

EMBERD

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ACT ONE

Some go and some stay behind
Some never move at all
Girl in amber trapped forever,
Spinning down the hall

Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, *Girl in Amber*

Chapter 1

In the Marsh

Saturday, 28th July

In the marsh, at sunset, the sun is a chasm opening onto the underworld and setting the entire creation ablaze, a mass of celestial proportions sinking into the mud with a sizzle, as if its sole desire were to be extinguished forever.

Vermilion red: I think that's the shade the sun has right now. This makes me chuckle a bit because as a child I was convinced that vermilion was a greenish fruit full of worms, and if that were the case, it would have been the perfect colour to describe this swamp.

A mosquito lands on my forearm and I swat it, staining my hand with blood. I try to wipe it off with dry dirt, rubbing my palm against a withered leaf, but the stain seems hopelessly set in my skin forever.

I sigh.

"This spot is perfect" Nicola exclaims.

I turn toward him and give him a once-over.

"Here? In the middle of this... this..." I mutter, waving my hands in front of me as if I wanted to encompass in my words all the desolation and the excruciating heat and the sweat that surrounds us. "This nothingness?"

Then, since he doesn't answer – and, in fact, is smiling rather stupidly – I add: "Wouldn't it be better to start with a shot of that cursed house? A shot that makes it, how should I put it... eerie?"

"You're an amateur!" he laughs. "If I want to win the contest, I have to impress the jury, not do what everyone else does! And don't worry about the house: there's no need to make it any eerier than it already is."

"It's your video, so you make the decisions," I sigh.

I raise a hand in his direction.

"What's up?" he asks.

"Give me your phone."

"But yours is nicer. Use that one."

"Are you saying I'm only here because I have a nicer phone than yours?"

"Well," he laughs, "you're here because you're my best friend, and you also have the smartphone with the most incredible camera I've ever seen, and you're pretty good at video editing, too."

"Am I supposed to edit your video?"

"Orfeo!" he exclaims. "You're always saying you come on vacation with us, right? Beach life is a drag. I don't like sunbathing, I don't want to put on sunscreen... You should thank me for finding something for you to do!"

I barely manage to hold back a smile, take the smartphone, and turn on the camera.

"Okay," I exclaim. "But I'll be the director."

Nicola shrugs in agreement, then clears his throat, tucks the tuft of curly hair from his forehead, and motions for me to start.

I press REC, but instead of pointing the camera at him, I aim it downward, at the weeds that are already withered before they've even seen the light of day. I slowly pan up through the purple-tinged clouds and widen the shot to take in the marshland stretching out beside us, the stalks of some marsh plant I don't recognize sprouting here and there like ticks in a dog's fur, and finally Nicola steps into the centre of the frame. I nod.

"The Po Delta," he begins. "Where the great river flows into the sea. A land of ancient traditions and mysteries, a place where time has stood still and... Why are you putting your phone down?"

"I thought we were supposed to make a video for that ghost-hunting contest—you know, those losers you like so much—not for National Geographic."

"First of all, they're totally cool!" he replies, stung. "Just because you don't believe in the paranormal doesn't mean..."

"They're losers who use cheap tricks to make kids – and note that I said kids – believe that..."

"Okay, okay, let's not argue! Let's start over!"

I laugh and wipe the sweat from my forehead.

"Let's do something with a little movement, okay?" I suggest. "You walk, and I'll follow you a short distance behind."

Nicola is so excited that I don't even have time to start recording before he's already set off. I follow him along a dirt path dotted with patches of mud, skirting the marsh. I try to film him from a distance so I can capture the bleak desolation of where we are, but that

idiot forgot to change out of the fluorescent yellow swimsuit he wore at the beach this afternoon, and now he stands out amid the lifeless colours of the marsh like a radioactive lemon in a morgue.

We continue in silence until we reach a patch of pine forest that cuts the marsh in two. In the twilight, everything looks like dry, twisted branches and protruding roots ready to grab you.

"We're almost there," Nicola sighs, flashing a knowing smile at the camera, then strides confidently into the woods.

I follow him. The branches close in above us like a shroud of resin. I pause for a moment to capture the tops of the pine trees soaring above our heads and the dying sunlight that illuminates them, setting them ablaze, then I lower the lens to focus on the undergrowth of weeds and pine needles. Pine needles everywhere, a dusty blanket covering everything.

Nicola continues along a path that only he can see, and in an instant, it's as if it were night. I do my best to capture the piercing darkness surrounding us, being very careful to check that there isn't a serial killer hiding among the branches behind me.

We walk, stepping on things I can't name. The darkness closes in on us.

Never – I swear – would I have thought I'd be so happy to see the August sun, and yet here I am, quickening my pace to reach the light.

Suddenly, about ten meters ahead of us, the pine forest gives way to a clearing.

Thanks to my friend's smile, I sense that, probably behind that last cluster of pines, lies the object of our search. Just a few more steps and I'll be able to breathe again, to shake off the anxiety pounding at my jugular. But instead, I stop. I'm fifteen, not four, and I haven't been afraid of the dark for quite a while, or at least that's what I try to tell myself as I signal to Nicola to stay right where he is.

I raise my smartphone and draw a frame of skeletal branches around my friend's face. He starts talking again.

"The Great Scarlet House," he declares. "An old mansion standing in the middle of the swamp, abandoned for who knows how many years, and which is, well, painted red."

He clears his throat, embarrassed by the obviousness of what he just said. I burst out laughing.

"Weren't you supposed to prepare what you were going to say?" I ask, wiping the tears from my eyes.

"Come on," he mutters. "I'll show you the house."

"Wait, I'll go first! I wouldn't want you to ruin the shot with that hideous swimsuit of yours..."

Nicola tells me to get lost but steps aside. I press REC and step into the clearing, my eyes fixed on the display. The very moment the image of the Scar House appears on the screen, a cold shiver crawls up my spine until it pierces my skull.

"I was right, wasn't I?" Nicola sighs. "Isn't it incredibly creepy?"