

Rebecca Voss. THE LANCE OF MALTA

When journalist Rebecca Voss arrives at Malta's ancient Dingli Cliffs to investigate a fisherman's disappearance, she doesn't know she's walking toward her destiny.

The limestone precipice holds more than secrets—it holds the truth of who she is. Fifteen years ago, something happened here. Something her family made her forget. But the dead remember. And they've been waiting.

Mrs. Azzopardi, the pious church teacher, has worn a thousand faces across three centuries. She's fed on innocence since the Knights of Malta walked these streets. And now she wants Sofia—Rebecca's teenage daughter, raised as her niece to hide an illegitimate birth.

When Rebecca dies trying to stop her, the truth explodes across the boundary between life and death: some bloodlines are too sacred to end. Some weapons have been waiting two thousand years to be reunited with the blood they were meant to serve.

Beneath Malta's catacombs lies the Holy Lance—the spear that pierced Christ's side at Calvary. It is covered in His blood. And Rebecca Voss carries that same blood in her veins. She is a direct descendant of Mary of Nazareth, the Mother of God. So is her daughter Sofia.

Blood calls to blood across two millennia.

The Lance recognizes them. It has been waiting for them. And when Rebecca returns from death—transformed, consecrated, armed with divine power—she and Sofia become what the world has forgotten: living proof that faith is real, that evil can be destroyed, that the sacred bloodline endures.

Mother and daughter. The Lance and the lineage. Together, they will hunt the ancient darkness that preys on innocence.

And they will bring light back to a world that has forgotten how to believe.

Chapter One: The Cliffs

Father Marco Leone crouched among the wild thyme and limestone outcroppings fifty meters from the cliff edge, his brown cassock blending with the lengthening shadows. His knees ached from holding position for the past hour, but he didn't move. Couldn't move. Not while *she* was here.

From behind a big stone, he watched the two figures at the precipice: the journalist and the woman in black who had appeared as silently as smoke.



His hand tightened around the rosary beads in his pocket until the wooden cross bit into his palm. The other hand rested on the hilt of the blessed blade hidden beneath his cassock—a weapon the Brotherhood had carried for four hundred and fifty years, consecrated in the blood of martyrs.

Mrs. Azzopardi. That's what she called herself now. But Father Marco had seen the photographs in the Brotherhood's archives, the faces that never aged across centuries. He knew what she truly was.

As he watched, the old woman turned slightly away from Rebecca, her face angled toward the darkening sea. For just a moment—a fraction of a second—her features seemed to *shift*. The wrinkles deepened into cracks, the eyes went black as pitch, and something ancient and hungry looked out from behind that human mask.

Father Marco's breath caught. His hand moved to make the sign of the cross, but he forced it still. Any movement might draw her attention. And if she knew the Brotherhood was watching...

"Not her," he whispered, so quietly the wind swallowed the words. "Please, God, not her. She doesn't know what she is yet."

The woman's face was human again, lined and weathered and perfectly ordinary. But Marco had seen. He always saw. That was his curse and his calling.

He watched Rebecca raise her camera—no, not a camera, her phone—to photograph the cliffs. Watched Mrs. Azzopardi's smile, cold and knowing. Watched the journalist write in her notebook, completely unaware that she stood three feet from something that had been feeding on children since before Christ walked the earth.

I should intervene, Marco thought desperately. I should call out, warn her, drive the creature away—

But he couldn't. Not yet. The Brotherhood's orders had been explicit: *Watch. Protect from the shadows. Do not reveal yourself unless her life is in immediate danger. She must not know what she carries in her blood. Not until the time is right.*

Seventeen years he'd been watching. Seventeen years of following at a distance, of silent prayers and sleepless nights. He'd been there when Rebecca was born, standing in the hospital corridor while Sister Catherine blessed the infant in secret. He'd watched her grow, watched her move to England for university, watched her return to Malta with questions in her eyes and a journalist's instinct for buried truth.

And now she was here. At the cliffs. With *it*.

Father Marco settled deeper into his hiding place, ignoring the sharp stones digging into his knees. He would stay until Rebecca left. He would follow her back to Rabat. He would keep watch through the night, as he had done so many nights before.

Because the Brotherhood had sworn an oath. Because the bloodline had to be protected. Because someday—perhaps soon—Rebecca Voss would need to know the truth about who she really was.

But not today. Today, he could only watch and pray.

Below him, at the cliff edge, the journalist stood with her notebook pressed against her chest like a talisman, and began to speak with the monster wearing an old woman's face.

The cliffs of Dingli stood like ancient sentinels against the darkening Mediterranean sky, their limestone faces scarred by centuries of wind and salt spray. Rebecca Voss had arrived in the late evening, when the last remnants of daylight were bleeding into the horizon, but the light here felt wrong—filtered through a deepening haze that seemed to cling to the rocks themselves, turning the world the color of ash and shadow.

She stood at the edge of the precipice, her notebook pressed against her chest like a talisman, and watched the sea churn two hundred meters below. The wind carried voices up from the depths—or perhaps it was only the waves finding purchase in the honeycomb caves that riddled the cliff face. Rebecca told herself it was only the waves.

The voice behind her was flat, uninflected. Rebecca turned to find a woman in her seventies standing less than three feet away—close enough that Rebecca should have heard her approach across the scrubland, should have sensed her presence. But there had been nothing. No footsteps. No displacement of air.

The woman was dressed entirely in black, her face a map of deep-carved lines that caught the dying light in strange ways. The wrinkles were there—age spots on her hands, the loose skin at her throat—but beneath it all was something else. Something that didn't quite match. Her skin had an odd smoothness to it, like old parchment that had been carefully preserved, and when she tilted her head, the shadows didn't fall across her features the way they should.



"Rebecca Voss. From the *Malta Daily Press*." Rebecca extended her hand, trying to shake off the unsettling feeling. The woman didn't take it. Didn't even glance at it. Her eyes—the color of the sea on a sunless day—remained fixed on Rebecca's face with an intensity that felt rehearsed, like an actor who had practiced this exact expression of grief in a mirror.

"You must be Mrs. Azzopardi. Thank you for agreeing to meet me."

"I didn't agree to anything. You sent letters." The old woman's eyes were the color of the sea on a sunless day. "You want to know about Gużepp."

Mrs. Azzopardi reached out and placed her hand on Rebecca's forearm—a gesture that should have been comforting but wasn't. Her fingers were ice-cold despite the warm October evening, and they moved with an unsettling fluidity, like water finding its level. Rebecca suppressed a shiver.

"He was my husband, yes." Mrs. Azzopardi's gaze drifted past Rebecca, toward the cliff edge where darkness was pooling. "Fifty-three years we were married." She paused. "Not like what happened to the old man."

Rebecca's pulse quickened. The police report had been frustratingly sparse: elderly man, history of dementia, presumed to have wandered off and fallen. Case closed within a week. But Rebecca had learned to trust her instincts, and something about this case had hooked into her from the moment she'd read that single-paragraph mention in the archives.

"The police said it was an accident," Rebecca ventured.

"The police say many things." Mrs. Azzopardi finally looked at her directly, and Rebecca felt the weight of that stare in the dimness. "They didn't find a body. They didn't find anything. But they stopped looking after three days. Said the sea had taken him." She made a sound that might have been a laugh. "The sea. As if the sea was all that lived in these cliffs."

The wind picked up, carrying with it a smell Rebecca couldn't quite place—not unpleasant, but strange. Like honey left too long in the sun, or flowers past their bloom. She made a note in her pad, though her hands had begun to tremble slightly. She blamed the wind and the encroaching darkness.

"Can you tell me about the night he disappeared?"

Mrs. Azzopardi was quiet for a long moment. When she spoke again, her voice had dropped to barely above a whisper. "He'd been strange for weeks. Talking to himself. But not the way dementia makes you talk—not confused. Purposeful. Like he was having conversations with someone who wasn't there. And he kept coming here. To these cliffs. Every evening at sunset, he'd walk here from the village. Two kilometers. A man who could barely make it to the bathroom without help, suddenly walking two kilometers."

She paused, and her expression shifted into something Rebecca couldn't quite read. Almost nostalgic. "From before the Knights, before the Arabs, before the Romans. From when Malta was just rock and sea and the things that lived between them." The way she said it—not with fear or confusion, but with intimate knowledge, as if she were speaking of old friends—made Rebecca's skin crawl.

A chill ran down Rebecca's spine despite the lingering warmth of the October evening. She'd grown up in London, moved to Malta five years ago for a relationship that hadn't lasted. She'd stayed for the work, for the light, for the way the island felt like a place where history had weight. But she'd never quite shaken the feeling that beneath Malta's sun-baked surface, something ancient was dreaming.

"The night he disappeared," Mrs. Azzopardi continued, "I tried to stop him. It was late—past midnight. But he was strong. Stronger than he should have been. He pushed past me and walked out into the dark. I called the police, but by the time they arrived..." She gestured at the vast emptiness around them. "He was gone. They found his walking stick here, at the edge. Nothing else."

"No signs of a struggle?"

"No signs of anything. The ground was hard—no footprints. But there was a smell." Mrs. Azzopardi's voice had become almost dreamy. "That same smell that's here now. You notice it?"

Rebecca did. It had grown stronger, that sweet-rot scent that seemed to emanate from the cliff face itself.

The old woman turned away, back toward the dirt path that led to the village. "I think he heard something that wasn't meant for human ears. I think he went looking for something that should have stayed lost." She paused, and when she looked back at Rebecca, there was something knowing in her eyes. Something that made Rebecca's breath catch.

"You'll understand soon enough, Miss Voss. You've always been drawn to places like this, haven't you? Even as a child." Mrs. Azzopardi tilted her head slightly, and in the dying light, her smile seemed too wide. "Some people are called. Some people answer. You answered once before, though you don't remember it yet."

Rebecca's pen froze on the page. "I don't—what do you mean? I've never—"

"Night is coming," Mrs. Azzopardi interrupted, her voice suddenly flat, final. "You should leave these cliffs now. Some stories aren't meant to be told. But you won't leave, will you? You never could resist."

Then she was walking away, and Rebecca blinked—because the movement was wrong somehow. Too smooth, too fluid, as if Mrs. Azzopardi were gliding rather than walking. Her black dress seemed to merge with the gathering shadows, becoming part of them, until Rebecca couldn't tell where fabric ended and darkness began.

Rebecca looked down at her notepad for just a moment, trying to process what the woman had said about her childhood, about answering—

When she looked up again, the path was empty.

Completely empty.

Mrs. Azzopardi was gone. Not walking away in the distance—simply gone. As if she'd never been there at all. The path stretched back toward the village, visible for at least a hundred meters in the twilight, and there was no black-clad figure anywhere on it.

Rebecca's heart began to pound. She spun around, scanning the cliffs, the scrubland, anywhere the woman could have gone. But there was nothing. No one.

Just Rebecca, alone with the wind and the waves and that persistent, unsettling smell.

Rebecca raised her camera to take a photograph, its screen glow harsh against the twilight, and that's when she saw it.

In one of the larger openings, perhaps twenty meters down the cliff face, something moved. Not the flutter of a bird or the scuttle of a lizard. Something that shifted with deliberate purpose, pale against the dark stone.

She zoomed in with her camera, her breath caught in her throat.



For just a moment—less than a heartbeat—she could have sworn she saw a face. Ancient and terrible and wrong, with eyes that caught the last light like a cat's. And then it was gone, leaving only shadow and stone.

Rebecca stepped back from the edge, her heart hammering. The rational part of her mind offered explanations: a trick of the fading light, a formation in the rock, her imagination primed by Mrs. Azzopardi's unsettling story. But the deeper part of her, the part that had brought her to this cliff in the first place, knew better.

Something was here. Something had been here for a very long time.

She walked quickly back to her car through the near-total darkness. She sat in the driver's seat for a moment, gathering her thoughts as the last light died over the cliffs. Then she started the engine and began the drive back to Rabat.

The drive took just 10 minutes, but it felt longer. The narrow roads twisted through darkness, headlights catching glimpses of limestone walls and twisted olive trees. Rebecca's hands were steady on the wheel, but her mind kept returning to that face in the cave mouth. That impossible, ancient face.

She parked on the outskirts of the old city, where the medieval walls rose like broken teeth against the night sky. The streets of Rabat were too narrow for cars—a maze of

limestone passages that had been old when the Knights of St. John walked them. Rebecca had found the apartment through a local rental agency, a small flat above a bakery in the heart of the old quarter. Charming, the listing had said. Historic. Authentic.

Now, walking through those ancient streets, she felt none of that charm.

The bakery was closed, its metal shutters pulled down, but light spilled from the windows above it—other apartments, other lives. Rebecca's footsteps echoed off the limestone walls as she walked, her camera bag heavy on her shoulder.

She wasn't alone.

The realization came slowly, a prickling awareness that started at the base of her skull. People were watching her. Not obviously—no one stared directly or called out. But she could feel their eyes tracking her movement through the narrow streets.

An old woman sat in a doorway, her black dress blending with the shadows. Rebecca nodded politely as she passed. The woman didn't nod back. She just watched, her weathered face expressionless, her dark eyes following Rebecca with an intensity that made her skin crawl.



Further down the street, a group of men stood outside a small cafe, smoking and talking in rapid Maltese. Their conversation died as Rebecca approached. Not gradually—it simply stopped, as if someone had flipped a switch. They turned to watch her pass, their cigarettes glowing like small red eyes in the darkness.

Rebecca kept walking, her pace steady, refusing to hurry. But her heart was beating faster now.

A shop owner was pulling down his shutters for the night—a small grocery that sold vegetables and tinned goods. He paused mid-motion as Rebecca walked by, his hands frozen on the metal grating. His eyes met hers for just a moment, and what she saw there wasn't curiosity or friendliness.

It was warning.

She turned a corner into an even narrower passage, the limestone walls so close she could touch both sides if she stretched out her arms. More eyes watched from windows above. An elderly man stood in a recessed doorway, rosary beads wrapped around his gnarled fingers. As Rebecca passed, he made the sign of the cross—not the casual gesture of the devout, but something more deliberate. More protective.

As if she were the thing that needed to be warded off.

The whispers started then. She couldn't make out the words—they were in Maltese, spoken too quickly and too quietly—but she heard her name. *Rebecca Voss*. And another name, repeated like an incantation: *Ġużepp Azzopardi*.

They knew. Somehow, impossibly, they all knew what she was investigating.

A woman emerged from a doorway ahead, carrying a basket of laundry. She saw Rebecca and stopped dead, her face draining of color. For a moment, they stood there in the narrow street, facing each other. Then the woman turned and hurried back inside, slamming the door behind her. Rebecca heard the sound of a bolt sliding home.

The street felt colder now. The shadows deeper. Rebecca pulled her jacket tighter and kept walking, but the sensation of being watched—of being *known*—only intensified.

More people appeared in doorways and windows. Not approaching, not speaking, just watching. Their faces were hard, closed off. Hostile in a way that went beyond mere unfriendliness. It was the hostility of a community protecting itself. Of people who had agreed, collectively and without words, that certain things should never be spoken of. Certain questions should never be asked.

And Rebecca had violated that unspoken pact.

She turned another corner and nearly collided with a young woman—perhaps twenty-five, with dark hair and frightened eyes. The woman gasped and stepped back, pressing herself against the limestone wall.

"I'm sorry," Rebecca said automatically. "I didn't mean to—"

But the young woman was already moving away, her eyes wide, her hand reaching up to touch something at her throat. A crucifix, Rebecca realized. The woman was clutching a crucifix like a talisman.

"*Harsa*," the woman whispered. The evil eye. Then she turned and fled down a side passage, her footsteps echoing off the ancient stones.

Rebecca stood there for a moment, her breath coming faster now. The weight of all those watching eyes pressed down on her like a physical thing. She could feel the hostility radiating from the buildings themselves, from the very stones of Rabat. This place had secrets, and it wanted to keep them.

She forced herself to keep walking. Her apartment was just ahead now, around one more corner. She could see the bakery's shuttered storefront, the narrow door beside it that led to the stairs.

But as she reached for the door handle, she heard it—a sound that made her blood run cold.

Shutters closing. All along the street, all at once, shutters were being pulled closed. Windows going dark. Doors being bolted. As if the entire neighborhood was sealing itself off from her. As if she carried some contagion that needed to be contained.

Rebecca looked back the way she'd come. The street was empty now, but she could feel them still watching from behind those closed shutters. Waiting. Judging. Protecting their terrible secret.

She unlocked the door and climbed the narrow stairs to her apartment, her footsteps loud in the silence. Inside, she locked the door behind her—both locks, and the chain—and stood with her back against it, breathing hard.

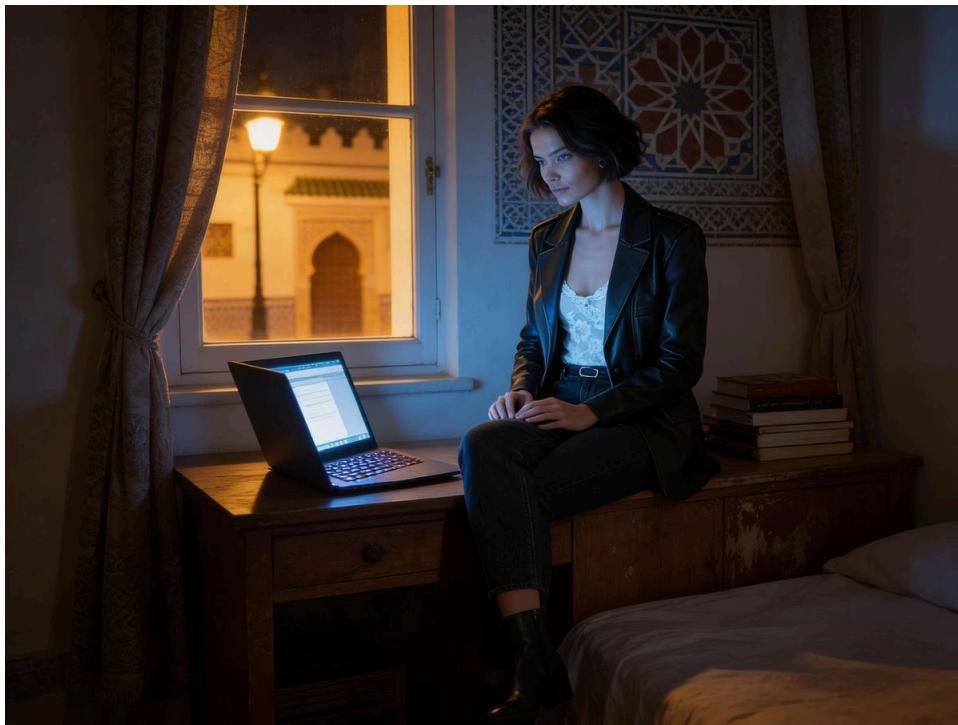
Through the window, she could see the darkened buildings across the street. No lights. No movement. Just the ancient limestone walls and the weight of centuries pressing down.

Rabat knew what she was looking for. And Rabat would not help her find it.

She was alone here. Completely, utterly alone. An outsider who had stumbled into something far older and darker than she'd imagined. Something the entire community had agreed to bury and forget.

But Rebecca couldn't forget. Wouldn't forget.

Even if it meant standing against an entire town. Even if it meant facing whatever waited in those caves beneath the cliffs.



She moved to her desk and opened her laptop, the screen's glow harsh in the darkness. She had work to do. Questions to answer. And now she knew—whatever the truth was about Ġużepp Azzopardi's disappearance, the people of Rabat would do anything to keep it hidden.

Rebecca could not find sleep because of the story—the way a good lead could burrow into your mind and refuse to let go. But when she lay in her hotel bed in Rabat, staring at the ceiling fan that turned without ever seeming to move the air, she knew it was something else.

The face in the cliff. Those eyes.

She'd seen them before. Not in the limestone of Dingli, but somewhere. The memory sat just beyond reach, like a word on the tip of her tongue that wouldn't come.

At three in the morning, she gave up to try to fall asleep and opened her laptop. The blue glow illuminated her small room—a converted townhouse near the old city walls, all honey-colored stone and narrow windows. She'd chosen it because it was cheap and because something about Malta's ancient architecture felt right for this story. Everything here was old. Everything remembered.

She started with the basics: news archives, police reports, anything she could access about Ġużepp Azzopardi's disappearance. The official story was sparse. Fisherman, age sixty-seven, last seen leaving his home in Siġġiewi on the evening of March 15th, 2019. His boat was found three days later, anchored in a small cove beneath the Dingli Cliffs. No body. No signs of struggle. The case had been classified as a probable drowning, though the sea had been calm that week.

What interested Rebecca were the details that didn't make it into the reports. The boat's anchor had been dropped in water too deep for fishing. Gużepp's tackle box was untouched, his lines still coiled. And according to one constable's notes—buried in a supplementary file—there had been scratch marks on the inside of the boat's hull, as if something had tried to claw its way out.

Or in.

Rebecca rubbed her eyes. The screen was starting to blur. She noticed, not for the first time, that her hands looked pale in the laptop's light. Almost translucent. She flexed her fingers, watching the tendons move beneath the skin, and felt a strange disconnect—as if she were watching someone else's hands.

The National Library's digital archives yielded more. Malta's history was layered like sediment—Phoenician, Roman, Arab, Norman, each civilization leaving its mark. The Dingli Cliffs appeared in records going back centuries, always with the same uneasy reverence. The Maltese had a word for certain places: *imqaddsa*—sacred, but not in the Christian sense. Older than that. Places where the veil was thin.

Mrs Azzopardi didn't need much light anymore. Her eyes had adjusted over the years—so many years that she sometimes lost count. Seventy-three, officially. But the woman who stared back from mirrors looked perhaps sixty, and felt much, much older inside.

She didn't need light. Her eyes had adjusted to darkness long before humans learned to make fire.

Mrs. Azzopardi allowed herself to remember—not everything, that would take too long—but the essential truth of what she was part of.

The network had existed since the time of the Knights. Perhaps longer. Seven of them, scattered across the islands: three in Malta, two in Gozo, two in Sicily. Teachers, priests, doctors, community leaders. People with access. People with trust. People who knew how to make children disappear without raising too many questions.

She thought of Brother Salvu in Victoria, Gozo, who ran the orphanage. Of Dr. Camilleri in Mdina, who signed death certificates without asking uncomfortable questions. Of Father Bonnici in Palermo, whose confessional heard secrets that were never repeated. Of the others—the schoolteacher in Marsaxlokk, the youth counselor in Comiso, the parish administrator in Mosta.

They rarely met. It was safer that way. But they knew of each other. Protected each other. When one was threatened, the others provided alibis, destroyed evidence, silenced witnesses. The network had roots that went deep—into the church hierarchy, into government offices, into police departments. Favors owed. Secrets kept. Blackmail when necessary.

And the practices—the old practices passed down through generations—kept them strong. Kept them vital. Mrs. Azzopardi didn't fully understand the rituals her predecessor had taught her, the ones involving blood and fear and the terror of the

innocent. She only knew they worked. That she should have been dead twenty years ago, but wasn't. That her mind stayed sharp while her contemporaries faded into dementia. That she could still do what needed to be done.

For three hundred years, the network had endured. For three hundred years, they had fed their particular hunger and never been caught. A few close calls, yes. A journalist here, a detective there. But they always disappeared. Always fell silent. Always learned that some truths were too dangerous to speak.

But it didn't matter. Rebecca would come to the cliffs. They always did, once the compulsion took hold. And then she would join the others who had asked too many questions, looked too deeply, remembered too much.

Rebecca Voss would be no different. In two days, she would bring the girl to the cliffs. The compulsion was already taking hold—she'd seen it in Rebecca's eyes at their meeting, the way her pupils had dilated when Mrs. Azzopardi touched her. The old poison, the old power, still worked.

And then it would be over. Another disappearance. Another unsolved case. Another family left to wonder and grieve and eventually forget.

The network would endure. It always did.

Mrs. Azzopardi went to her bedroom, confident and unhurried. She had survived three centuries of this work. What was one curious journalist compared to that?

She went to sleep with the sound of the sea in her ears—the same sea that had once tried to drown her and failed.

She did not know, could not know, that this time would be different.

That this time, the ancient evil—human evil, the worst kind—would finally meet something it could not corrupt or destroy.

That this time, the ancient evil would finally meet something older and more powerful than itself.

For now, Mrs. Azzopardi slept, and dreamed of children's screams.

Chapter Two: The Archive

Outside, the wind picked up, rattling the shutters. And somewhere in the darkness, Rebecca could have sworn she heard whispers. Old voices speaking in older tongues, discussing the woman who asked too many questions.

Rebecca's coffee had gone cold. She drank it anyway, barely tasting it. Outside her window, Rabat was still dark, but she could hear the first stirrings of morning—a cat yowling, a distant car, the bells of St. Paul's preparing for dawn mass.

She should eat something. The thought came to her suddenly, accompanied by the realization that she couldn't remember her last meal. Yesterday? The day before? Her stomach didn't feel empty, exactly. It didn't feel like anything at all.

She spent the day chasing leads through Mosta and the villages near Rabat. The marine biologist was polite but unhelpful, explaining that the caves were partially submerged and largely unexplored due to dangerous currents. The historian was more forthcoming, sharing stories about *il-Belliegħa*—the Siren—a creature from Maltese legend that lived in sea caves and lured men to their deaths with promises of forbidden knowledge.

"But these are just stories," the historian said, smiling indulgently. "Fishermen's tales to explain drownings."

Rebecca smiled back and didn't mention the face she'd seen in the cliff.



Karmenu Borg was harder to find. She tracked him to a small bar in Siġġiewi, where he sat alone at a corner table, nursing a glass of Kinnie. He was ancient—easily in his eighties—with skin like weathered leather and eyes that had seen too much sun and sea.

When Rebecca introduced herself and mentioned Ġużepp's name, those eyes went flat.

"I don't talk about Ġużepp," he said.

"Please. His wife—"

"His wife should let the dead rest." Karmenu's voice was hard. "And so should you."

"I just want to understand what happened."

The old fisherman studied her for a long moment. Then he leaned forward, and his voice dropped to barely above a whisper. "You've been to the cliffs."

It wasn't a question.

"Yes."

"You've seen something."

Rebecca hesitated. "I don't know what I saw."

Karmenu nodded slowly, as if this confirmed something. "Gużepp saw it too. Came to me three days before he disappeared, told me he'd found something in the caves. Something that had been waiting. He said..." The old man's hand trembled slightly as he raised his glass. "He said it knew his name. Not just his name—everything about him. His whole life, laid out like a map. Past and future both."

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him to stay away from those cliffs. To forget what he'd seen." Karmenu's eyes met hers, and Rebecca felt a chill despite the bar's warmth. "But he couldn't. Once it knows you, once you've seen it... you can't stay away. You'll go back. You'll keep going back until—"

He stopped abruptly, his gaze moving past Rebecca to the bar's entrance. But when she turned to look, there was no one there. Just the empty doorway and the afternoon light slanting through.

When she turned back, Karmenu was standing, fishing coins from his pocket.

"Wait—"

"You should leave Malta," he said. "Tonight, if you can. Before it's too late."

"Too late for what?"

But the old fisherman was already walking away, and something in the set of his shoulders told Rebecca he wouldn't answer even if she followed.

She sat alone at the table for a long time after he left, watching the light change outside the window. The bar was nearly empty—just her and the bartender, who seemed not to notice her at all. She'd tried to order another coffee earlier, but he'd looked right through her, as if she weren't there.

It happened sometimes, she told herself. People got distracted. Lost in their own thoughts.

Rebecca decided to return to Rabbat before the darkness would come over the country.

The light was already dying when she arrived in Rabbat. It caught in the baroque balconies overhead, turned the honey-colored stone to amber, to rust, to something darker. Shadows pooled in doorways and spilled across the cobblestones like oil. The few people she passed moved quickly, purposefully, as if eager to be indoors before full dark.

Rebecca walked without direction, her footsteps echoing strangely in the confined spaces. The streets of Rabbat were a labyrinth—medieval, pre-medieval, built on Roman foundations that were themselves built on something older. Phoenician, perhaps. Or older still. The kind of old that had no name, that predated names entirely.

She turned a corner and found herself in a small square she didn't recognize. A church stood at one end, its facade dark and austere. A few shops lined the other sides, their shutters already closed despite the hour. In the center, a fountain stood dry, its basin cracked and stained.



And beside the fountain, an old woman sat on a stone bench.

Rebecca stopped.

She knew that face. Those eyes. The black widow's dress, the gnarled hands folded in her lap. It was Mrs. Azzopardi—Gużepp's widow, the woman she'd interviewed at the

cliffs just last evening.

But something was different. The woman looked older somehow, more ancient than she had at the clifftop. Her face was a deeper map of wrinkles, her hands more twisted. And her eyes—those eyes that had been wary and sad at the cliffs—now burned with something else. Recognition. And fury.

"Mrs. Azzopardi?" Rebecca took a step forward. "I didn't expect to see you here. I wanted to thank you for speaking with me yesterday—"

The old woman's lips pulled back, revealing teeth that seemed too many, too sharp. She spoke, and her voice was nothing like it had been at the cliffs. It was harsh now, guttural, speaking in that same ancient language Rebecca had heard in her dreams. Not Maltese. Not anything human.

"I told you," Mrs. Azzopardi hissed, switching abruptly to English, her accent thick with rage. "I told you to stay away. I warned you about the cliffs, about the smell, about the things that live between the sea and the stone. But you didn't listen. You never listen. None of you ever listen."

Rebecca's heart hammered against her ribs. "I'm just trying to understand what happened to your husband—"

"My husband is gone!" The old woman stood, and she seemed taller than she had been, her shadow stretching across the square like something alive. "He went where he was called, where he was always going to go. And I warned you—I warned you not to follow. But you came back. You went to the cliffs again. You asked your questions. You disturbed what should not be disturbed."

"I don't understand—"

"You will." Mrs. Azzopardi's eyes were milky with cataracts, but Rebecca had the unsettling sense that they saw her perfectly. Saw through her. Saw something in her that Rebecca herself couldn't see. "You already do. You felt it at the cliffs. You smelled it. It knows you now. It's already chosen you."

The old woman's lips moved, forming words in that ancient tongue—a chant, a curse, something that made Rebecca's teeth ache to hear it. The air in the square grew thick, oppressive, as if the weight of centuries was pressing down on them both.

And then Mrs. Azzopardi spat.

The gesture was sudden, violent. Saliva struck Rebecca's cheek, warm and viscous. Rebecca stumbled backward, shock and disgust flooding through her. She raised her hand to wipe it away—

But the old woman was gone.

The bench was empty. The square was empty. As if no one had been there at all.

Rebecca's hand trembled as she wiped her face. Her skin felt hot where the spittle had landed, feverish. Burning. She looked around wildly, but the square remained deserted. Even the church seemed darker now, its windows like empty eye sockets.

She needed to leave. Needed to get back to her car, back to her hotel. But when she tried to retrace her steps, the streets had changed. Or she had. Nothing looked familiar. The alleys twisted in ways they hadn't before, leading her deeper into the old town rather than out of it.

Her stomach lurched. Nausea rose in her throat, sudden and overwhelming. She leaned against a wall, pressing her palm against the warm limestone, trying to steady herself. The stone felt strange under her hand—soft, almost, as if it were breathing. As if the wall itself were alive.

The nausea worsened. The world tilted, and Rebecca slid down the wall until she was sitting on the cobblestones. They were cold now, despite the lingering heat of the day. Cold as a tomb.

Her vision blurred. The street seemed to darken, though she could still see the last light clinging to the rooftops above. Or was it darkening? Maybe it was her eyes. Maybe something was wrong with her eyes.

She tried to stand and couldn't. Her legs wouldn't obey. Her whole body felt heavy, distant, as if it belonged to someone else. As if she were watching herself from very far away.

Time passed strangely. She might have sat there for minutes or hours. People walked by—she saw their legs, heard their footsteps—but no one stopped. No one seemed to see her at all.



Eventually, she found herself standing. She didn't remember standing, but she was upright, walking, moving through the streets with a strange, dreamlike certainty. Her body knew where to go even if her mind didn't. Back through the labyrinth, back to her car, back toward—

The cliffs.

She needed to go back to the cliffs.

The thought came from somewhere deep inside her, somewhere that wasn't quite her own mind. But it felt right. It felt inevitable. As if this had always been where she was going, where she'd been going since the moment she arrived in Malta. Since before that, perhaps. Since always.

The nausea was still there, a constant churning in her gut. Her skin felt wrong—too tight, too cold, too something. And there was a smell following her now, faint but unmistakable. That same sweet-rot smell from the caves. As if it had gotten inside her somehow. As if she were carrying it with her.

But none of that mattered. Nothing mattered except the pull, the gravity, the absolute certainty that she needed to return to Dingli. To the cliffs. To the caves and whatever waited in them.

Rebecca found her car. Got in. Started the engine. Her hands moved automatically, and she realized with a distant sort of horror that she couldn't feel the steering wheel under her palms. Couldn't feel anything at all.

But still, she drove.

Toward the cliffs. Toward the sea. Toward whatever was calling her home.

By the time Rebecca drove back toward Dingli, the sun was setting, painting the sky in shades of blood and gold. She told herself she was just going to look, to take a few more photographs in the better light. But she knew—had known since the moment she woke—that she would return to the cliffs.

That she had to.

The wind was stronger this evening, carrying that same sweet-rot smell from the caves below. Rebecca stood at the edge, camera in hand, and watched the shadows lengthen across the limestone. The sea was darkening, turning from blue to black, and somewhere in that darkness, she knew, the caves waited.

And in the caves, something was waiting for her.

She could feel it now—a pull, like gravity, like inevitability. The same pull that had brought her to Malta in the first place, though she couldn't quite remember making the decision to come. The assignment had simply appeared, the story had simply called to her, and she had simply answered.

Rebecca began to descend the narrow path that led down the cliff face, toward the caves and the sea and whatever waited in the spaces between.

Chapter Three: Three Days After

Three Days After Rebecca Disappeared

Sofia Voss stares at her phone for the fourteenth time in an hour. Still nothing. No texts, no missed calls, no explanation for why Aunt Rebecca hasn't responded in three days.

"Put that away," Aunt Catherine says from the kitchen doorway. Not her real aunt—her mother's sister, the woman who raised her. "You're supposed to be studying."

Sofia looks down at her biology textbook, at the diagram of cellular mitosis she's been pretending to memorize. "Have you heard from Rebecca?"

The pause is too long. "She's working on a story. You know how she gets."

"For three days? Without answering a single text?"

"Sofia." Catherine's voice has that edge to it, the one that means *drop it*. "Rebecca is an adult. She doesn't need to check in with us."

But that's not true. Rebecca always checks in. Always sends a quick message, even when she's chasing a lead. Sofia has her location shared on her phone, and it's been stuck at the Dingli Cliffs since Tuesday night.

"I'm worried about her."

"Well, don't be." Catherine turns back to the kitchen, but not before Sofia catches something in her expression. Fear? Guilt? "She'll turn up when she's ready."

Sofia waits until she hears the water running, then pulls up Rebecca's contact again. The last message she sent sits there, unread: *Found something interesting. Tell you about it later.*

That was three days ago.

Sofia closes her textbook and opens her laptop instead. If no one else is going to look for Rebecca, she will. She starts with the *Times of Malta* website, searching for Rebecca's recent articles. The last one published was about a missing fisherman from fifteen years ago. Gużepp Azzopardi. Disappeared near the Dingli Cliffs.

The same cliffs where Rebecca's phone has been sitting, unmoving, for seventy-two hours.

Sofia's stomach tightens. She clicks through to the article, reading about the fisherman's boat found empty, his family's insistence that he would never have abandoned them. And then, buried in the comments section, she finds something that makes her blood run cold.

My grandmother knew him. Said he wasn't a good man. Said the cliffs took him for what he did.

She's about to dig deeper when her phone buzzes. Not Rebecca—a reminder. Catechism class in an hour.

Sofia groans. She's been going to St. Augustine's every Wednesday since she was twelve, mostly because Catherine insists and it's easier not to fight about it. The classes are taught by Mrs. Azzopardi, an ancient woman with eyes like flint who always seems to be watching Sofia a little too closely.

She closes her laptop and stands, stretching. Through her bedroom window, she can see the Mediterranean in the distance, a dark line against the darkening sky. Something about it pulls at her, has been pulling at her for days now. An inexplicable urge to drive west, to the cliffs, to stand at the edge and look down.

Sofia shakes her head. She's being ridiculous. Rebecca is fine. She's probably holed up in some archive somewhere, lost in research, phone battery dead.

But as she grabs her jacket and heads downstairs, she can't shake the feeling that something is terribly wrong. That Rebecca isn't just missing.

That maybe Rebecca is trying to tell her something, and Sofia just doesn't know how to listen yet.

The drive to St. Augustine's takes fifteen minutes. Sofia parks in the small lot behind the church and walks through the garden, past the statue of the Virgin Mary with her serene, knowing smile. The evening air smells like jasmine and something else—something sweet and rotting that makes Sofia's nose wrinkle.



Inside, the other girls are already seated in the small classroom off the main chapel. Maria, Theresa, Anna—all of them from good Maltese families, all of them here because their mothers insist. Mrs. Azzopardi stands at the front of the room in her black dress.

"Sofia," she says, and her voice is like stone scraping stone. "You're late."

"Sorry, Mrs. Azzopardi."

"Sit."

Sofia slides into her usual seat near the back. Mrs. Azzopardi's eyes follow her, and Sofia feels that familiar prickle of unease. The old woman has always made her uncomfortable, though she's never been able to say exactly why.

"Tonight," Mrs. Azzopardi begins, "we discuss the nature of sin. Of temptation. Of the ways the devil works through those who appear innocent."

Sofia tries to focus, but her mind keeps drifting back to Rebecca. To the cliffs. To that strange, pulling sensation that's been growing stronger all week.

"Sofia."

She looks up, startled. Mrs. Azzopardi is staring at her, those dark eyes boring into her.

"Yes?"

"I asked you a question. What is the greatest sin?"

Sofia's mouth is dry. "I... I don't know. Murder?"

"No." Mrs. Azzopardi's lips curve into something that might be a smile but isn't. "The greatest sin is pride. The belief that we are above God's law. That we can escape the consequences of our actions."

Something about the way she says it makes Sofia's skin crawl. As if she's not talking about theology at all. As if she's talking about something—someone—specific.

"Have you heard from your aunt recently?" Mrs. Azzopardi asks, and the question is so unexpected that Sofia actually flinches.

"Which aunt?"

"Rebecca." The name hangs in the air like a curse. "I understand she's been asking questions. Disturbing old graves, so to speak."

Sofia's heart is pounding now. "I haven't heard from her in a few days."

"Hmm." Mrs. Azzopardi turns back to the board, but Sofia can still feel her attention, heavy and suffocating. "Perhaps that's for the best. Some questions are better left unasked. Some stones are better left unturned."

The class continues, but Sofia doesn't hear another word. All she can think about is Rebecca, and the cliffs, and the way Mrs. Azzopardi said her name—like she already knew something terrible had happened.

When the class finally ends, Sofia is the first one out the door. She practically runs to her car, her hands shaking as she fumbles with her keys. She needs to go home. She needs to call the police. She needs to—

Her phone buzzes.

For one wild, hopeful moment, she thinks it's Rebecca. But it's just a notification from the news app. She almost dismisses it, but then she sees the headline:

Body Found Near Dingli Cliffs. Identity Unknown.

Sofia's vision blurs. Her hands are shaking so badly she can barely hold the phone. She clicks on the article, but there are no details yet. Just that a body was discovered by hikers that afternoon, that the police are investigating, that the identity is being withheld pending notification of next of kin.

But Sofia knows.

Read Sample

She knows with a certainty that feels like ice in her veins.

Rebecca isn't missing anymore.

She's dead.

And somehow, impossibly, Mrs. Azzopardi already knew.



***To get a better impression
of the book you jump now to
a key chapter ... what is
chapter 9 enjoy reading***



"Teach me," she said again, but this time the words meant something different. "Teach me how to grieve. Teach me how to make my tears fall true."

Chapter Nine: The Tears

Sofia sat at Rebecca's desk, the lamp casting a warm circle of light over the scattered papers. Outside, night had fallen completely over Malta, turning the world beyond the window into darkness punctuated by distant streetlights. The house was silent except for the occasional creak of old wood settling.

She'd been reading for over an hour now, piecing together Rebecca's investigation like a puzzle with half its pieces missing. The handwriting was familiar—Rebecca's neat, precise script that Sofia had seen on birthday cards and shopping lists her whole life. But the content was something else entirely.

Ġużepp Azzopardi. Disappeared June 12, 2008. Body never found. Wife claims he went fishing and never returned. But the boat was found intact, no signs of struggle. No blood. Nothing.

Sofia turned the page, her finger tracing the words.

Spoke to three fishermen who knew him. All refused to talk. One crossed himself when I mentioned Ġużepp's name. Another told me to "let the dead rest." But he's not confirmed dead. Just missing. Why do they all act like he's gone?

The next page had a hand-drawn map of the Dingli Cliffs, with several spots marked in red ink. One spot, near the water's edge, had been circled multiple times, the pen pressing so hard it had nearly torn through the paper.

Something happened here. I can feel it. Every time I visit the cliffs, I feel pulled to this spot. Like I've been here before. But I haven't. I know I haven't.

Sofia's skin prickled. She pulled her cardigan tighter around her shoulders, suddenly cold despite the warm evening. The feeling was back—that sense of being watched, of not being alone.

She kept reading.

Mrs. Azzopardi knows something. The way she looked at me today—it wasn't grief. It was recognition. Like she knew me. But we've never met before. I'm sure of it. Almost sure.

The handwriting on the next page was shakier, less controlled.

I keep having dreams about a boat. About water. About hands that won't let go. I wake up and I can't breathe, like I'm drowning. Like I've drowned before. This doesn't make sense. None of this makes sense.

Sofia's heart was beating faster now. She turned another page and found a photograph paper-clipped to the notes—the same one she'd found earlier. Young Rebecca at the church, standing with the other girls. Mrs. Azzopardi's hand on her shoulder.

Beneath it, Rebecca had written in red ink: *Why can't I remember this?*

A cold breeze touched the back of Sofia's neck.

She gasped, spinning around in the chair so fast it squeaked against the floor. Her eyes scanned the room—the bed with its faded quilt, the bookshelf, the half-open closet door. Nothing. No one.

But the cold remained, a presence she could feel but not see. The air itself seemed to thicken, to press against her skin like invisible hands.

"Hello?" Her voice came out smaller than she intended. "Is someone there?"

Silence. Just the distant sound of a car passing on the street below.

Sofia turned back to the desk, her hands trembling slightly as she reached for the next page of notes. She was being ridiculous. It was just an old house, drafty windows, her imagination running wild after reading Rebecca's increasingly paranoid observations.

But her aunt wasn't paranoid. Rebecca was the most rational person Sofia knew. If she'd written these things, if she'd felt these things—

Sofia looked down at the notes and spoke without thinking, her voice barely above a whisper: "Where are you, Rebecca?"

The words hung in the air.

And then, so softly she almost missed it, a single drop of water fell onto the page.

Sofia stared at it. A perfect circle of moisture, darkening the paper, making the ink blur slightly at the edges. She looked up at the ceiling. No water stains. No cracks. The lamp was dry. The window was closed.

Another drop fell.

This one landed directly on Rebecca's handwriting, on the words *I can feel it*, spreading like a tiny pool.

Sofia's breath caught in her throat. She leaned back slightly, her eyes fixed on the papers. This wasn't possible. There was no source, no explanation—

Another drop. Then another.

They were falling steadily now, one after another, landing on the scattered notes like rain. But there was no rain. No leak. No rational explanation for water appearing from nowhere, falling onto her dead aunt's desperate investigation into a man who'd disappeared fifteen years ago.

Sofia reached out with one trembling finger and touched one of the drops.

It was warm.

Warm like tears.

"Oh my God," she whispered.

The drops kept falling, faster now, soaking into the paper, blurring the words Rebecca had written in her final days. Sofia watched, transfixed, as the moisture spread across the page, across the photograph, across the map with its circled location.

She should have been terrified. Should have run from the room, from the house, from whatever impossible thing was happening. But instead, she felt something else. Something that made her chest tighten and her own eyes begin to burn.

Recognition.

"Rebecca?" Her voice cracked. "Is that you?"

The drops fell harder, like someone weeping. Like someone trying desperately to communicate the only way they could. Sofia's hands hovered over the papers, not quite touching, afraid that if she moved too quickly, whatever fragile connection existed would break.

"I don't understand," she said, and now her own tears were falling, mixing with the impossible drops that continued to darken the pages. "I don't understand what's happening. But I know—I know something's wrong. I know you're trying to tell me something."

The drops began to slow. One. Two. Three more. Then nothing.

Sofia sat in the sudden stillness, her heart pounding, staring at the water-stained notes. At the evidence of something beyond explanation, beyond the rational world she'd always believed in.

She picked up the photograph—the one of young Rebecca at the church. Mrs. Azzopardi's hand on her shoulder. The Dingli Cliffs in the background.

And the text message on her phone, still glowing on the desk beside her: *Field trip to Dingli Cliffs. Two days.*

Sofia's hands were shaking as she set down the photograph. But her voice, when she spoke again into the empty room, was steady.

"I'm listening now," she said. "Whatever you're trying to tell me, Rebecca—I'm listening."

The lamp flickered once.

And in the silence that followed, Sofia Voss began to understand that some mysteries couldn't be solved with logic. Some truths could only be felt in the cold touch of a ghost's presence, in the warm fall of a dead woman's tears.

She gathered the water-stained notes carefully, reverently, and began to read them again. This time, looking for what Rebecca had been trying to tell her all along.

This time, ready to believe in impossible things.

Sofia stared at the wet spots on Rebecca's notes, her mind racing through possibilities, through explanations that made no sense but were somehow true anyway. The tears had stopped, but the evidence remained—warm droplets on paper, appearing from nowhere, from nothing.

From someone who shouldn't exist anymore.

Her scientific mind rebelled against it even as her heart knew it was real. She'd felt the cold touches all day. The presence that followed her. And now this—tears that fell from empty air, that responded to her voice.

Rebecca was trying to communicate.

The thought crystallized with sudden clarity. This wasn't random. The tears had started when Sofia spoke Rebecca's name, had fallen on the notes about Guzepp Azzopardi. They meant something. They were *intentional*.

Sofia's pulse quickened. If Rebecca could cry in response to her voice, maybe—

She grabbed two blank sheets of printer paper from Rebecca's desk drawer, her hands trembling with urgency. With a thick black marker, she wrote in large block letters on the first sheet:

YES

On the second:

NO



She placed them side by side on the desk, clearing away the notes and photograph to make space. The papers looked stark under the lamplight, absurdly simple. Like a child's game. Like a séance from a bad movie.

But Sofia's throat was tight as she positioned herself in front of them, her hands gripping the edge of the desk.

"Rebecca," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "If you're here—if this is really you—please. Show me."

Silence.

The lamp hummed. Outside, a car passed on the street, its headlights sweeping across the wall. Sofia's breathing sounded too loud in the quiet room.

"Please," she said again. "I need to know. Are you here?"

For a long moment, nothing happened. Sofia felt foolish, desperate, her eyes burning as she stared at the two sheets of paper. Maybe she'd imagined it all. Maybe the tears had been—

A drop fell on the YES paper.

Sofia gasped, her hand flying to her mouth.

Another drop. Then another. They fell in a small cluster near the center of the word, darkening the paper, spreading into the fibers. Warm. Impossible. Real.

"Oh my God," Sofia breathed. Tears sprang to her own eyes—shock, fear, wonder, relief all crashing through her at once. "Oh my God, Rebecca, you're really here."

More tears fell on YES. Faster now, as if in response to Sofia's recognition. As if Rebecca had been waiting, desperate to be acknowledged, to be seen.

Sofia wiped her own eyes with shaking hands. "Okay. Okay, I understand. You're here." She took a breath, trying to steady herself, trying to think. "Rebecca, are you—are you in danger?"

The tears shifted immediately to the YES paper. Three drops in quick succession, emphatic.

Sofia's stomach clenched. "Is it—" She swallowed hard. "Is Mrs. Azzopardi involved?"

YES. The tears fell harder now, almost angry in their intensity.

"Jesus." Sofia's mind was reeling. Her church teacher. The woman who'd taught her about virtue and sin, who'd smiled at her every Sunday. "What did she do?"

But there was no way to answer that. Only yes or no. Only these crude, desperate signals across the boundary between life and death.

Sofia looked at the text message on her phone. The field trip. Two days.

"The cliffs," she said slowly. "Should I go to the cliffs? To the field trip?"

The response was immediate and violent. Tears fell on the NO paper like rain, soaking it, spreading across the entire sheet. More tears than before. Desperate tears.

"Okay!" Sofia said quickly. "Okay, I won't go. I promise, I won't go."

The tears on NO slowed but didn't stop entirely. As if Rebecca didn't quite believe her. As if she'd heard promises before that meant nothing.

Sofia's throat tightened. She thought of the photograph. Young Rebecca at the church, Mrs. Azzopardi's hand on her shoulder. The cliffs in the background.

"Rebecca," she said quietly. "Am I in danger?"

The pause before the answer was the worst part. Sofia watched the papers, her heart hammering, knowing what the answer would be but hoping—

Tears fell on YES.

Not many. Just three drops. Deliberate. Certain.

Sofia felt the room tilt around her. She gripped the desk harder, her knuckles white. "Because of Mrs. Azzopardi?"

YES.

"Because of the field trip?"

YES.

"Because of what happened to you?"

The tears came faster now, falling on YES over and over, soaking the paper until the letters began to blur. And Sofia understood—really understood—that whatever had happened to Rebecca fifteen years ago, whatever had made her disappear and then reappear as a journalist investigating her own trauma, it was happening again.

To her.

Mrs. Azzopardi had done something to Rebecca. And now she was planning to do it to Sofia.

"What do I do?" Sofia whispered. "How do I stop her?"

But the tears just kept falling on the YES paper, unable to answer. The limitation of their communication was suddenly, horribly clear. Yes or no. That was all they had. All the complexity of warning, of explanation, of truth—reduced to two words.

Sofia wiped her eyes again. Her hands were shaking, but her mind was clearing. She was scared—terrified—but she was also angry. And she was smart enough to know that fear without action was just paralysis.

"I won't go to the cliffs," she said firmly. "I'll tell Mrs. Azzopardi I'm sick. I'll stay away from her. I'll—" She paused. "Rebecca, do you need help?"

The tears shifted to YES immediately. Urgently.



"Can I help you?"

A longer pause this time. Then, slowly, reluctantly, tears fell on both papers. YES and NO at once. Maybe. Uncertain. Complicated.

Sofia's chest ached. "I'll try," she said. "I don't know how, but I'll try. I promise."

The tears stopped.

The room fell silent again, but it felt different now. Not empty. Occupied. Sofia could feel the presence still there, watching, waiting. Her aunt—her *mother*, she realized with a jolt, though she didn't know how she knew—trapped somewhere between life and death, able only to weep and touch with cold fingers and hope someone would listen.

Sofia looked at the soaked papers on the desk. At Rebecca's notes spread around them. At the photograph of a young girl who'd trusted the wrong person and paid a price. Sofia was only beginning to understand.

She picked up her phone and deleted Mrs. Azzopardi's text message. Then she opened her contacts and scrolled to Maria's name—her friend from church, who was also going on the field trip.

Her thumb hovered over the call button.

If she was in danger, Maria might be too. They all might be.

Sofia took a breath and pressed call.

Whatever was happening, whatever Mrs. Azzopardi had planned, it ended now. Sofia didn't know how to save a ghost, didn't know how to fight something she couldn't see or understand.

But she knew how to save the living.

And that, at least, was a place to start.

But before her finger could complete the motion, something stopped her. A pressure in the air. A weight that made her hand freeze mid-reach.

Sofia's throat tightened. The tears on the papers were still warm, still impossible. The presence in the room pressed closer, urgent, desperate. She could feel it like a hand on her shoulder, like breath on her neck.

Not yet. Please, not yet.

The words didn't come as sound. They came as knowing, as certainty that bloomed in her chest like ice spreading across water.

Sofia set the phone down slowly. Her hands were shaking.

"What do you want me to do?" she whispered to the empty room.

The air grew colder. The lamp flickered once, twice. And Sofia felt something building in the space around her—something vast and terrible and full of grief so deep it had no bottom.

She didn't know why she did what she did next. It wasn't rational. It wasn't something she'd planned. But Sofia had been raised in the church, had been taught to pray when there were no other answers, and so she lifted her head toward the ceiling and closed her eyes.

"Please," she said, her voice breaking. "Please, whoever you are, whatever you are—help me understand. Help me know what to do."

Her lips parted slightly as she spoke, her face turned upward in supplication. The prayer felt inadequate, childish, but it was all she had.

And then it happened.

The first drop fell directly into her open mouth.

It landed on her tongue with shocking precision—warm and salt-bitter and *wrong*. Sofia's eyes flew open in surprise, but before she could react, another drop fell. Then another. Large, heavy tears falling from nowhere, from the empty air above her, falling with impossible accuracy into her mouth.

She tried to close her lips, to turn away, but her body wouldn't respond. The tears kept falling, and she kept swallowing reflexively, and with each drop that slid down her throat, the coldness began.

It started at the back of her tongue—a bitter, chemical cold that tasted like metal and salt and something ancient. Then it spread. Down her throat. Into her chest. Through her veins like ice water injected directly into her bloodstream.

"Oh God—" Sofia gasped, but the cold cut off her words.

It wasn't like winter cold. It wasn't like touching ice or standing in wind. This was the cold of the grave, of the deep sea, of spaces where warmth had never existed and never would. It flooded through her with violent intensity, claiming every cell, every nerve ending.

Sofia's legs gave out. She fell hard, her knees hitting the floor with a crack that should have hurt but didn't—couldn't—because all she could feel was the cold. It was in her lungs now, in her heart, in her bones. She was drowning in it, freezing from the inside out.

Her vision went white at the edges. She couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. The cold was everything, consuming everything, and she was going to die here on the floor of her aunt's room, frozen solid by impossible tears that—

My baby.

The voice cut through the cold like a knife through ice.

Sofia's eyes were closed—when had she closed them?—but she heard it clearly. Not with her ears. Deeper than that. In her chest, in her heart, in the marrow of her bones where the cold had settled.

My baby. My daughter.

"No," Sofia tried to say, but her lips wouldn't move. The cold held her paralyzed, held her suspended in a moment that stretched and stretched.

I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry, my darling girl.

The voice was crying. Sobbing. Each word fractured by grief so profound it had weight, had substance. And Sofia knew that voice. Had known it all her life, though she'd never heard it speak these words before.

Aunt Rebecca. But not aunt. Not aunt at all.

Mother.

The truth hit her like a physical blow, like the cold had hit her, undeniable and absolute. Rebecca wasn't her aunt. Had never been her aunt. The woman who'd disappeared

three weeks ago, who everyone said had gone to investigate a story and never come back—

She was Sofia's mother.

And she was dead.

The cold began to recede, pulling back like a tide, and Sofia could breathe again. She gasped, her lungs burning as air rushed back in. Her eyes flew open.

Rebecca was sitting at the desk.

Not translucent. Not flickering. Solid and real and *there*, her hands folded in her lap, her face wet with tears that caught the lamplight. She looked exactly as she had in the photographs Sofia had found—the same dark hair, the same sharp features, the same eyes that were now fixed on Sofia with an expression of such desperate love and anguish that Sofia's heart cracked open.

"Rebecca?" Sofia's voice was barely a whisper.

"Sofia." Rebecca's lips moved, and this time Sofia heard it with her ears, heard the break in her mother's voice. "My Sofia. My baby girl."

Sofia couldn't move. Couldn't process what she was seeing. Her aunt—her *mother*—sitting there as solid as life, as real as anything, when she should be gone, should be missing, should be—

"You're dead," Sofia said, and the words felt like stones in her mouth.

Rebecca nodded slowly, tears streaming down her face. "Yes."

"How long?"

"Three weeks. The night I went to Rabat." Rebecca's voice was steady despite the tears, despite everything. "Mrs. Azzopardi cursed me. I died that night on the road back to the cliffs."

Sofia's mind was reeling. The cold was still in her, a residue that made her bones ache, but it had changed. It wasn't drowning her anymore. It was connecting her. To Rebecca. To the truth.

"You're my mother," Sofia said. Not a question. A statement of fact that rearranged her entire world.

"Yes." Rebecca's face crumpled. "I was seventeen. He—Gużepp Azzopardi—he took me on his boat. Mrs. Azzopardi sent me to him. And when I escaped, when I killed him and climbed those cliffs, I hit my head. I forgot everything. I didn't remember until—" Her voice broke. "Until it was too late."

Sofia stared at her. At this woman who'd been her aunt, her guardian, her friend. Who'd taught her to read, to question, to think. Who'd disappeared and left her alone.

Who'd been her mother all along.

"Why didn't you tell me?" The words came out raw, accusatory.

"I didn't remember." Rebecca's hands twisted in her lap. "I didn't know. Your grandmother—my mother—she and my aunt decided it was better that way. That you'd be my cousin, my niece. That I'd never have to know what he did to me, what I did to him. They thought they were protecting me."

"But you remembered eventually."

"No." Rebecca shook her head. "Not until I died. Not until I came back to the cliffs and found him there, waiting. Then it all came back. Everything."

Sofia's chest was tight. She wanted to scream, to cry, to run. But she couldn't move. The cold had rooted her to the floor, and Rebecca was there, *right there*, more present than she'd been in weeks.

"You can see me," Rebecca said wonderingly. "You can really see me."

"I drank your tears." Sofia's voice was hollow. "They fell in my mouth and I—I felt you. Inside me. The cold—"

"I'm sorry." Rebecca stood abruptly, her hands reaching out but not quite touching. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I just needed you to understand, to *know*, and I didn't know how else—"

"I'm not hurt." Sofia cut her off. She pushed herself to her feet, her legs shaky but holding. "I'm not hurt. I'm just—"

What was she? Terrified? Devastated? Relieved?

All of it. None of it. Something beyond words.

"You're my mother," she said again, testing the words, feeling their weight.

"Yes." Rebecca's voice broke on the word. "And I failed you. I left you alone. I died and left you with *her*, with that woman who—" She couldn't finish.

Sofia took a step forward. Then another. Until she was standing right in front of Rebecca, close enough to touch if touching were possible.

"You came back," Sofia said quietly. "You're dead, and you came back to warn me."

Rebecca nodded, tears falling freely now. "She's going to take you to the cliffs. In two days. The field trip. She's going to—" Her voice cracked. "She's going to do to you what

she did to me. What she's done to so many others."

"I know." Sofia's own eyes were burning now. "I figured it out. From your notes. From the tears. I know."

They stood there, mother and daughter, separated by death but connected by something stronger. By blood. By love. By the tears that had passed between them and changed everything.

"I won't let her hurt you," Rebecca said fiercely. "I don't know how, but I won't. I'll find a way."

Sofia looked at her mother—her *mother*—and felt something shift inside her chest. The cold was still there, but it wasn't frightening anymore. It was Rebecca. It was connection. It was proof that love didn't end, even when life did.

"We'll find a way together," Sofia said.



**Rebecca Voss will go on
in the next Adventure
"The Hearts of Gozo"
Do not miss it ...**

