

NOT
GOOD
FOR
MAIDENS

TORI BOVALINO

TITAN BOOKS

PART I

COME BUY, COME BUY



"O, where are you going?" "To Scarborough fair,"
Parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme;
"Remember me to a lass who lives there,
For once she was a true love of mine."

—"SCARBOROUGH FAIR," TRADITIONAL ENGLISH BALLAD

"Lie close," Laura said,
Pricking up her golden head:
"We must not look at goblin men,
We must not buy their fruits:
Who knows upon what soil they fed
Their hungry thirsty roots?"
"Come buy," call the goblins
Hobbling down the glen.
"Oh," cried Lizzie, "Laura, Laura,
You should not peep at goblin men."

—"GOBLIN MARKET," CHRISTINA ROSSETTI



PROLOGUE

MAY



Boston, Eighteen Years Earlier

May had ways of coping. She ate. That was an improvement. She ate, and sipped the water that Laura kept pushing toward her. She looked out the window of the brownstone, watching the people down below. She kept looking for the city walls, but of course, they weren't there. The walls, the people, the market—they were all a world away.

May coped, and she slept, and she ate. She held her tongue until her voice was rusty in her mouth, until her vowels were unfamiliar and her accent heavy against Dad's. But silence was better than screaming, and if she opened her mouth, May was not sure what would come out.

She smiled when their father brought a new candy every day from the shop on the corner, presenting them with an endless rotation of American snacks that turned her stomach. She let Laura fret over her because it hinted at forgiveness awarded or forthcoming, even though it tugged at that deep guilt May couldn't shake.

When she was alone—which was rare, with Laura’s fretting—she hummed to herself. She knew the songs, all of them, by heart. Backwards and forwards and all the way around.

Are you going to Scarborough Fair?

No, May thought, staring down at the street as their father rounded the corner with a shopping bag hanging from one hand. *No, I’ve been to Scarborough Fair, and I’d not like to return.*

Sometimes, in the moments May forgot about it all, she woke up searching for something within herself she’d lost, only to realize all over again that it was gone.

Thirty-two days after they arrived, Laura knocked softly at May’s door. “Are you in there?”

“Yes,” May said. Where else would she be?

Laura came in. She was wearing a dress, green, that she didn’t have in York. She must’ve bought it here, but May couldn’t remember her leaving to get it. Perhaps she’d gone when May was sleeping. Laura looked better now. Less thin, less tired.

“I’m going out tonight,” she said, nudging a fallen silk scarf on the floor with one foot. May had gotten it in Leeds four years before.

In their past life, in the times before, this would’ve been an enticing bit of information. May felt it tugging in her mind, that spark of something that would’ve interested her. It only lasted a moment in the current fog of her brain, the dimmest of embers in a pile of ashes.

But it was a fog she didn’t like Laura to see. “Oh?” May said, remembering that she had to say something.

Laura nodded. “With a boy. He works at that bookshop on Newbury.”

There was a pause, a pause May was probably supposed to fill. She stared at Laura blankly. Maybe she was meant to ask his name. May had never been to the bookstore on Newbury— Laura had invited her, but May didn't like to leave. She felt the age of the city pressing against her skin. Not York old, not by a longshot, but the closest this country had.

All she could think was: *Don't stay too late, don't seek the market, you don't know if there's a market.*

Laura's smile faded. May had failed, she knew. She should've pretended, should've asked something. Anything.

"Are you okay with me going?" Laura asked. "I can stay."

Stay here, in her green dress, with Dad and his questions and haunted May? Stay here when she wanted to go, after she'd sacrificed everything for May? It would be a travesty, probably, to keep Laura inside. No matter how much she wanted to ask her to stay. No matter how much the idea of a house without Laura scared her.

She dreamt of her sometimes, in the haze of the market: Laura, brave and valiant. Standing tall, stained with the juice of cherries and shining with sweat, blood leaking out of a gash across one arm. Laura, always the stronger sister, always with the greater will; Laura, come to save her yet again.

Laura, who had given up the entire world for May.

"You go," May said. She tried on a smile, but her teeth felt dry and the corners of her mouth cracked and Laura looked even more wary. "Go and have fun." She turned back to the window so she didn't have to watch Laura leave.

Coping was an odd thing, May thought, as she watched Laura flit out onto the street in her green dress, into the arms

of a kind-looking brown-haired boy with a mediocre silver car. Coping was pretending to listen to Dad as he chatted over dinner and nodding in the appropriate places, and returning to her room and the window seat as soon as she was able. Coping was watching the people on the street but not seeing them, not really processing, because she was trying too hard to see the horns and warts and pale green skin glamoured to look human; not thinking of the magic she'd lost or how Laura must resent her. It was not running through the spells that were once so familiar to her she practiced them in her sleep, not calling Mum every day to see what she was missing, what she'd given up, what she'd thrown away because of May's mistakes.

Coping was not thinking about the market, not thinking about the market, not thinking about anything other than the market.

When May slept, it felt less like she was slipping from consciousness and more like she was falling out of present time, back to somewhere else.

Well, not just anywhere else. Most times, her mind went back to the beginning. To York, her home, where the pavement smelled like rain and fog, where she knew the streets by heart. She closed her eyes and imagined standing in the shadow of the Minster with a girl by her side, unbloodied. In her imaginings, she and Eitra walked the velvet night, through misty rain and clear darkness, fingers entwined.

In her imaginings, Eitra did not die. May had that thrill of

magic back, even if she could not use it. They were home, home, home, in the place where May could not return.

But in the end, May opened her eyes, like always. In the end, she was always banished, always alone, and Eitra was always dead.

An indeterminate amount of time later, long past dark, May watched the silver car pull back up to the curb. The boy got out, went around, and opened Laura's door. They kissed on the street outside.

May tasted a rush of goblin blood in her mouth.

She swallowed it down.

Minutes later, the door opened and shut, and Laura came in silently to sit on her bed. Her cheeks were flushed and her hair askew, and there was no point telling her that the buttons of her dress were not done correctly.

It was a detail she noticed, May realized, despite the fog.

"You look like you haven't moved," Laura said.

May shrugged.

Laura sighed, slipped off her shoes, and shimmied out of her dress. She pulled the pins from her hair and grabbed a spare shirt from May's drawer.

"Come to bed," Laura said.

May nodded. She slipped under the sheets, still in her jean shorts and tank top that Laura made her put on that morning. Laura smelled of cigarette smoke and lipstick, but it was okay. In a way, it was the first time she'd smelled normal since . . . since before.

Laura ran her fingers through May's hair, combing through the tangles. "You're here," she murmured. "You're safe. You'll never go again, May. Do you hear me? You'll never go to the market again."

May bit her lip. Because, though she was an ocean away from the market, though she may never see the walls again in her life, she knew the truth. She was a part of the market. Some part of her would always be there. Some part would never leave as her blood clung to Eitra's skin, as they decayed into flowers and moss together. Maybe, in her time away, some part of her had become the goblin's property, even if Laura had gotten her out.

When she closed her eyes every night, she fell into the same nightmare of the goblins grabbing Eitra's arms and legs and holding her down, pushing her into the grass of the park as she struggled against them. In her dream, May never closed her eyes fast enough, or perhaps she forced herself to watch.

Maybe she watched because she hadn't in real life, when it had really happened. She'd only heard the snick of the knife, had only imagined the hot splash of Eitra's blood, and heard her sharp scream cut off.

But in her nightmares, her eyes were open. In her nightmares, every night at the witching hour, May watched Eitra die all over again.

She'd never left the market. She'd never leave the market. And when it was time, when it came again, the market would take her back.

That was the truth of coping: it was just delaying the inevitable.

ONE



Boston, Present Day

On the night the market came to claim what it was owed, Louisa Wickett-Stevens was three thousand miles and five time zones away, trying to figure out how she had so many mothers who didn't understand her.

She stood at the Do Not Walk sign, dead phone clutched in her hand, and waited for the Walk sign to flash. It was one of those weeks in Boston when the city felt buried under a layer of heat, when she could almost smell the harbor all the way in the middle of town. Every few seconds, she pressed the home button and glanced down at her phone, only to be reminded all over again that there was no point. She'd forgotten to bring her charger to Dad's. Usually, she'd call Neela when she was walking home alone at night. Especially a night like this, when the city felt sleepy and silent, the weight of it pressing against her ears.

Lou shifted, wishing the light would just *change* already. Dad had offered to drive her home, but if she rode with him, there would be a guaranteed talk about how her stepmom Gen

was just trying to do what was *best*, trying to be closer to Lou. As if closeness was what she needed.

The walk sign flipped on, and Lou jogged across. It wasn't a far walk: a mile at best, from her dad's place in Beacon Hill to the apartment in Back Bay where she lived with her mom and aunt May, recently inherited from her grandfather. Sometimes, Lou's feet still dragged her to the bus route that would take them to their old place, and she had to consciously remind herself that their cramped apartment wasn't home anymore. That they'd relocated, shifted with all of their same problems and misshaped dilemmas into the new, bigger place.

Lou took the longer route through the Gardens. Dark was falling, and it probably wasn't the best idea, especially with her phone dead. But she wasn't ready to go home yet.

It had started that afternoon, when Lou was at the hardware store with her mom for more Command hooks and wallpaper stripper to handle the upside-down bird wallpaper in May's bathroom. She wished May was off work to go with them, because it felt less like a chore when May was around and more like an adventure. Lou went back for more painter's tape and by the time she was done, Mom had found the paint section. Before Lou could intervene, Mom was having a ghastly shade of magenta mixed.

Lou raised her eyebrows, checking the paint chip in Mom's hand. "Hot Lips. Sounds . . . inappropriate."

Mom only rolled her eyes. She finished up and paid, and she and Lou set off for the car. "It'll look nice in the lounge," Mom said in her broad Yorkshire accent. It was

always softer when they were out of the house, like she felt the need to hide some part of herself, even if she was only talking to her daughter.

“It’ll look terrible,” Lou responded. She was tired and sweaty and didn’t want to spend any more time painting the house. May couldn’t do it, claiming the fumes were bad for her pregnancy, and Mom was too busy with the unpacking and wallpaper stripping. So it had been up to Lou to paint the hall and the nursery in approved colors. If Neela had been there like she was every other summer, it would’ve been fun. But by herself, the whole thing was dull and annoying.

“If I spoke to my mum the way you speak to me, she would’ve left me for the fairies,” Mom said airily.

Lou rolled her eyes. Sometimes, with the way Mom, May, and Nana Tee spoke, Lou wondered if they actually *did* believe in fairies.

She slid into the front seat, rolling down a window as soon as Mom turned the car on to get some of the hot air out. “About Nana Tee,” Lou said, shooting a quick glance over at Mom. Though it wasn’t a great opening, the threat of being taken away, it was better than nothing. “Neela had an idea.”

Mom sighed, like she knew exactly where this was going. Neela, Mom and May’s younger half sister, was just a year older than Lou. Usually, Neela came to stay with them in Boston for her six-week summer break, but not this year—she had a wedding to attend in India in August, and she was leaving for university at the end of break.

But Lou couldn’t imagine a summer without Neela, her best friend.

“What if I go stay with them?” Lou asked, trying to keep her eyes on the road ahead. It was easier than looking at Mom, easier than seeing her quick refusal, or worse, her disappointment that Lou would even ask.

“When? Your dad has that Yosemite trip planned for August,” Mom said. Lou couldn’t miss the caution in her voice, like she was seeking an easy dismissal.

Lou picked at the frayed edge of her shorts. She’d rescued them from Neela two summers before, when Neela splattered paint on the front right side and was about to throw them away. Lou kept them; she thought the splattered paint and worn rips made the shorts look cool and edgy.

“Nee gets back August 10th. School doesn’t start until the first week of September.” Lou dug her nails into the meat of her palm. There were negotiations to be had, the same tired fight they’d struggled through Lou’s entire life. “Why can’t I go there?”

Mom’s lips were thinned into a line, her knuckles white as she clenched the wheel. “You’re with your dad then. The custody agreement includes—”

“I’m seventeen,” Lou interrupted. “I get a say in where I go. And Dad won’t care. Gen might, but Dad—”

“No, Louisa,” Mom said. It was a sharp word, cutting through any and all arguments Lou and Neela had hashed over the night before. She felt that terrible knot in her stomach, the lump in her throat. Lou leaned her head against the window.

But she didn’t want to give up, not this time. “I’ve never been to your hometown,” Lou said, trying to keep her voice steady. “I don’t know anything about where you and May are from. Don’t you think that’s a little weird?”

Mom didn't answer. Lou couldn't tell if she was ignoring her or not.

"Neela and Nana Tee come here every single year. That's not fair to them, and it's not fair to me. And it's not fair to Neela or me that we can't see each other because of your stupid rules."

"It's a lot of money to just go—"

"It can't be about money," Lou bit out. "Not this time." Not since Grandpa Jack had died and left his hefty bank account and swanky apartment to Mom and May. Yes, they'd struggled for Lou's entire life, living in the shitty one-bedroom apartment in Revere before Grandpa Jack passed away in the spring and left them the brownstone apartment that May and Mom had grown up in and everything else he owned. But money wasn't an issue anymore.

Mom turned onto their street. As soon as they were inside, this conversation would be over. Lou couldn't let this just slip under the rug, like every previous iteration of this conversation.

"Please," she said. She hated revealing any vulnerability, showing any loneliness to Mom and May, who got along just fine with themselves. But at least they had each other to lean on. Lou didn't even have Neela, not in real life. "I just want to visit for a few weeks."

She watched as Mom looked up toward their second-floor apartment. Lou could just see the outline of a hanging pentacle in one of the windows, meant for protection of the house.

"No," Mom said. "You're too young to go by yourself. Money or not."

"You were literally just a year older than me when you came here by yourself," Lou seethed. She couldn't stop the anger that

flooded through her. “It’s been enough time. Since whatever happened to you that you refuse to tell me about.”

Let me in, she thought. Let me see who you were, why you chose this, why you left.

Mom’s eyes cut over to her, hard and emotionless. “I wasn’t alone. I came here with May to live with Dad. And look how that turned out.”

The jab smarted, even though she knew her mother didn’t mean it. When Mom and May moved to Boston as teenagers, the first thing Mom did was get pregnant.

Mom closed her eyes and pressed a hand to her forehead. The hairs along her neck had escaped from the bun on top of her head and stood out in frizzy curls. Sometimes, it felt like Mom’s dark wavy hair was the only thing Lou had inherited from her. Like they were strangers, unrelated and unknowable, besides that dark hair.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I don’t want you to go alone, not without May or me.” Her accent was thicker, just like it always was when she spoke of home.

It was finished and done. Mom would not let her go to England to see Neela and there was no debate there.

Or so Lou thought as she angrily texted Neela from her room. But then Nee said, *Would your dad let you?*

So off Lou went to dinner at Dad’s, where she was supposedly always welcome, even though she wasn’t a permanent fixture there like her stepbrother, Peter. Except that plan wasn’t great either, because Gen threw a whole fit about Lou even *considering* skipping the family vacation, and Dad had only shrugged and said, “Tough luck, Lulu. We can all go next year.”

But next year didn't matter. It didn't even matter that Lou had dual citizenship if her parents didn't give her permission to go. And worst of all, Lou's phone died before she could even call Neela to come up with a new plan.

Now, alone in the dark, Lou let the full force of her misery settle into her bones. She'd never been good at friends. She didn't know what parts to show, what parts to keep. Maybe she'd gotten that from Mom, who held everything so close to her chest that Lou wasn't sure anyone knew her, other than May.

She pushed her hands into her pockets and left the Gardens, turning onto Comm Ave. This, at least, was well lit. There was nothing to worry about, not a soul to bother her. Sometimes, it felt like there wasn't another soul in the world.

The faster she got home, the faster she could call Neela. It was past midnight in York, but Neela was out with her friends. She'd be up.

Lou glanced up at the window as she approached their brownstone. Golden light filtered through the upstairs window. Mom was still up, or May had gotten home early. Lou chewed on her lip. She just had to get to her room, and she wouldn't have to talk to them.

She jogged up the stairs to the second floor and unlocked the door, excuses already prepared on her lips. But when she went in, the living room was empty.

Mom had pushed all the furniture to the center of the room and laid drop cloths. A ladder stood against one wall, and there was a pan with the offending magenta and an abandoned paintbrush left in it.

Lou paused, listening. The place was old. If Mom was here,

she'd be able to hear the creaking. If May was back, then at least Lou could complain to her. Though May was like another mother to Lou, she also filled the role of fun aunt. She knew May would understand the injustice of it all.

Nothing.

The place smelled of burnt herbs. Mom must've cleansed the house while Lou was out. A few drips of paint marred the drop cloth. In the shadows of the ladder, they looked like spilled blood.

Lou tried her best to shrug off her sense of unease and shut herself in her room. It used to be May's, back when May was younger, and there was still plenty of her crap left here from nearly two decades ago for Lou to sort through and throw away before she finished unpacking.

First things first, she plugged in her phone. While she waited for it to come to life, Lou went to her windowsill and brushed away the salt—it was another of her mom's superstitions, meant to ward the house or something like that. Lou didn't keep track of all the weird stuff Mom and May believed in. Mom must've gone on a full spree earlier after cleansing. The salt looked new, and there was a new iron pentacle hanging over Lou's window.

She changed into soft shorts and a Boston University T-shirt before settling onto the windowsill. The air conditioning was flighty and old, so Lou preferred to sit here with her window open to cool down. She pulled her phone to her as it flashed, coming back to life.

It immediately started vibrating. Lou wasn't surprised to see the flurry of drunk messages coming in from Neela: three

about someone spilling a beer on her shirt, one about a pretty girl in a bathroom. Nothing to say she'd made it home.

A few messages from Mom, too, and one from May. But Lou didn't bother to read them.

There were two voicemails, both from Neela. They talked every day on the phone or video chat, but it wasn't a big deal if one of them left a voicemail or WhatsApp voice memo. It was much easier than sending a million texts back and forth.

Lou pressed play on the first message.

"Oh my god—fuck. *Fuck*. Lou. Lou I need you to pick up, I need you to—" Neela's voice faded for a second and Lou heard something odd in the background, like screams mixed with muffled sobbing. Something scraped along a stone floor. Neela's voice came back, closer, like she was holding a hand over her mouth and the speaker.

"I need you. Help me. You have to get—" Neela cut off again. Something smashed, like breaking glass, and the line went dead.

Lou stared at the wall, uncomprehending. She listened to the message again, her fear deepening. What had Neela gotten herself into? And how was Lou supposed to help, all the way from *Boston*?

But there was another message. Her mouth tasted bitter, bile creeping up from her stomach. She didn't want to listen. She needed to call Mom or May or Nana Tee, someone who understood what was happening. Someone who could really help Neela with whatever had happened.

She pressed play on the second message.

Gaspy, breathless sobbing crackled through her speakers. "Please," Neela begged Lou or someone else, someone on the

other side of the phone. "I didn't mean to. You have to get me *out*."

Someone shouted in the background. There was a dull roar, and above it all, a cackling sound.

"I'm out of time," Neela said, her voice more forlorn than Lou had ever heard it. Lou's palms were slick with sweat. "I'm at the market, Lou. When they ask you where to find me, I'm—"

Something clattered. The phone, maybe? In the distance, Lou heard someone screaming. Her heart plummeted.

Neela.

The line was silent for a second, as if all the sound in the room had been sucked out. And then, just as Lou was about to start the message over again, a very different voice took over.

"*Are you coming to Scarborough Fair?*" the voice whispering in a rusty alto. A chill ran down Lou's spine. Then, lower, almost inaudible, "We're waiting for you, Louisa Wickett."

The phone fell from Lou's hand. It had to be a prank, she thought, scrambling for her phone. She needed to know it was a prank.

Lou called Neela.

The phone rang and rang and rang and rang. No answer. Neela didn't pick up.

Don't panic, she thought. It had to be an ill-considered, drunk prank. It *had* to be.

But Neela sounded so awful. So scared. Lou dialed her number again, listening as it rang and rang and no one answered, no one came.

She sent a quick text before trying to call again: *What happened? Are you okay?*

Somewhere else in the apartment, the door opened. There was a clatter of keys hitting the table, the rushed babble of two nearly identical voices arguing.

“You literally *can't*,” one of them said.

“Ten years was up years ago. I’m not asking for your help . . .”

Once, Neela had complained that people calling the house could never tell her and her mother apart. Lou had never had that problem, and the mismatch of accents sometimes left an aching hole in her chest. Lou did not look like Mom and May, did not sound like them, did not have their easy relationship. How, then, could she belong to them?

If there was trouble, Mom or May would know. Lou launched off the windowsill, through her bedroom door and down the hall. Both fell silent when Lou slid into the room on her socks. May looked exhausted, as always, in her flower-patterned scrubs. She had one hand on her belly and the other pressed to her back. Mom, on the other hand, was tightly wound and closed off, with her arms crossed over her chest and a muscle in her jaw ticking.

“Have you spoken to Nana or Neela?” Lou said, the words coming out in a rush.

The silence stretched too long, long enough to realize that there were black streaks of mascara under May’s eyes. She’d been crying.

Lou’s heart thumped harder, a dark stone of fear rippling in her stomach.

“Is everything okay?” But even as she asked, she knew. It wasn’t, it wasn’t, it wasn’t.

I'm at the market, Lou, Neela had said, her voice trembling with fear. But what did that even *mean*?

May's lip trembled. She pressed her hands to her face, a move both she and Mom did when they were stressed. "You decide," May said, probably to Mom, but Lou couldn't be sure. She wiped her nose on her arm.

"Of course I'll decide," Mom said quietly. "I'm her mother."

They shared another significant look, one that Lou couldn't even begin to interpret. Finally, Mom sighed. When she turned to face Lou, she looked infinitely more exhausted. "Something happened to Neela."

Lou felt like she'd been removed from her body, like she was watching the scene play out from above. She could hear her heartbeat. She could see the blank look on her own face. But none of it mattered, none of it was real.

I need you. Help me.

No. She couldn't get carried away. Everything was going to be fine. Of course Neela was okay. Of course she was fine. Lou could not exist in a reality where anything else was true.

Mom shook her head. "She's been . . . taken."

Something about the phrasing made Lou's stomach drop. She looked again between her mother and May, both grave and hopeless. "Taken? How? By . . . a gang? Sex trafficking? Like, that Liam Neeson movie?" Her mind spun in circles, grappling for purchase, for anything. Behind her mother, the magenta wall looked even more offensive after dark.

"Louisa—" May started, but Mom shot her a look that cut her off. May bit her lip, looking down at the floor. Her shoulders were full of tension. The way they stood reminded Lou of a picture

of the two of them, right after they moved to Massachusetts to live with Grandpa Jack. In it, both sisters had looked drawn and pale, and May especially looked haunted. She'd had a hard time aligning her happy, joyful aunt to that image, but now—now, she saw it.

"Taken by what?" Lou asked, dreading the answer.

"Taken by—"

"May." Mom cut her off harshly, turning May's name into a ragged, wretched thing. Mom shifted her attention to Lou. "I'm going to handle it. You'll go stay with your father for a few weeks."

There was that spinning sensation again. "You're . . . Where are you going? To handle it?"

"York," Mom said, biting off the hard syllable.

Lou stared at her, waiting for an explanation, waiting for the words to make sense. Neela was gone—gone where, she did not know, but gone somewhere—and Mom was leaving. Mom was leaving her here, and she wasn't even leaving her with May.

"But Mom—"

It was too late. Mom was already gone into the kitchen where Lou could hear her talking to Dad on the phone. Lou stared at May as if the answers would come from her, but May just shook her head.

"Neela called me," Lou said desperately to May. "She told me she needed my help."

May's face was carefully blank. "Laura will fix it," May said, darting a doubtful glance at Mom's back. "She'll fix it."

But that wasn't an answer; not even close. "What happened to Neela?" Lou pleaded.

May came closer, close enough that Lou could feel her breath on the top of her head. She leaned down to kiss Lou on the forehead. Her fingers squeezed Lou's hand once, briefly. They were ice cold.

"Be glad," May said, stepping away, towards her room, "that you never have to know."