, she had stayed.

“Excuse me, sir. Your drinks are ready.”

Nick turned around and rested his hands on the counter. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“Do you watch foreign movies?”

“Nah. I like romantic comedies. You?”

“Yeah. Way too many.” He picked up his drinks, nodded, then balanced his way back outside to the table. On the way, he scanned the Greenwich Village café, which bustled with conversation that spring morning. With open floor-to-ceiling front windows and outside tables full, the café extended to the end of the Thirteenth Street sidewalk, where Sassa sat waiting. As he gently placed her tea on the round tabletop, a warm breeze washed over him like water caressing a stone. “Here you go. Extra strong Gyokuro Imperial Green Tea.”

She took a sip. “This one is really good.” After a few more sips, she put her cup down and stroked the handle a few times. She moved her mouth as if to say something, but checked herself and studied the sidewalk instead. When she turned back to him, she clearly had a more measured response. “I've been

thinking about our earlier conversation. Do you always start your dates with emotional stuff?”

“Normally not, though I’m not that good at small talk.”

“So you understand the light now?”

“Maybe.”

“You can do better than that.”

That’s why he loved strong women—he had to do better. Waves of warmth radiated from his chest and balanced the heat on his face from the sun. He smiled. “It’s the color of loss.”

She reached into her purse and pulled out a Chick-in-Shell Pez dispenser. She flicked the chick and stacked purple Pez until they fell over. “Let’s recap. So now I know you’re attracted to me, you noticed some funky light in my eyes that reminds you of loss, and you’re good at picking tea. When do you get to the original stuff?”

“You’ve heard this before?”

“Better be soon.”

“Do you think our conversation has been generative so far?”

She twirled a Pez with her thumb and index finger, then popped it in her mouth. She reached for her tea. “Is *generative* even a word?” Smiling into her teacup, she put the cup down, then lifted it again and took a sip. A well-dressed businessman caught her eye as he entered the café.

“I believe so. Life’s all about words and ideas.”

“Sadly.”

“What do you mean?”

“Really?”

“Right.” What was she talking about? What else was there? “I meant what I said about your eyes. There’s something about them—”

“This might go south.”

“Where do you want it to go?”

“North.” Her phone buzzed and she picked it up to read a text message. Fragments from deep within him, puzzling, stored long ago, surfaced,

attempting to reassemble for her, before they lost shape and sank. A picture of what? Why now? Why her? Not a clue. He couldn't shed his discomfort, but instead of closing down, instead of pulling back, instead of deflecting, he leaned in.

"Sorry."

"No problem. Back to the light. I see strength, but that's only partially right. You're strong, though your strength might be better described as perseverance. You don't give up."

"Wow, I've won the jackpot."

"You've tried to fix a problem for a long time and you haven't been able to sort things out. You're hoping that you'll get there someday, though my hunch is that your hope is starting to dwindle. That, more than anything else, scares you."

Faint changes colored her facial expression. Her eyebrows arched as her mouth circled before momentarily resting. Then the corners of her lips barely turned upward. "Have you thought about a career as a psychic?"

"More as a therapist. Go with the flow for a bit."

"What do you think you're . . . sorry, I'm trying to fix?"

"Your sadness. Your numbness. Do you agree?"

"What do you think?"

"Do you always answer a question with a question?"

"Almost always." Her eyes dulled and she stared off at nothing as she reached for her Pez dispenser and slipped it back into her purse. Then she twirled a strand of her hair for a bit. "Whenever I can get away with the flip."

"That's what I thought. Me too."

"I don't know if you've got me figured out. You sound pretty sure of yourself after only an hour, but I don't trust words. You need to show me."

She was right about that. What would pierce through? Reaching across the table, he held his finger up like E.T. and slowly pressed it against hers. For a second, something passed between them. A current? A spark? Probably

nothing. He rested his finger on the table. “I don’t know what happened to you, but my hunch is there are places where we overlap.”

“I bet you say that to all the girls.”

“Maybe we can figure out the overlap together?”

She rested her finger on the table. “Too soon to tell.”

“One more thing. I believe in congruence between words and body language.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Not really. I say what’s on my mind and my body language mirrors what I say.”

Her phone beeped. She plucked it off the table and read another message. “Just a second.” She started typing something. A moment later, she rested her phone back on the table. “Sorry. Congruence. What an interesting idea.”

She’d thrown him a bone, but she wasn’t going to stick around much longer unless he figured out a way to get through. Words didn’t work. Ideas didn’t work. But there were unseen places where they overlapped and he’d never experienced that before. Maybe that would be the way in.

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After a restless night of replaying his entire conversation with Sassa, Nick found himself again waiting for her the next morning at Joe’s. Each table seemed blocked off as patrons sat with opened copies of the *Sunday Times*. Street percussion from cars, trucks, delivery boys, and pedestrians blended with Radiohead’s “Subterranean Homesick Alien,” which blared through the café sound system. He tapped his foot in rhythm. With his laptop open, he admired Sassa from a corner table as she breezed into the café wearing jeans, a Nirvana *Nevermind* T-shirt, and black Keds. “Nice look.”

“I wanted to match you.” She fixed a stray hair behind her ear before closing his laptop and sitting down.

For most of his twenties, he'd worn the same clothing every day: a Beatles T-shirt, jeans, and Birkenstock sandals. Even in the winter. He tugged on his T-shirt right below the album cover. "I'm a few years behind you. Sometimes I think I was born into the wrong generation."

"The *White Album* is my favorite," she said.

"Mine too."

"How many Beatles T-shirts do you have?"

"Lots. Not enough. I'll order."

He ordered coffee, tea, and the *Times*. She'd taken the time to dress down for him. And she liked the Beatles. What was it about her that was like no other? He didn't have a clue, but George could have written the song for her. A few minutes later, he served her.

"You look tired," she said.

"I didn't sleep well. Do you want a section?"

"Business."

"I'll stick with Arts."

She lifted the newspaper and paged through the Business section without reading a single story. After a few moments, she put the paper down on the empty chair next to her. Leaning over the table, she folded her hands. "Want to know what I thought about when I went home last night?"

"Sure."

"You're way ahead of me. I'm just looking to have a good time with a cute guy for a while."

"Cute?"

"Yes, Nick, you do have that going for you."

As a six foot four inches, guitar-playing songwriter with long curly brown hair, dark brown eyes, and a semi-tragic story, "cute" bothered him. But maybe that was the way in? Maybe it was that simple. "Cute?"

"I paid you a compliment and you're complaining?"

"Sorry."

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She twirled her hair again. “You know, cute can cover a multitude of sins.”

“You’ve got me there. Same is true for beautiful.”

She grabbed his spoon, fiddled with it between both hands. Balancing the spoon on one finger, she glided it over the table until it fell on his hand. “Sorry.” Reaching over, she patted the injured part exactly once.

“No problem. Something on your mind?”

“Want to play the What and Why game?”

“You mean I get to ask you any What or Why question?”

“Me too.”

It was as if she were about to take a college final and knew all of the answers. Or she’d done this many times in the past only to be disappointed. But which one? He smoothed his T-shirt. He pushed back in his chair to straighten up. His laptop found a new home on an empty chair. He had to do better. “Okay. Shoot.”

She opened the stopwatch application on her phone and pushed start. “No more than ten seconds per answer. What school?”

“Columbia.”

“Why Columbia?”

“I had a hunch about living in the city. What school?”

“Michigan.”

“Why Michigan?”

“Easier to blend in with a hundred thousand students. What do you do for a living?”

“I run a small online recording studio: studiomusicians-dot-com.”

“Why music?”

“Love. What do you do?”

“I’m a chef at DiPosto.”

“Why a chef?”

“Love. An Italian grandmother taught me to cook. It stuck, I guess.

She's why I went to cooking school after I landed in New York. Your favorite movie?"

"Only formal what or why questions."

"I don't like rules." With the corners of her lips turned slightly upward, she slid her phone into her purse.

"*Persona*. Ingmar Bergman."

"I've never seen a Bergman movie. Aren't they depressing? Why do you like it?"

He picked up his spoon and stirred his coffee. No one had ever asked him that question before. In fact, he'd never told anyone before that he'd even seen it. But for some reason, he needed to tell her. "I was numb, so I gathered feelings. *Persona* helped me learn to feel again."

"What does 'gathered feelings' mean?"

"At first, they were like scripts. I used them when I needed a certain emotional response."

She pushed her chair back, and crossed one leg over the other. Interlacing her hands, she draped them over her knee. "But you didn't feel anything yourself?"

"Something like that. I was frozen. The scripts were my pretend thaw."

"That sounds appealing. Can I borrow some?"

"They don't seem necessary around you." What a role reversal. After years of playing Sassa's role with his former girlfriends, one where he withheld as much information as possible, he'd flipped to being the one openly sharing.

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Freshman year, Nick skipped his morning classes at Columbia and plodded more than a hundred blocks from campus to see the first showing of *Persona*. He stepped into the Village Cinema and settled in the row behind an older man two seats to his right. Only the two of them. The patina of the place drew him in; the smell of popcorn melding with spilled soda, crushed candy,

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and who-knows-what-else was just right. Diet Pepsi in hand, he watched the previews.

The opening sequence of *Persona* rolled across the screen. Disjointed images and atonal music transported him. An erect penis, a cartoon, a tarantula, the crucifixion, a boy, all flashed before him in black and white. They woke him up, seemingly from a dream; he was more alert than he'd been in a long time. Who was that boy? He pushed back in his theater seat and straightened up. He parked his drink on the floor.

The camera zoomed in on Liv Ullmann's face and stayed there for over a minute. Her face: the entire human condition, somehow holding boundless sadness and hope. She hovered in front of him, the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

Later, on screen, Liv's character, Elisabet was on the beach with Alma. Dark and light hats on the beach. What an image. On the island, they created a place of light. And dark. A compartment. So many beautiful truths within each of them. Why did they keep their most vivid ones hidden? Elisabet studied Alma as if she were preparing for a part in a play, gathering in her feelings so she could use them when needed.

Later, the women's faces merged into one—the most beautiful film image Nick had ever seen. Could any one human being see another completely and not fall apart?

After the film ended, Nick remained in his seat. He stroked the blue velvet on the arm of his chair with his finger. Nothing he'd experienced, in or out of a movie theater, compared to *Persona*. Shaking, tears welled up until he willed them back down. After the lights came on, he left the theater and trekked out of the Village toward campus.

He was like Liv's Elisabet.

In the dark, safe, he'd gathered feelings without saying a word. He'd learned about intimacy without the real risk of revealing anything about himself. He'd banked emotional scripts for future use.

He crossed Columbus Circle and raced up Amsterdam, park side. Life since his dad's death had consisted of distant and dishonest relationships. How to trust? How to be trusted? Could he let down his guard and enter into emotionally intimate relationships that were deep into things?

Infiltrating the campus, he made his way back to his dorm room. He sprawled at his desk, opened his economics book, and began working on his midterm paper. The euphoria from the afterglow of *Persona* permeated his writing as he whistled "Hey Jude."