

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

SARAH PENNER

*a short
story*

THE
CONJURER'S
WIFE

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For Rachel

December 1821
Teatro La Fenice
Venice, Italy

From her place onstage at tonight's sold-out show, Olivia Van Hoff stands three inches left of the small *x* indicating her assigned position.

The curtain will lift at any moment. Behind it, Olivia hears the hum of activity among the audience waiting in their seats: murmured greetings, the occasional clearing of one's throat. Teatro La Fenice is a packed house this evening, every last ticket sold. It is the penultimate show of a two-week run. The grand finale is tomorrow.

Olivia's breath is steady, her arms relaxed at her sides. She's done this hundreds of times before—though, admittedly, her palms are slightly damp tonight. The air this evening feels different.

A click sounds above her as the pulley system engages. The heavy green velvet curtain begins to rise, and the crowd on the other side gasps. These tickets were not cheap, and they sold out months ago. Now, at last, it is time.

Olivia comes slowly into view. The ruffled edge of her amethyst gown, skirting the stage floor, sets the audience applauding. Then, the curve of her corseted waist, the curious protrusion on her left wrist. Finally, the glint of tiny bells nestled in her dark plaited hair.

By the time the curtain is fully lifted, the crowd's cheering has grown to a frenzy.

Olivia delights in the hundreds of faces turned toward her. Most remain in shadow except for their eyes, which reflect the glow of the candles and oil lamps scattered throughout the theater. The auditorium is draped in garlands strung with ruscus leaves and dried tangerine slices. The air is cool and damp, smelling of caramel and beeswax.

The audience seems especially spirited tonight. Olivia feels it radiating from them, their anticipation at what the magician—who has not yet come onstage—might have in store. She can feel their sense of

superiority, too, how proud they are to have secured tickets to such an esteemed event. Mere days before Christmas too.

Many of the theatergoers are drunk. It's a Friday evening, and it is the holidays, after all. The auditorium floor is slick, glistening with shoe prints: not an hour before the show, a light snow began to fall. Venice doesn't see a lot of snow, and the novelty of it has enlivened the theatergoers just as much as the hot *vin brûlé* available by the mugful in the foyer.

Olivia squints. Even after two weeks, she's still not used to the stage lighting at La Fenice. She's used to the candlelight and oil lamps, but this new gaslight system making its way into theaters—it is very bright. Disorienting, even. She blinks a few times, slightly angling her head to better see the crowd. She inhales a whiff of tobacco—many men in the auditorium are sucking on pipes—and wonders how they might react if she were to ask for a quick smoke herself.

In the front row, a woman wrapped in an emerald-colored shawl leans forward, her chin in her hands as she gazes up at Olivia. She's pressed close to the gentleman next to her, and he, too, watches Olivia with a look of fascination. What might they be thinking? Olivia has overheard people talking about her before—"Mrs. Van Hoff is even more beautiful than what they profess in the papers"—and now, she wonders if this couple is thinking exactly that.

Still, at the age of twenty-four, Olivia wouldn't hesitate a moment to trade these awestruck gazes for a single true friend.

Olivia wonders if she used to have them—friends. But her memories, from before the accident a year ago, have evaporated. Her head injury was a dreadful one; afterward, the official diagnosis was amnesia. "It happens more often than you'd think," the doctor said.

The woman in the front row has a playbill resting in her lap, her hand lying protectively over it. Olivia has seen the playbill enough times, knows precisely what it says in big, bold letters:

STARTLING FEATS AND MARVELOUS AMUSEMENTS
MR. OSCAR VAN HOFF
WORLD-RENOWNED
CONJURER & TRANSFORMATIONIST
AT THE

TEATRO LA FENICE
ACCOMPANIED BY HIS WIFE AND AIUTANTE, OLIVIA
DECEMBER 21, 1821
DOORS OPEN AT 7:15 P.M.
SHOW COMMENCES AT EIGHT O’CLOCK.

Olivia wonders if the woman will frame this playbill after the show. Many do. Since Oscar’s popularity exploded a year ago—on the heels of their wedding, and Olivia’s accident—the playbills have become prized relics in and of themselves. Theatergoers bring them home and proudly display them like pieces of expensive art. *I was there*, they tell their envious friends. *A shame you could not get a ticket. What a magnificent sight it was! He’s not a fraud like the others. He made a peacock appear where there was none. And then, a swarm of butterflies. I haven’t any idea how he did it . . .*

A sudden hush falls over the audience. Even the theater staff, stalking the aisles with paper turtledoves and spiced pecans, come to a halt. Olivia need not avert her gaze to know what this means: Oscar, fourteen years her senior, has just stepped onstage.

Tonight, he’s wearing his usual plain black tailcoat lined with silk, the same purple fabric used to craft Olivia’s bespoke gown. He wears a simple top hat, and his beard is neatly trimmed.

He always dresses simply. His displays are shocking enough.

Oscar assumes his position onstage, but then he turns, something having caught his eye: Olivia is standing off her mark.

The first time she did this, a few weeks ago, Oscar gave her a quizzical look. They have always worked flawlessly in concert with one another. Indeed, their synchronization is part of the appeal.

The second time she missed her mark, he looked at her with exasperation.

But tonight, his nostrils flare. He is incensed.

They’ve had heated discussions about this already. In fact, he reminded her just this evening, while they readied themselves in the dressing room. “The x is right there on the stage,” he said. “You cannot miss it. You *will* not miss it.”

Now, onstage in front of 550 people, all of them waiting with bated breath for Oscar to turn his first trick, Olivia has done it again. She knows

he won't dare admonish her—even with a glance—under these bright gaslights.

Besides, what does it matter if she stands three inches to the left? These stage markings are Oscar's rules for the mere sake of rules, nothing more than a way for him to maneuver her around. Which she's tired of, by the way. She will stand where she wants to stand. The crowd is here for her as much as they are for him. She put Oscar on the map; before she and Oscar married, before she became his assistant, Oscar was lucky to fill half a room.

Look at him now. He needs her, not that he'd ever admit it.

It thrills Olivia, this moment of rebellion. It feels like being drunk.

Despite what she's done, Oscar begins. What other choice does he have? He asks a man in the second row for his hat, and the man happily removes it from his head, disheveling his hair. He knows he will not get his hat back; in a moment, Oscar will transform it into something else.

The man leans into the woman next to him, whispering something. *What a terrible honor!* he's probably saying. *My God, what made him choose me?* He will never forget this moment, will be telling the story at parties decades from now.

Oscar takes the hat and turns it over in his hands. He approaches Olivia—he must take an extra-long step toward her to compensate for her mispositioning—and asks her to inspect it. She does so carefully, her brows furrowed.

To this day, even as his wife and stage assistant, she still does not understand the secret to Oscar's work.

In months past, she's studied the stages, inquired with the staff. There are no trapdoors, no subfloor compartments. She's even brought his suits to her seamstress, who found no concealed pockets, no hidden seams.

How, she still wonders, does he do it?

She returns the hat to Oscar, no more enlightened than she was moments ago, and discreetly rubs her left wrist. The old injury is especially bothersome tonight, though she'd never let on, not in front of a crowd.

Oscar takes the hat, then he places two fingers to the tiny dip in his throat, where one might feel their pulse.

At once, before their very eyes, the hat transforms into a bright, fully bloomed peony. Its petals are a soft pink, its stem long and leafless.

A few of the women in the audience scream. Others gasp. Then everyone applauds.

Oscar hands Olivia the peony. He doesn't need to tell her what to do next: she takes the flower, easily glides down the stairs, stage left, and walks to the second row. Several paper turtledoves litter the floor. Olivia gives the flower to the hatless gentleman, who proceeds to gift it to the woman sitting next to him.

The audience fawns over the moment. A young girl sits nearby, her mouth agape, as though she has just seen a ghost.

Olivia returns to the stage, and Oscar resumes his show. It goes on like this for forty minutes, a variety of magical manifestations. He summons a candle flickering with flame. He relocates a ring from a woman's finger onto his own. He conjures delFTWARE pottery pieces, he moves shoes from one man's feet to another's, and he transforms cigars into bottles of exotic wine.

The audience is equally aghast and delighted.

At one point, someone shouts, "Gold! Lire! Diamonds!" But Oscar just shakes his head. This, too, remains a mystery to Olivia: her husband has never conjured money, nor gems. It seems his strange magic, whatever it is, prohibits him from doing so. Oscar has expressed his chagrin over this fact countless times. They're making quite good money these days, yes, but Oscar always wants more, more.

As the show nears its end, Oscar and Olivia engage in a bit of playful, pre-scripted banter. But Olivia is irritated by something she found earlier that night in their dressing room. And that feeling of drunk-rebellion has gone. She wants it back.

"Tell me, Mrs. Van Hoff," Oscar begins. "Which demonstration did you find most captivating this evening?"

Olivia knows her line. She is to reply: *Why, no demonstration at all, Mr. Van Hoff. It is you I have found most captivating.* Audiences always swoon over this exchange; they find something awfully romantic about the idea of Mr. and Mrs. Van Hoff as not only partners onstage but partners in love.

Olivia pauses several seconds longer than she's supposed to. The tip of Oscar's nose reddens. His mouth twitches.

He is scared.

"The candle," Olivia says sharply, locking eyes with her husband.

“The heat of the flame, the smell of the wax. There was no smoke when I blew it out; did you notice? Brilliant—it was an utterly brilliant display.”

From the corner of her vision, Olivia sees many in the audience nodding. It seems they favored the candle demonstration too.

But Oscar just stands there, dumbfounded, his lips parted slightly.

It was only a newspaper article. It should have been innocent enough.

Olivia hadn't meant to snoop. On the contrary, it was Oscar—sipping cordials with the theater proprietor before tonight's show—who instructed Olivia to go in search of his small tin of wax. He uses it for all sorts of things: the dry patch on his bulbous nose, tidying the unruly lock of hair at the nape of his neck.

She quickly found the tin in the dressing room, among his combs and various salves. His diary of appointments lay there, too, a small leather-bound book denoting their upcoming appearances.

The corner of a cutout newspaper article protruded from the diary. Olivia gave it a passing glance, spotting the word, *witches*.

How curious. *Witches*? She pulled the article out.

It had been published just days before in one of Venice's better-known newspapers, and it discussed a perplexing incident: two ships had sunk very near Positano earlier that year, within hours of each other. Officials from Naples had spent months on the inquisition, finding no discernable cause.

Olivia agreed it was very odd. But odder still was the fact that Oscar had underlined the last paragraph: *Some blame the unexplained sinkings on the fabled “sea witches” of Amalfi. Known for their lush red hair, tempestuous spirits, and most notably, their power over the ocean, legend has it these women possess great wealth and impossibly good fortune . . .*

She might have read on, if not for the sound of footsteps outside the dressing room. Quickly, she returned the article to Oscar's diary, then she delivered his tin of wax, saying nothing about what she'd found.

Now that Olivia has deviated from the script, it takes Oscar a moment to recall his next line. “Wh-why, thank you,” he stammers, bowing stiffly. “Shall I perform one final demonstration?”

She responds as she's supposed to, glad she could recite her lines in her sleep if needed. She's distracted, still thinking about that article and those witches. And Positano—what's that all about? Oscar has never so much as mentioned the town, nor the Amalfi Coast. Does he intend to uproot them and move south? It would have been nice for him to ask Olivia her thoughts on the matter, whether she desired to move elsewhere at all.

Or maybe, she thinks, I should give him the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps he mentioned Positano before the accident and I simply don't remember. Perhaps the error is mine.

She touches her wrist again, pressing on the sore, protruding bone. The doctors did not set it correctly after the accident, and, especially in cooler weather, it tends to stiffen and ache.

The accident happened the night of her and Oscar's wedding. She'd been leaning against a third-story banister at the country villa where they'd married, admiring the stars sprinkling the sky. Suddenly, the banister gave way. Olivia plummeted to the ground.

Oscar makes much of the fact that he still suffers nightmares, plagued by what he saw, and heard, that night: His new wife tumbling through the darkness. The crack of bone on pavement. The blood seeping from the back of her head—"bright as a poppy flower," he says—and the grit digging into his palms as he knelt, despondent, over her.

And the *solitude*: they'd been married in a private ceremony, no family or guests, surrounded only by fireflies. Oscar says he felt so alone that night, with no one to help cart his new wife to the hospital.

So vivid are his descriptions that Olivia sometimes begins to sweat, to shake, as fragments of the incident take shape in her mind: the whoosh of air through her curls as she plummeted to the ground. The sudden smell of copper all around her. Oscar's childlike cries. The heavy, cool weight of the wedding band on her left ring finger.

Despite her amnesia, these unwelcome recollections seem immune to whatever afflicts her, whatever has taken all her other memories.

Though they've discussed the accident at length, they don't talk much about the before-days. Olivia knows she was abandoned by her parents at a young age and sent to an orphanage outside of Venice. After adolescence, she began working at the orphanage as a seamstress, sewing clothing for the children. She met Oscar one afternoon while visiting a

textile shop in the city; their romance was a whirlwind, he tells her, and they could hardly stand a day apart. They married only months after meeting.

These particulars are nice to know, but Olivia wants more. She has asked Oscar well-meaning questions about her old demeanor, her quirks and disposition. But when she does, Oscar always begins to weep. “It hurts too much to talk about who you were before your amnesia,” he says. “I will always grieve that version of Olivia.”

Still, he has shared a few things: The old Olivia, having spent so much time around children, was not nearly as uptight. She relished parties too—what a change from the orphanage!—and she used to be more enthusiastic in the bedroom.

Despite Oscar’s taciturn ways, Olivia cannot deny it: after the accident, he doted on her with a tenderness she’ll always remember. He brushed her hair, changed her bedpan, brought her needlework and retaught her, stitch by stitch, how to sew. After she recovered, when she found herself frustrated with Oscar, she reminded herself how well he’d cared for her.

She knows her accident was hard on him. Sometimes, she even pities him.

But always, in the back of her mind, a thought nags at her: *I am the one who fell. I am the one who lost my memory. Who should be pitying whom here?*

As the audience eagerly waits, Oscar withdraws a small black pouch from his pocket. It is time for his last trick. The crowd leans forward as one, their seats creaking beneath them.

He shows the audience that the pouch is empty, even squeezes it in his hand. Then, after the requisite pause, Oscar places his fingers to his throat.

Suddenly, two tiny, furry red ears pop out of the black pouch. Next, a pair of beady black eyes. Then a wet black nose.

It’s a baby red fox.

The crowd coos as Oscar grabs the little cub by the scruff of his neck and takes him out of the bag. He sets the cub on the stage floor, and the crowd waits. There’s no telling what a wild animal will do; Oscar will be

as surprised as any of them, which is part of the fun. Might the fox cub sit nicely for them all, or sniff his way offstage, or even give Oscar's shoe a little bite?

He does none of these things. Instead, the fox hobbles his way to Olivia, lying down at her feet. At once, he closes his eyes and begins to doze.

Olivia cannot resist. She reaches down, picks up the little cub, hugs him to her chest. His fur is the softest thing she has ever felt, and his moist breath tickles the skin at her throat.

She will take him home, she decides. She will never part with him.

The show is almost over. In the glow of the footlights, Oscar thanks his audience with the same scripted acknowledgment he makes at the end of every show. But the crowd isn't watching Oscar, much less listening to him. They're more interested in Olivia, the way she clutches the helpless baby fox to her breast.

It's nearly time for the curtain to come down. Oscar steps closer to Olivia, mere inches away, and she can see the tense, taut muscles twitch in his throat. She will pay for her insolence tonight; he will begin berating her the moment the green curtain drops.

A click as before, indicating the propmen in the wings have begun to lower the curtain. In her peripheral vision, Olivia sees it coming down, an inch at a time.

But suddenly it stops. The curtain has snagged.

This was not scripted, not planned. Oscar turns to Olivia, his eyes screaming, *Are you behind this too?* But she shakes her head. She isn't. Really, she isn't.

A hush falls over the house as the audience waits, wondering what this means; is it a special performance for them and them alone? Oscar has been known to pull surprises every so often.

Oscar is visibly mortified. He's a regimented performer, terrible at improvising. He needs a sequence and a script and oversized marks on the stage floor. He eyes the curtain, still snagged. He doesn't know what to do with his hands, his feet. He can pull foxes from pouches and turn hats into peonies, but he knows nothing about pulleys and ropes.

Olivia can feel the heat coming off him—he is outright feverish! But she quite likes this mishap, this change in routine. For once, it is something new. She purses her lips, even throws a coquettish glance at the

couple who was eyeing her earlier. Just for fun.

As for Oscar, he cannot handle it any longer. He looks as though he might melt under the heat of these gazes, these damned lights. He bows awkwardly to the crowd and scoots his way offstage.

Olivia stands alone now. She begins to laugh, and her jostling awakens the cub in her arms. The fox looks out over the crowd, blinking curiously. A few brave audience members begin to clap. They're pleased she hasn't run off the stage with her mortified husband.

Olivia is not quite ready to go. If anything, she sees an opportunity to further entertain her audience. They paid good money to be here, didn't they?

With one hand, Olivia unclips a gold satin bow from her plaited hair. As her braid unravels, she tilts forward, letting her curls tumble into the dip between her breasts. Then she clips the bow to a tuft of fur on the cub's scruffy chest.

Her baby fox now boasts a resplendent gold bow tie.

It is not magic, nor a grand gesture of any kind, but the audience cheers nonetheless. Olivia and her fox have made quite the charming encore.

The applause goes on. Some in the audience stand and wave, hoping to catch her attention. Olivia locks eyes with as many people as she can, as riveted by them as they are by her. She finds herself wondering about their lives—their children, illnesses, affairs.

For the first time, Oscar is not directing her gaze. She can look wherever she likes.

She hopes the curtain never descends.

But it does, eventually. After a few moments, the heavy fabric unsnags and begins to lower, veiling Olivia inch by inch. By the time the bottom edge of the velvet brushes the stage floor, the crowd is roaring.

She has never heard anything like it.

“What the hell do you think you're doing?” Oscar hisses the moment Olivia joins him backstage. Stagehands skitter around them, sweeping the floor and gathering melted-down candles. “You stood off your mark again.”

She gawks at him, briefly wondering what she sees in him. “The

wing lights were blinding me—I couldn't see.”

“You know right where the mark is,” he snaps. “Besides, you only need to see me. My cues.” He narrows his eyes. “And the script, you—”

They're interrupted by the theater's proprietor, who rushes toward them with a toothy grin. His cheeks are flushed, his shirt sweaty in the armpits. “My God,” he begins. “I've never seen a crowd so rapt. Mrs. Van Hoff, the way you handled the flub with the curtain, it was—”

“Enough,” Oscar interrupts. He glares at the proprietor. “Make sure the pulley is fixed before tomorrow.”

Olivia keeps quiet. Tomorrow's finale, dubbed *The Fatalist's Fête*, will be their largest show ever. La Fenice will install extra chairs in the auditorium and permit standing guests in the boxes too. It will be the theater's highest attendance to date, well over a thousand.

It will be Oscar's greatest feat thus far too: he intends to conjure a white stallion inside a glass box. Only Olivia and the theater's staff know of his plans.

Now, Olivia rubs the fox cub between his ears, vaguely wondering what she and Oscar will do with a horse.

The proprietor turns to her. “I hear congratulations are in order. Your wedding anniversary is tomorrow?”

She nods. Oscar must have told him earlier. “Yes, thank you.” She wonders if Oscar told him it is the anniversary of her accident too—if he told the man about the accident at all.

“We'll have to make a toast,” he goes on, “at the soirée tonight.”

The soirée. Olivia had all but forgotten about it. It is to be an exclusive, more intimate event than tomorrow's post-finale party. Which, honestly, is worse.

She fights a pang of disappointment. Though she does deeply desire a circle of friends, she finds parties loathsome. She's never sure what to do with her hands, she's repulsed by picked-at canapés, and she still has not learned the art of joining other people's conversations.

Tonight, she'd rather go home and build a box for her fox, whom she has decided to call Marmalade, for his bright-orange color.

Alas, her husband would never permit her absence.

Next to Olivia, Oscar's flush has faded. The mention of the party has both revived and calmed him. The night may be redeemed, after all. And if nothing else, Oscar loves a good party.

The soirée is close by—their carriage must only cross one bridge—at a Gothic palazzo tucked tightly between two canals. Olivia leaves Marmalade in the carriage, bundled in blankets. A light snow continues to fall, but the ground is warm and the snowflakes melt instantly. As they approach the entry, the wet pavement glows with the reflection of light from inside the house. The windows are adorned with English ivy, and a doorman greets them with a tray of pale-pink champagne and sugared apricots.

Inside, the party is well underway. A large spread has been laid out in the frescoed hall: capon and boiled potatoes, an assortment of salami, ginger cake, and an enormous crock of *cioccolato caldo*.

Oscar disappears into a throng of admirers. As Olivia meanders through the house alone, she fights the familiar sense of aimlessness that accompanies her at every party. She finds a drink and decides to make for the art gallery at the back of the house. But as she walks past a group of women standing in the hall, she overhears the word *Positano*.

She stops, bending down and pretending to fix the buckle on her shoe. A few women are discussing the same article she found in Oscar's diary, exchanging their thoughts and opinions on the ship sinkings.

Suddenly, Olivia feels a hand on her shoulder. "Are you—oh! You are Olivia Van Hoff!" The women have halted their conversation, their attention now squarely on her.

"Indeed," she says, standing to face them. Perhaps this is how one joins a conversation—by feigning a minor fashion emergency until someone else says hello.

"What do *you* think?" one of the women asks. There are three of them, all wearing empire-waist gowns in wintry hues, silk shawls, and tasseled hats. "You've seen the news about the sinkings, surely?"

Olivia nods, delighted to have someone to talk to, but still she glances over her shoulder, ensuring Oscar isn't nearby. He isn't fond of her trying to make friends. "You cannot trust anyone," he often reminds her. "The people you think are befriending you—they just envy you, or desire you, or mean to steal from you."

"And," he recently added, "I don't want anyone asking questions."

Questions about his magic? What a ridiculous statement. How could she answer anything when she, herself, doesn't know the secret to his

work?

“Perplexing, indeed,” she now says to the women. She wants to remain amenable, easy to engage. “I wonder if the weather was to blame?”

The women shake their heads in unison. “No,” one of them says. “It was a perfectly clear day.” She toys with an expensive-looking bangle on her wrist. “I’ve never believed the claims about witches near Positano, nor the existence of witchcraft at all, but maybe the author of the article is right. Maybe those strange women *are* to blame.”

“Undoubtedly,” her friend says. It’s the woman right next to Olivia, the one who tapped her on the shoulder. “I’ve always believed the rumors. I hear some of them live in extravagant villas—but of course! I would, too, if I spent my time sinking ships full of jewels.”

Olivia wonders if this is why Oscar cut the article from the paper. Though they bought a lovely house only months ago, already he has begun talking about something larger, something grander. Is he interested in buying another villa, something seaside?

“No matter who they are,” the woman goes on, “I hear they come by their fortune in terrible, violent ways. The article, I think, is proof of it.” As she continues to fiddle with her bracelet, the other women lean in, effusively complimenting her on its heft, its gleam.

“Won’t find a bangle like that in Positano,” the third woman says. “Villas or not, that village is a provincial place, as dull as it gets.” She smirks and throws back her glass of cream and cognac.

The women banter for another minute or two, then the braceleted woman excuses herself with practiced ease, leaving a pungent curl of perfume in her wake. She’s off to find another drink, and—she whispers under her breath—maybe a man for the night.

The moment she’s gone, her two friends lean in close to one another. “I’m embarrassed to even be seen with her,” the nearest one says. “She’s slept with half of Venice, dare I say.”

Seemingly indifferent to Olivia’s presence, the other woman nods. “Yes, and I’ve never seen a bracelet so hideous in all my life.”

Olivia listens for a moment as they volley insults back and forth. At once, she decides she wants nothing to do with them. But she does not know how to properly excuse herself: the drink in her hand is full, and no one stands nearby, bidding for her attention.

Oscar’s warning echoes in her ears. *You cannot trust anyone.* Olivia

hates to admit it, but perhaps he's right.

Awkwardly, with no finesse at all, she simply turns and walks away.

The art gallery is at the back of the house. Either Olivia is the first to have found it, or no one else is in the mood for art.

She walks slowly from painting to painting, waiting for something to catch her attention. She's less interested in the artists' subjects and more intrigued by their choice of medium. Watercolor is her favorite: it's the most defiant of all mediums. The artist may do what he pleases with his brush, but he cannot control where the pigment drips and bleeds.

Ahead, a painting catches Olivia's eye. It is undeniably watercolor, all reds and blues. She steps closer, settling her gaze on it.

It's a painting of three women, standing shoulder to shoulder at the very edge of a cliff, looking out over a tiny, bustling village. They are so close to the edge one woman's toe is hooked over the rocky lip of it. In the distance, the artist has painted a calm aquamarine sea.

They are barefoot, all of them wearing simple white frocks. It takes Olivia a moment to realize the artist has not painted their dresses white; rather, he painted everything else around them, so the dresses simply reveal the blank canvas on which he worked.

Olivia chews her fingernail, wondering what the artist hoped to convey with this negative-space technique. Nevertheless, it is beautifully ironic, how the women appear clothed from afar, yet up close they do not wear so much as a single brushstroke.

She studies the rest of the painting. The women stand so close that locks of their hair intertwine in the breeze. The artist has deftly infused the image with intimacy and devotion; Olivia feels sure that if one woman slipped over the edge, the others would go after her.

This stirs her far more than her conversation with the women in the corridor moments ago. This is the kind of closeness, and loyalty, she seeks.

As she studies the painting, the watercolors begin to swirl and blur in Olivia's vision. Teal bleeds into white, red into orange.

It takes Olivia a moment to realize she is weeping.

She wipes her cheek on the sleeve of her gown and composes herself. When she turns her attention back to the painting, Olivia notices that all

three women have vibrant red hair. They wear necklaces, too, but they're like something a child might make, stranded with seashells and coral fragments and pumice rocks. No gems or gold to be found on them.

A strange sensation tugs at her, like she is on the cusp of remembering something. Her heart thrums harder—she can feel it in her tender wrist, the rhythmic pulsing—and then her eyes fall on the tiny inscription in the bottom right-hand corner of the canvas. *Le streghe del mare di Positano*.

The witches of Positano.

She gasps, touching her fingers to her lips. Quickly, she peers over her shoulder. The gallery remains empty.

She delicately removes the painting from its hook on the wall and turns it over, pleased to see a tiny, faded envelope affixed to the back. An artist's note.

She withdraws the paper inside, reading it quickly. In the note—dated several years ago—the artist identifies the three women in the painting: his sister and two of her friends. *Three of the gentlest women I know*, he writes. *They are friends to everyone in the village, greatly beloved by all. Yet amongst themselves, they share an impenetrable closeness I can't help but admire.*

Olivia muses on her conversation with the women in the corridor, how easily they'd accused these "witches" of working in violent, terrible ways. They'd also called Positano "dull" and "provincial." This painting, though—it tells a different story. Here, the village looks lovely: there is a tiny chapel with a steeple and a bell, and a market in the town square, scattered with children and steaming kettles. The sea witches keep vigil over it all.

There seems nothing dull about any of it. Not to Olivia, anyway. She decides to dismiss everything the women said earlier, especially in light of the way they talked about one another.

The edges of Olivia's lips turn upward: if Oscar does indeed plan to take them on a trip to this seaside village—or even uproot them to move there permanently—she won't be disappointed. They can still travel to his magic shows throughout the Continent, after all.

But her smile is short-lived. She knows Oscar well enough by now. He adores life in the city, the revelry of it. He'd choose a masquerade over the market any day.

Which, yet again, leaves Olivia confused about the article. She still doesn't understand why Oscar cut it from the paper.

She fears he has something altogether different in mind.

Oscar can hardly keep himself upright as he puts on his pajamas that night. He's drunker than Olivia has seen him in months.

The clock has just ticked past midnight. Olivia wonders if he will wish her a happy anniversary.

"So much money!" he says to her instead, snickering as he falls onto the bed. "What a run! We can install terrazzo in the hall at last. And tomorrow, with the horse, will only serve to bolster us even further . . ."

He trails off, too inebriated to go on, and begins to doze face down, sprawled in the center of the bed.

Finally, Olivia thinks.

She goes to the foyer, where she left Marmalade wrapped in a coverlet. He hasn't crawled out of his blanket, though he could have easily done so; he seems very well-behaved for a young and wild fox. Olivia feels bonded to him already.

"Let's make you a box," she tells him. "Something with plenty of space for you to stretch and sleep." She will line it with linens too—the softest she can find in the house.

Olivia has no idea how to build a box, though she's determined to try. Oscar has a cupboard at the back of the house where he keeps a variety of household tools, and Olivia reasons that if she can find some wood and a hammer and nails, she can probably figure it out.

As she passes through the kitchen, she spots something even better—a fruit crate. Why hadn't she thought of that? She removes a few pears from the bottom of the crate and happily shows Marmalade his new box. But he seems more interested in the set-aside pears, so Olivia cuts one into segments and puts them on a plate for him.

He devours his dinner at once, then eyes another pear sitting on the counter. He attempts to jump, but his little legs won't carry him far enough.

"Oh," Olivia says sweetly, "you aren't quite as well-behaved as I thought." She tucks him under her arm. "I'll need to find a lid for your box, won't I?" She hates the idea of latching him inside, but it seems a

necessity when she can't always be with him in the house. She can only imagine the mess Marmalade might cause if left alone with a kitchen full of fruit.

To the tool cupboard they go. Marmalade's breath smells like pears, and Olivia kisses him on the nose.

The cupboard is near the door leading to the garden. Oscar is always in and out of the cupboard, doing God knows what. It isn't as though he does much in the way of house repairs, and she's never seen him with a hammer.

The cupboard door, to Olivia's surprise, is locked. She frowns, slightly peeved.

She recalls that Oscar went to the cupboard when they got home, after the party. Actually, now that she thinks about it, he always goes to the cupboard after his shows. Well, the key must be somewhere around the house, then.

She tells Marmalade to keep quiet as they tiptoe back to the bedroom. In the darkness, she searches Oscar's bedside table for a key, and then a few of his drawers. Nothing. Marmalade, meanwhile, has begun to chew at her hair. He's bored with this whole undertaking.

Oscar's purple-lined tailcoat is crumpled on the floor; he was too drunk to hang it up when they got home. *Hmm*, Olivia wonders. She bends over, reaches her hand into an inner pocket of the coat, and feels the cool, satisfying touch of a bronze key against her fingertips.

She meanders back to the cupboard, key clutched in her palm. She's in no real hurry, even stops for a drink of water on the way.

The key slides easily into the lock, and Olivia peers inside. If she can just find a hammer and nails, that will be a good start. The moonlight seeping through the garden door illuminates the inside of the cupboard. Strangely, though, there are fewer things inside than she expected: a few of Oscar's old top hats and a cane. The interior smells like tobacco, and she spots a few amber vials too.

She does not, however, find any tools.

Well, this doesn't make any sense at all. She bends down, spotting a small red box pushed to the back of a shelf. It's roughly six inches wide and two inches deep. She thinks she's seen it before—yes, yes she has. She's seen it in Oscar's dressing room, before shows. She always thought it was his shaving kit. But why would he keep his shaving kit here, locked

away?

Curious, she withdraws the box and lifts the lid. Inside, she finds a few loose sheets of paper. Each bears a drawing of some kind. She takes the pages out, sets the box down, and sifts through them.

The first drawing is a peony with pastel-pink petals. Olivia has seen just such a flower—earlier that night, in fact.

The second drawing is a candle, its wick aflame.

The third, a blue-and-white porcelain dish.

The fourth, a bottle of wine, its label hailing from far away.

By the time Olivia nears the bottom of the stack, she's terribly excited. Her hands have gone numb, and a buzzing sound hums in her ears. These drawings, they depict everything Oscar conjured tonight.

When she gets to the last sheet of paper in the stack, Olivia already knows what will be drawn on it. She clutches Marmalade more tightly to her chest, then turns the last sketch to the moonlight.

It is a baby red fox sitting on his haunches, his fluffy tail tucked up against him.

This box, she thinks. This box is his secret.

Well, this is awfully fun. She decides she will experiment, momentarily. The lid for Marmalade's fruit crate can wait.

Olivia inspects the rest of the cupboard to see what she might have missed. She finds a small sleeve of colored pastels and an envelope bearing the word *Finale*.

Curious, she opens the envelope, sifting through the pages within. There are images of baby bassinets and miniature umbrellas and a dish of *budino* custard. And, as Oscar has mentioned in days past, a white stallion inside a glass box. It must be everything he has planned for tomorrow's grand finale, *The Fatalist's Fête*.

Toward the back of the shelf she finds several discarded, crumpled-up pages. Olivia reaches for them, careful not to bump Marmalade's head on the shelf as she bends into the cupboard. She smooths out the first drawing, using her palm to iron the wrinkles in the paper.

It is also a sketch—a pile of coins. Hundreds of them. Oscar must have spent hours on the drawing, but given that he crumpled up the paper and tossed it aside, Olivia knows the magic box did not perform for him as he wished.

Olivia reaches for another discarded drawing, smooths it out.

Her mouth drops open.

It is a redheaded woman, wearing a sheer cotton shift. She holds a large abalone shell. In the margins, Oscar has made a note: *How to conjure her powers, her wealth?*

It now makes perfect sense. Oscar has no plans to move them to Positano, nor has he any interest in ship sinkings. This is about money. This is about the redheaded women and their wealth.

Oscar wants to conjure a witch.

As she holds the drawing in her hands, Olivia spots another scribble in the margins: *Outward vs. inward?* She pauses, dwelling on the meaning of this.

She remembers the moment Marmalade popped his little head from the black pouch at that evening's show. Oscar had drawn, and thus conjured, a little red fox—the *outward*. But he couldn't have dictated the animal's preference for pears, or his docile mood. The *inward*.

The witches too. Oscar must believe the rumors of their existence—or he's desperate enough to experiment. Regardless, while he knows how to conjure their red hair and their abalone shells, he doesn't know how to manifest what lies within: Their prowess, their aptitude. The invisible peculiarities that have made them legendary.

Yes, there is clearly a limit to this magic box's abilities. It does many things, but it does not do everything. She thinks of how often Oscar has lamented the fact that he cannot conjure money or jewels. Perhaps the box has principles, or merely preferences. Either way, it seems Oscar cannot circumvent them.

Olivia suddenly feels very tired. She situates everything as she found it, even crumpling the discarded pages and tossing them to the back of the shelf. But because she is frustrated, she tosses one of them too hard; it lodges between a pair of panels at the back of the cupboard.

Blindly, in the near dark, Olivia reaches to dislodge it. But as she does so, one of the panels gives way, and her fingers brush against something else—it feels like another envelope—behind the panel.

Frowning, she withdraws it.

This envelope, too, has something written on it: the month and day of their wedding.

Something for our anniversary? she wonders. Perhaps this is a gift, a ticket for a holiday in a faraway place, something Oscar has nobly kept

hidden from her. She grapples with indecision for a moment: Should she peek? Or return it to its hiding spot?

The envelope feels dusty, though. Like it has been behind the cupboard's panel for a very long while.

She slides her finger beneath the unsealed flap, withdrawing a single sheet of paper.

She turns it over, brings it close.

She cries out, drops the drawing.

It is *her*.

Olivia sinks to her knees as the drawing floats to the floor, landing face up in front of her. She cannot bear to touch it, to pick it up. The level of detail in the image frightens her: her skin is bruised, her hair disheveled. A halo of blood seeps from her temple, and her left wrist is bent at an odd and ugly angle.

It is how Olivia imagines she looked moments after her fall.

She can hardly breathe, cannot think, cannot—

Suddenly she remembers what he said recently, when they last talked about her desire to make friends. *I don't want anyone asking questions*, he'd said.

He hadn't been referring to his magic.

It seems as impossible as it is obvious. Her amnesia. Their supposed wedding, void of guests. And Oscar's aversion to conversations about her past.

There was no past. There *is* no past. Olivia did not exist before one year ago.

Olivia is one of Oscar's conjurings.

That night, Olivia does not sleep.

Instead, she sketches by candlelight in the drawing room. Next to her are the magical red box, the pastels, countless sheets of blank paper.

And Marmalade, asleep in his lidless box, whiskers twitching as he dreams.

When they arrive at Teatro La Fenice the next evening, Oscar is on edge. He's complained of a headache since he woke and a sore throat too. He

thinks it has something to do with the fox.

“We will need to re-home him,” he tells Olivia, “if he continues to shed like this every day.”

Olivia doesn’t waste her breath on a reply.

If last night’s crowd was spirited, tonight’s is downright riotous. The theater staff cannot manage to quiet the crowd, wound up as they are, and there’s a mess of sticky, broken glassware that needs to be swept up in the main aisle too. The proprietor tells Oscar the show will need to begin a few minutes late. This does nothing for Oscar’s already-tense mood.

Unfortunately, Olivia has further bad news for him. “I was sick earlier,” she tells him a few moments before they go onstage. “I am feeling well now, but in the event I’m plagued with another bout of it . . . well, I just thought you should know.”

He cocks his head. “Something you ate?”

She nods. “At the party, yes. You know heavy food doesn’t always sit well with me.”

“You’ll need to figure out a way to keep it in,” he says coolly. “It is the finale, after all.”

One of the stagehands nods to Olivia. It’s time for her to go on. She makes straight for her *x*, lining the tips of her toes exactly where she should. She will recite her lines word for word too.

She waits for the curtain to rise.

It has always felt strange to Olivia, extended show runs like this: two weeks of the same performance, night after night. The arrangement is the same, and the choreography too. What changes are the objects Oscar conjures. They are usually as much of a surprise to Olivia as they are for the audience, which contributes to the overall effect and appeal of the show.

But tonight, nothing is a surprise, and when Oscar transforms a woman’s playbill into a baby bassinet, Olivia feigns astonishment. When he pulls a miniature umbrella from a tin of tobacco, she parts her lips, mouth agape with fake delight.

The show, for all intents and purposes, moves along flawlessly. Soon, there are only two demonstrations left.

Next comes the porcelain dish of chocolate budino. Olivia is looking

forward to this trick: Oscar has conjured food in the past, and he always offers it to her onstage. Chocolate budino is her favorite, and she's not actually feeling sick at all. If anything, she's hungry.

The custard-like budino quivers on its plate as Oscar holds it up to show the audience. After they "ooh" and "aah," he pulls a spoon from his back pocket and faces Olivia. He plunges the spoon into the custard, carves off a bite, and deposits it onto Olivia's tongue. His neck reddens.

He thinks we will make love later, Olivia muses.

A member of the theater staff rushes onto the stage and retrieves the soiled dishware. There is only one trick left.

"Tell me, Mrs. Van Hoff," Oscar says. "Which demonstration have you found most captivating this evening?"

Olivia replies exactly how she is supposed to, and relief crosses his face.

"Why, thank you. Shall I perform one final demonstration?"

"You shall," she says.

Together, they wait for the crowd's roaring to reach its crescendo and then die off.

But suddenly, Olivia throws a hand to her mouth, puffs out her cheeks a little.

Without waiting to see how Oscar reacts, she rushes offstage. He will think she is vomiting, which buys her a little time—a minute or two at most. She heads straight for their dressing room and goes to Oscar's leather travel bag, locating the magical red box in a side pocket.

Quickly, she sifts through the pages and swaps the bottommost drawing—the stallion inside the glass box—with her own drawing, which she has had tucked against her breast all evening. The paper is warm and damp from her skin. She doesn't have time to see if this affected the drawing, but she hopes the magical box works in her favor and honors her intentions regardless.

She returns to the stage, lets Oscar see her wipe her chin. "Better," she whispers to him under her breath. His shoulders sink in relief. "All better."

In the awkward interim marking Olivia's absence, it seems Oscar has told some very terrible jokes. He's losing the crowd; they've begun to chat among themselves.

Finally, Oscar withdraws the black velvet pouch. Stuck to its edge is

a tiny orange hair, left behind by Marmalade as he emerged from the pouch last night. Olivia imagines him in the back of the carriage now, waiting for her. He will want another pear, the little devil.

Oscar flutters the pouch in front of him, puts his fingers to his throat. At once, there is a deafening, cracking sound, not unlike the shattering of glass. Olivia cannot help it—she squeezes her eyes shut and flinches so abruptly she nearly slips. She hears screams from the audience; they, too, are startled by whatever has just happened.

Olivia opens her eyes.

A glass box has indeed appeared. It is about twice the size of a travel chest and enclosed on all sides. Its seams are tight.

Inside the box, Oscar is on all fours. Stunned, he crouches, looking down at his hands and knees planted firmly on the glass floor of the box.

He peers through the glass, eyeing the crowd. They have risen to their feet and are chanting, “Van Hoff! Van Hoff!” They believe this to be his greatest act ever: he has not, in all his time onstage, performed an act on himself.

It worked, Olivia thinks. Not only that, but the glass is thicker than she expected. She wonders what it will take to shatter it—if it can be shattered at all.

She moves quickly, withdrawing a second piece of paper from her breast. She steps to the glass and slams the drawing against it for Oscar to see.

He gapes at her. Both Olivia in the flesh and the drawing of her from a year ago.

Now, Oscar knows all he needs to know.

The seconds are ticking. Olivia takes the depiction of herself as bruised and broken and approaches one of the flickering gaslights at the edge of the stage. She slips it into the crystal lamp casing, letting the flames devour it.

“How will he get out?” Olivia overhears someone asking in the front row. “Did his magic misfire?”

“We will have to wait and find out!” her companion replies, fanning herself with her playbill.

Meanwhile, the theater staff stand by, visibly displeased; they were promised a horse.

Olivia slips offstage as Oscar attempts to lean back on his heels in the

glass box. He has begun to pant, panic setting in.

She rushes again to the dressing room and snags the magical red box, tucking it tight against her chest. She slips down a darkened hallway, out the back door of the theater, and into the waiting carriage.

Marmalade lets out a little chirp as Olivia hops in next to him. Her travel case is on the carriage floor, just as she left it. She stuffs the magic box inside, next to a ream of blank paper and the sleeve of pastel chalks. A few drawings wait at the ready, too, things she sketched that afternoon. Simple frocks, and a necklace strung with seashells.

She'd been tempted, very briefly, to sketch an image of herself next to three redheaded women, with Positano and the seaside beyond. But how cruel it is to conjure another person solely for the sake of one's own needs or enjoyment. There is no love, and certainly no loyalty, in that.

"Go," she tells the driver. "Quickly. To the stagecoach station."

"But, Mrs. Van Hoff, wh—"

"Go," she demands. She doesn't have the time for this; if he doesn't heed her directions, she will take Marmalade and make for the canal. There are gondolas everywhere.

With a sigh, he slaps the reins against the horse and they're off. After a few blocks, they pass the palazzo where tonight's after-party is to be held. Its large, spiral staircase is elegantly lit, like something out of a fairy tale. Porters rush up and down, bearing flowers and carafes of wine. A fountain beside the staircase shimmers with floating candles.

It is all very lovely, Olivia thinks, but it is not for her.

Marmalade nudges her with his cool, damp nose. He's hungry. "All right, all right," she tells him. She reaches into the bag and opens the lid of the box. She removes the drawings already inside—the bassinet, the umbrella, the budino.

"What will it be?" she whispers to her fox pup. "Another pear?" He blinks at her; he doesn't care. He only wants a treat. "Let's try a raspberry," she says.

She sketches a berry with the vermilion pastel chalk. Then, shielding the box from the driver's view, she drops the sketch inside and touches the fingers of her left hand to her throat.

A tiny raspberry appears on her lap. Marmalade snatches it before she can even hand it to him. "So greedy," she admonishes.

They've arrived at the station. Olivia and Marmalade exit the

carriage; she wishes the driver *addio*. He will undoubtedly return to La Fenice and reveal all that has happened.

Let him. By the time he makes it back to the theater, Olivia and her fox pup will be long gone.

She goes to the ticket window and inquires about southward routes. There are plenty of them. There is, in fact, a coach departing for Florence in eight minutes.

Olivia buys a ticket, finds her seat, and settles in. As she waits, she withdraws a piece of paper, sketching a whole heap of raspberries. She shows it to Marmalade. “There, you see?” She drops the sketch into the box.

As Marmalade eats, the carriage jolts forward. Olivia leans her head back and closes her eyes. She will not let herself mourn what has happened to her, the cruelty of Oscar’s decision to conjure her for his own selfish reasons. She thinks again of his crumpled-up drawings and his tiny, frustrated scribble: *outward vs. inward*.

He couldn’t have predicted this, could he?

Olivia wraps her arms tightly around herself, feeling her heart beat steadily against her rib cage.

She has all she needs.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

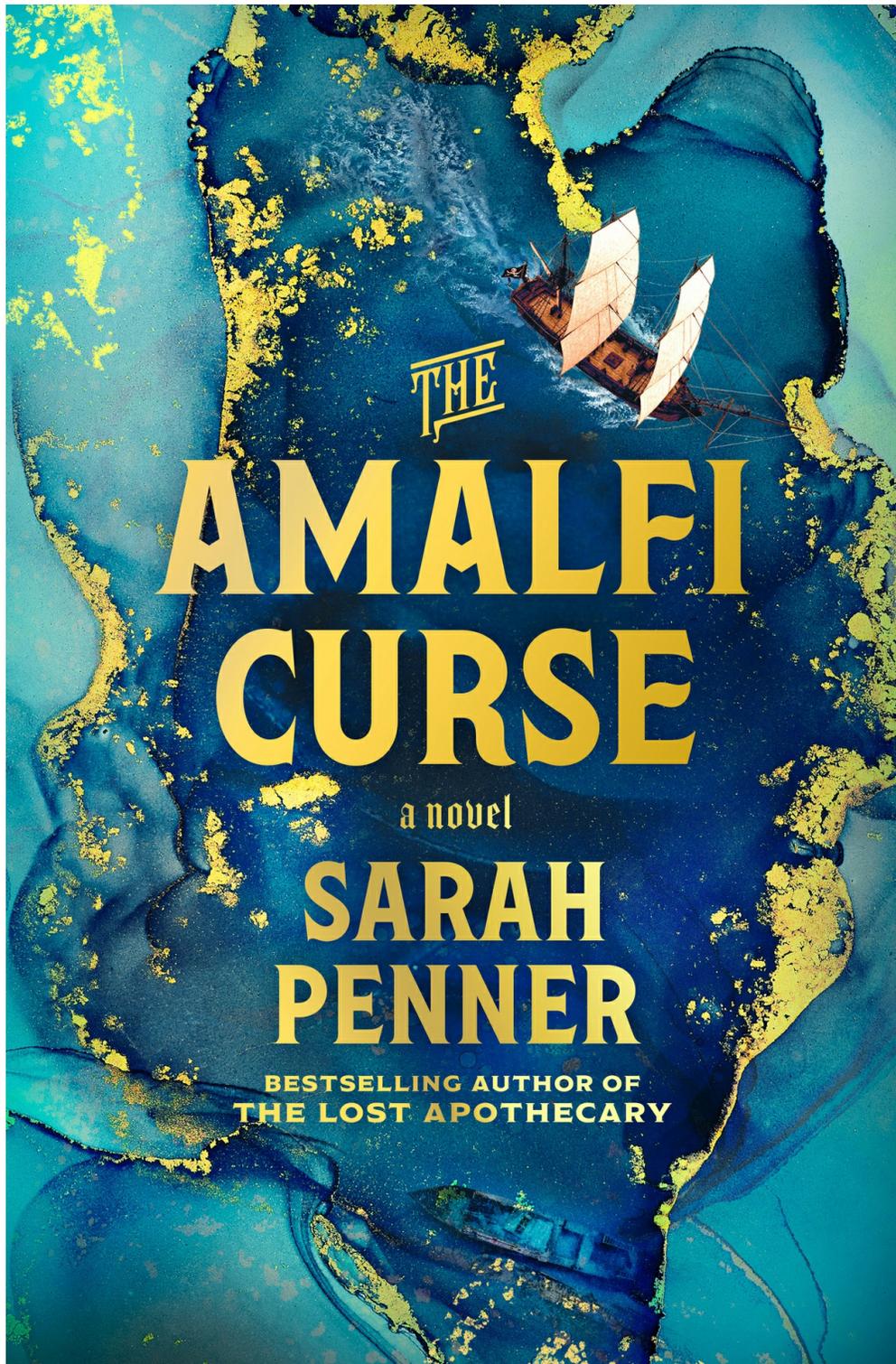


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Sarah Penner is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Lost Apothecary*, *The London Séance Society*, and *The Amalfi Curse*. Her books have been translated into more than forty languages. A graduate of the University of Kansas, Sarah spent thirteen years in corporate finance and now writes full-time. She enjoys hiking, yoga, and cooking, and also sits on the board of directors at her local animal shelter, Friends of Strays. Sarah and her husband, Marc, live in Florida.

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