

STRANGE DEATHS
OF THE **LAST ROMANTIC**

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a novel

MOSES YURIYVICH MIKHEYEV

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Dedicated to The-Girl-Who-Wouldn't-Eat-Popcorn. This one's for you.

“To the well-organized mind, death is but the next great
adventure.”

—J. K. Rowling

Prologue

I

February 13th, 2007

Miss Anne-Marie Reneux walked towards the French café wearing her bright-red trench coat to order her usual. She wore lavish clothes, had an umbrella crooked over her arm, and her hair fell to her shoulders in a ball of silver, tangling itself in the pearl necklace that charmed her aged but still beautiful neckline. Every so often, she would bring both hands to her mouth and blow gently into them, trying her best to keep her numb fingers warm. The winter sky stared down at her with mixed emotions.

Located in the center of Midtown Manhattan, the café was a few blocks away from her apartment. She had been eating breakfast there her entire life.

The fragrance of her perfume greeted the owner, Gabriel Lefebvre, before he saw his loyal customer. Without turning to meet her gaze, he greeted her warmly while he cleaned the espresso machine.

“*Bonjour, madame,*” he said. “It looks like it may rain, *non?*”

“I made it here just in time, Gabe,” she replied, indicating with her unopened umbrella before placing it on a nearby table. “It certainly felt that way half an hour ago.” She cast him a quick glance with raised eyebrows.

It was nine o’clock and the morning rush was over. Everyone was either at work or late to it. The entire café lay dormant, the elderly woman the only customer.

As she looked around the place, she began removing her white leather gloves. “Where’s Jessica?” she asked.

“Ah, Jess?” he muttered and shook his head. “She couldn’t make it today. Said her daughter caught something, you know?” He threw a white towel into a large stainless-steel sink and walked over to the cash register. “The same as usual, madame?”

She nodded her head. “I’m sorry to hear that about Jessica. She always makes my mornings with her tales of how that cat of hers frightens her daughter.” Her gray eyes glowed magically as she spoke. “Can you believe that her daughter thinks the cat is a tiger?”

“I’ve heard the story a thousand times.” A smile formed on his face.

The elderly woman turned her head to look through the large windows at the front of the café.

The clouds were beginning to break, and little rays of light, once held hostage by the gray, began to escape. At first one smudge of blue revealed itself, before being followed by another, and then another, and another. She watched in awe as the sun made an unexpected appearance.

Turning to face him again, she said, “Maybe I was wrong to bring my umbrella. I’m getting too old for predicting the weather.” She chuckled under her breath.

“You are far from old,” he said, observing her face.

She waved her bare right hand. “I would blush for you, Gabe, but beneath all of these wrinkles and makeup, I doubt you’d be able to see a damn thing!”

“*Pas du tout!*” he rejoined. “Old isn’t for the likes of us.”

“Now you’re just trying to replace my Jessica,” she said, shaking her head while smiling politely. “But I won’t let you.”

In the kitchen a bell rang loudly. The chef had prepared her breakfast and was using his big thumb to call for service rather impatiently.

Raising his head and looking directly at her, Gabriel said, "You want me to bring the breakfast outside as usual?"

She glanced around the café. The windows glowed from the sunlight that streamed in. "Yes, I've changed my mind," she said, returning her gaze to him. "I think outside would be just fine."

Gabriel could not remember the last time she had had her breakfast indoors. She always sat outside, that woman in the bright-red trench coat. He shook his head and smiled.

"After you," he said, opening the door for her.

A real trooper. Isn't that what the Americans call such women? he thought to himself as they walked out.

She took a seat at her usual table, and he watched her take a deep breath and glance at the sky.

When Gabriel arrived with her food, he remarked, "Don't place all your hopes in New York. It's a city of many faces and grand illusions." He placed a plate full of omelet and potatoes on a table.

She looked at him and smiled.

"Anything else, madame?" he asked before leaving.

"Yes."

"Yes?" he asked.

"You forgot something, Gabe."

He gave her a confused look.

"The paper?"

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "I'll bring that right out." He scurried back into the café.

"You're definitely not Jessica," she called after him. "She would have never forgotten such a thing."

"I heard that," she heard him yell back from the confines of the building.

She shook her head and smiled. The food looked delicious.

Momentarily, he returned with that day's *New York Times* in his hand. He placed it on her table and asked her if she wanted anything else.

"You know who," she told him.

"I'll let her know," he said with a wink before greeting another customer who had just arrived and following them into the café.

Miss Reneux ate her breakfast, drank her coffee, read her paper, and watched the world go by. It was what she did every morning. This morning was no different.

Across the street, at the entrance of a bank, a line of customers had formed. Men in suits and ties carrying leather suitcases ran across crosswalks. She watched the legs of women as they followed after them. They were always wearing shiny high heels with black pantyhose, making that click-clack sound as they skipped on the pavement.

"New York," she whispered to herself.

Cars and taxis and large buses advertising dreamed-up worlds sold to the highest bidders drove past, emptying puddles wherever they went. Sirens filled the air with typical routine.

A mother at a crosswalk scolded her child. "Don't you dare think about crossing the street, miss!" she yelled. "You're not getting run over on my watch!"

And then, amidst the hustle and bustle of New York life—just as she turned the paper to see a full-page advertisement of Tiffany and Co.'s jewelry—she heard it.

It began as a faint disturbance of sorts in an alleyway several blocks away. Miss Reneux turned to look. She heard the little girl at the crosswalk yell out before watching her bury her face in her mother's dress. Miss Reneux watched as the mother's blank expression became consumed by horror.

She placed her fork down and wiped her mouth with a napkin.

That's strange, she thought. Something loud and awful must be happening.

She watched as the crowd raised its fingers as if to accuse some unknown entity, and her gaze shifted towards *it*.

Directly ahead of her she could make out a young man—not more than seventeen—running in the street, entirely naked.

A hundred yards.

He had wavy, blonde hair that flapped around in the wind like pigtails worn on the head of a girl riding a merry-go-round. All she could see was his nude body and his wild hair.

Eighty yards.

She looked across the street again and surveyed the crowd. Some continued to walk as if nothing happened; others stood frozen in their tracks, waiting for something to occur.

The mother picked the child up and pressed her against her chest. She wasn't sure what the hell was happening; she knew—as all mothers instinctively know—that one did not wait for trouble.

Sixty yards.

Miss Reneux returned her now confused gaze to the naked man. She could not make out his face, but she could see his chest. It was sweaty, and he was breathing deeply.

Someone from the crowd yelled, "Call the police! He's a madman!"

Forty yards.

His head shot back and forth—like an owl's—as he ran right towards Miss Reneux in her bright-red trench coat. His eyes darted here, now there, searching for something while constantly talking to himself.

Twenty yards.

A crazed look filled his eyes, and the crowd that had just been raising accusing fingers now turned away, ashamed and in fear. They looked away with horror. The young man seemed to create a climate of confusion. Some only saw his butt cheeks; others only saw his impossible eyes. But nobody seemed to see him—to really *see* him. They only saw parts of him—an eye, a leg, a flailing penis.

The Miss Reneux in her bright-red trench coat didn't know it, but as the sound of running feet kept getting closer, and the crazed talking kept getting louder, she began to realize a certain truth: the naked man was running *directly towards her*.

"Oh, God!" escaped her painted lips as she brought a hand to her mouth in sheer astonishment. "My God, somebody help!"

She turned her head towards the café. She could see Gabriel helping a customer inside, oblivious to the scene outside. "Gabe!" she tried again.

Across the street, some of the crowd had dispersed, seeking asylum from the madness.

"Someone . . . help . . . God . . . me . . ." she repeated. She wanted to stand, to run into the café, but sheer terror trapped her in her seat.

Ten yards.

"Obituaries," he muttered under his breath. "Obituaries."

Was he talking to her?

“You!” he called out.

Paralyzed by dread, Miss Reneux still refused to believe the naked maniac was addressing her.

“You there!” he shouted again.

She could not believe what she was hearing.

I'm not anyone to him. He's not talking to me. Why would he be? He doesn't know me, and I don't know him.

Subconsciously, her left hand jerked with horror and pushed the plate over, sending it crashing to the floor.

She jumped at the sound of it smashing.

Does he really know me?

An explosion of other thoughts formed in her mind. They attempted to move to the tip of her tongue, but she remained seated and silent, buried under the weight of fear.

“Aristotle Zurr-McIntyre,” he kept saying as he approached her, large puffs of condensation escaping his mouth with every tired exhalation.

He stopped at her table and threw his hands on it.

His youthful body had finally arrived, heaving with excitement.

She bolted backwards in her chair.

His hands shot forwards, grabbed onto the chair, preventing it from crashing backwards.

For a brief moment, their hands touched.

His touch was soft but firm; his skin was as fresh as a baby's.

He was so close, she could hear his heart beating inside of his chest; a madman imprisoned, knocking on prison doors, begging to be released.

He panted heavily and stared at her with blue eyes so dark they were almost black.

He moved his hand back to the top of the table.

She glanced quickly at them. They looked clean. Extraordinarily clean.

He must have been born yesterday, she thought.

He kept staring at her, catching his breath.

At first one knee buckled, then it was followed by the other. “Obituaries,” he mouthed painfully as he kneeled to the ground, staring right into her eyes.

Seeing him on his knees like that, entirely helpless, filled her with momentary boldness. She remembered the revolver she carried around with her for rare occasions like this. She even forgot she ever had it. She never had to use it.

Maybe I'll pull it out and scare him away?

She jumped to her feet, accidentally throwing the paper she was reading at him.

In the speck of a moment, he had both of his hands on it, devouring its pages like roadkill. Until he reached the obituaries section.

He stopped.

And then looked up at her.

She watched his gaze fall to an object near him.

To her utter surprise, it was her revolver.

He moved a hand and grabbed it quickly.

She froze with fear, unable to move.

Did she really lose her gun in the confusion?

Is he going to kill me? she thought.

She wanted to run, but some inexplicable primordial fear kept her feet glued to the ground.

Like some wild animal, he returned his attention to the paper. Still on his hands and knees, he began reading all the names out loud.

“Oh, good,” she whispered. “He’s not going to kill me.”

“Jason Hershorn. Anna Love Withers. Jason Smith West,” he read.

He got to Aristotle Zurr-McIntyre and began reading to himself. He was lost in a haze, as if transported to another place. He shook his head. “No! No, no!” he shouted, white saliva foaming at the corners of his blue mouth.

She watched as the revolver appeared in his right hand, glistening against the dull pavement.

He looked up at the woman, giving her that half-crazed, half-sane look of his, staring at her with his black-yet-blue fierce eyes. He shoved the barrel into his mouth and pulled the trigger.

The gunshot was interrupted by police sirens.

She turned her head for a split second, enticed by the flashing of the reds and blues.

She returned her gaze and looked for the young man.

He was gone.

Only splattered blood remained on the newspaper that he had left behind. And then it, too, disappeared.

Horror took hold of her face. Both hands shot up to her mouth as she gasped. “Oh God, oh God, oh God!” She began to spin in circles, turning her body every which way. She looked around herself, stared across the street, searched the roofs of skyscrapers. She even bent over and looked under the table.

Nothing.

The young, crazed man—who had stolen her newspaper, who had read through an obituary section in the span of a few seconds, who had pulled a gun out and shot himself in the mouth—had vanished.

“Oh, God,” escaped her lips moments before she lost consciousness and fell.