

love
AND
impediments

A Novel

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BQB

North Carolina

Love and Impediments

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Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments.

—William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 116"

Review Copy

*To my aunts:
Verna and Villie,
and all the other women—
the size of a sparrow, with the strength of an eagle.*

Review Copy

CHAPTER 1

Gray

At three minutes to one, Marta Aneva walked down to the lectern, and looked up. The auditorium was a vortex with raked rows of curved tables, and Marta stood at the bottom of it. She took a deep breath and forced a smile. Teaching was a performance, and like any good actor, she had to put aside troubling thoughts about her personal life and career setbacks and instead focus all of her energy on being inspiring.

For many years, Marta had been teaching classes on child development and dedicated herself to engaging her students in their learning. But today their cool indifference unsettled her. She opened her laptop and began her lecture with a steady voice.

“Emotions permeate and define human existence. We express them through all forms of art. In literature, for example, they are even directly displayed or implied in the titles of books, such as the Jane Austen’s novels *Pride and Prejudice* or *Sense and Sensibility*. Or the titles themselves evoke emotional reactions, such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, by Gabriel García Márquez, or Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.” Marta walked closer to the front row of tables. “And more recently, some of Stephen King’s novels sport titles such as *Misery* and *Joyland*. But let’s agree that some are more apt to his genre than others.”

A few students looked up from their computer screens

and some even chuckled, but then their eyes sank back into the blue glow. Marta's voice wavered, but she continued with her lecture on the early stages of emotional development. When several students drifted out of her class early, she pressed her lips together and mumbled, "Perhaps this was enough 'misery' for the day. Next week you'll learn how to recognize emotions in the sounds a baby makes." She seized her laptop and dashed out of the auditorium with her head down.

Upon feeling the satiny smoothness of the doorknob, Marta let out a deep sigh. She was home. The Toronto house was an old Victorian, which had been maintained with a mere fresh coat of paint and an occasional new appliance. Marta cherished the features that preserved the house's origins: the colorful stained glass windows, the dark wood paneling, and the bronze doorknobs. It had been in contrast to her former husband's preference for everything modern and sleek; tingling hints of a failing marriage that she had been willfully ignoring.

Marta carried a steaming cup of tea into her home office and placed it on her desk. She opened her laptop and her eyes skimmed a message from the funding agency, but before she finished reading it, she reclined in her chair and took a sip of her tea. Her application for a grant to support her next big research project had been unsuccessful, for a second time. If she wanted any chance at a promotion to full professorship, she desperately needed the money to support her research on the emotional attachment of children. The repeated rejections were alarming, but not as much as the abrupt realization that all along her life had consisted of tightly wound circles that came back to close at roughly the same spot.

The pattering sound of raindrops on the delicate leaves of

early spring came through the open window. Marta stood up and tried to pull the wooden window down, but it was stuck. She pulled harder and it closed with a thud, but a sharp pain sliced through her shoulder. She rubbed it until the pain subsided and reclined back in her chair.

A crisp chime from her phone startled her and she whispered a curse. It was a calendar alarm reminding her about her dinner plans with a colleague that evening. Marta's first impulse was to cancel. The prospect of having to be pleasant and upbeat drained her. But it would be rude to change plans on such short notice. She placed the still hot cup of tea on her desk and plodded toward her bedroom closet.



The walk to the Italian restaurant in her neighborhood helped her shed some of the gloomy thoughts that had been gnawing at her for most of the day. Now, they seemed to have settled on her aching shoulder. Marta rubbed it again.

As she approached the restaurant door, she recognized the large frame of a man in a trench coat waiting for her. Bruce Mason's wide grin made it easier for her to smile back. They worked in different departments—she in psychology and he in physiotherapy—but they were members of the same committee at the university.

"Howdy," he greeted her. "Judging from the tasty whiff coming from the restaurant, you made a good choice."

Marta smiled and he opened the door for her.

The restaurant was crowded. At one time, the boisterous sound of people, mellowed to a hum by a glass of wine, uplifted Marta's spirits. But tonight it annoyed her, and she could barely hear Bruce over the sound of it. Oblivious to

his surroundings, he reveled in stories about himself. He had youthful clean looks despite the thin spot at the top of his head that was surrounded by well-trimmed ash-blond hair. Aware of his insecurity, Marta leaned toward him. She was not troubled by his impending baldness.

As Bruce changed the topic to work, she bit into the mushroom-stuffed ravioli, savoring the smooth cream sauce contrasted by the firmer texture of the pasta. Throughout dinner, he told her pretty much everything about his uneventful childhood in Manitoba, his boring education on the West Coast, and similarly dull academic pursuits. By the time Marta finished her main course, she concluded that they had very little in common, and *that* troubled her.

She took a sip of her strong, dry cappuccino, the only trace of milk in the froth. Bruce was scarfing down a tiramisu, already slightly drunk from the brandy he ordered after the two glasses of wine he had with dinner. When he swallowed the last spoonful, he changed the topic again.

"And did I tell you I'm divorced? The ex and I officially signed the papers last month. She left me for the weaselly guy in her office. And took the kids too. I only have weekly visitation rights. Mind you, the kids are still young. Hell, that's life, eh?"

As the conversation moved on to increasingly more intimate topics, Marta's body tensed, and she gripped the bottom of her seat. She could not suppress the feeling that the innocuous dinner she thought she was having with a colleague was turning into an alarming date.

"And how about you?" His abrupt question pulled Marta from her thoughts.

She hesitated. "What would you like to know?"

"Well, I've been blabbing on all night, and you've barely

said a word. I see shoptalk's boring you. So, tell me about yourself. Are you married? In a relationship?"

Of course, all he wanted to know was whether Marta was single. She was desperate to go home. Her shoulder was now in constant pain, and she was exhausted.

"I'm divorced, too, and I have a nineteen-year-old son who's away at university." A son in college implied that she was a woman of a certain age, and being in her mid-forties she expected Bruce to find it off-putting.

Instead, he smiled. "You don't look old enough to have a grown-up son."

"Looks can be deceptive," she said and looked toward the door.

Despite Marta's gentle objections, Bruce insisted on paying for the dinner and walking her home. They strolled in silence, which was interrupted by his indignant exclamations about the stench wafting from the urine-soaked alleys, the garbage scattered on the street, or the deafening noise from a passing motorcycle—aspects of urban life Marta had come to accept as par for the course.

When they reached her house, she waved her arm toward the door. "This is it." She looked at the keys as she continued to twirl them with her fingers. "Thanks for dinner and for walking me home." She looked up at him. He was smiling, and his eyes sparkled in the dim light.

"Would ya invite me in for a drink?"

"I don't think that's a good idea. I injured my shoulder this afternoon, and it really hurts now." Marta chose to take the easy way out.

"Hey, I can massage your shoulder real good. And it'll be like new by tomorrow."

Shaking him off was going to be harder than she thought,

and Marta was frustrated with herself for not realizing it sooner.

"I can't," she mumbled, avoiding his eyes.

"You can't or you don't wanna?" Bruce's voice still sounded playful.

Marta knew that she had to tell him the real reason and it was bound to end it all. As it *almost* always did in the six years since her divorce.

"Bruce, I barely know you. And I need time to build trust with a person before I can be more intimate with him. And . . . I'm not sure that you and I will ever get there." She looked at him. He was no longer smiling. "I'm sorry."

His narrowed eyes, separated by a deep crease, examined her face. He shook his head and walked away. After a couple of steps, he turned back and said, "We live in the twenty-first century, you know. You can let your hair down. See ya." He waved and disappeared in the darkness.

Marta had heard versions of these words before, but it never got any easier to hear them again. She sensed his thoughts—*What a waste of time*—and clutched the smooth doorknob.



Marta woke up with a searing pain in her shoulder. The faint glow of dawn seeped through the cracks in the curtains. She reached for her cell phone and gasped in agony. She fussed with a couple of pillows until she found a position that was more bearable, and relaxed.

She was all alone, and this would have been a good time to have someone nearby. But her son, Ilian, was in Montreal. And while one of her friends would come to help her if she

called, Marta was not about to trouble them with her silly aches and pains.

She spent the next two days mainly in bed being as still as possible, which gave her plenty of time to think. Frustrated that her neatly planned career path seemed to have veered off course, and seeing no bright prospects for her lonely existence, Marta decided that it was time to take a break before she allowed the ominous curve to close completely, yet again.

Where could she go? She liked to visit busy destinations filled with history and vibrant culture. But this was not to be a typical vacation. She would be taking an unpaid leave from her university. She was restless and craved a quiet, peaceful place. She considered going back to her native country, Bulgaria, but then she would feel obliged to see her family and friends, and she was not ready to revisit her recent past with them. Besides, there were so many countries waiting to be discovered.

Marta leaned back on her pillows and closed her eyes. She saw a young girl who would sit on the floor and stare longingly at a tattered map. The girl had never traveled outside of her country and dreamed of roaming every continent.

Marta jumped out of bed and winced from the sharp pain that pierced her shoulder. She held her injured upper arm as she trudged to Ilian's old room, where a large map of the world was still hanging on the wall. She had been to every continent but Antarctica and South America. Antarctica was too cold and desolate, and she was not prepared for such an extreme degree of social and geographical isolation. She trailed her finger down the South American continent. She

tried to remember bits of information about each place when her finger stopped in its meandering track just below the word “Uruguay.”

Marta was amused that she knew absolutely nothing about this one country on the whole continent. No longer bothered by the pain in her shoulder, she sprung onto her tiptoes. She went downstairs to her office and opened the laptop on her desk. Her search revealed that Uruguay was a small and stable country—its total population as large as the city of Toronto’s—that was not a typical tourist hub, thus not likely to be crowded, and was generally warm all year round.

Four days later and fully recovered from her injury, Marta met with her friend and colleague, Gabrielle, in the coffee shop in the basement of their office building. In between sips of bitter dark coffee, Marta told Gabrielle about her recent challenges with Bruce and in her work.

“But I’ve concocted a plan to take a six-month leave and go away,” Marta said.

“Where are you gonna go?” Originally from Réunion Island, Gabrielle spoke with a heavy French accent. Her head was covered with tightly wound coils of shiny silver-streaked curls, and she wore one of her classic large and brightly colored necklaces and earrings to match. She was vivacious and frank, and Marta braced herself for Gabrielle’s reaction to her news.

“Uruguay,” Marta answered.

“*Uruguay*? Why Uruguay of all places? Do you like its name?”

Marta laughed.

“It’s in South America, right?” Gabrielle continued. “That

means they speak only Spanish there, and it's a language you don't know."

"I can learn it while I'm there. It'll be a bonus. And now that you mentioned it, Uruguay does have an interesting sound to it, but that's not what draws me there."

"Well, what's it then?" Gabrielle pressed her. "An ill-advised wanderlust?"

Marta wrinkled her brows, ignoring Gabrielle's teasing. "I don't know. Perhaps, my choice is a result of growing up in Communist Bulgaria during a period when the word 'options' was considered extravagant."

In the grocery stores, when they had it, there were two types of bread, white and dark; one type of milk, with fat content unknown; two types of cheese, cow and sheep; and two types of yogurt, cow and sheep. When it came to clothes and shoes, the choices were even more limited. As a child, Marta had been exasperated to see other girls wearing the same frilly skirt her mother had bought for her. As an adult, she continued to strive for originality, either in her colorful or embellished locally made clothes, or in her choice of obscure travel destinations.

In the evening, she called Ilian to tell him about her decision. She was both curious and apprehensive about how he would react.

"Maman," he said, "Uruguay isn't your type of place. It has fewer UNESCO heritage sites than Bulgaria."

He was right. There was no logic in her choice of travel destination, but its sudden pull was strong, as if there was something bright waiting for her there. Something exciting and invigorating.

She had to find out.