

DAMASCENA  
the tale of roses and Rumi

a novel by  
Holly Lynn Payne

For Gracelyn Rose

and in memory of  
Trudi Mancia, who so loved the roses

#### A Note to The Reader:

The story of *Damascena* is a work of fiction inspired by the poet and Sufi teacher, Jalala-al-din "Mevlana" Rumi, the Afghan refugee born 800 years ago in the early 13th century, famous for his masterpiece collection of 27,500 love poems and his deep faith in the spirit world. The name Rumi had been given to Jalala-al-Din after he died in 1273; however, for the sake of modern readers, who know him primarily as Rumi, I refer to him as such throughout the manuscript.

The novel centers around two historical mysteries involving Rumi's beloved friend and spiritual companion, Shams of Tabriz, a controversial and elusive figure, from whom Rumi received the spiritual insights that made him famous. Rumi spent only three years in the presence of Shams, from the age of 37-39; however, his life changed forever as a result of Shams' tragic disappearance. Many theories exist: Rumi's own son killed Shams, Rumi's jealous disciples stabbed Shams outside Rumi's house, or Shams drowned in a well in Konya. To this day, nobody knows for sure, though several countries claim to be the resting place of Shams.

The second mystery, and perhaps the most significant inspiration for this book, involves an Afghan girl, believed to be the first influence on Rumi's profound faith. According to the tale, Mongols invaded and terrorized Balkh, Rumi's birthplace in what is now Afghanistan. Rumi's father insisted the family flee before the Mongols destroyed the city. On the day of their exodus, apparently young Rumi saw the beautiful girl praying, surrounded by Mongol soldiers. Nobody knows what happened to the girl, but those who have written about Rumi believe the power of her faith made an indelible impression on his heart. *Damascena* is a fictional continuation of the girl's family lineage and the spirit of Shams.

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And the day came  
when the risk to remain  
tight in a bud was more  
painful than the risk it  
took to blossom.

-Anais Nin

**PROLOGUE****Konya, Turkey 1270**

On the third day of spring, Jalal al-din Mevlana Rumi woke with a quiver in his stomach. He lay in bed, feeling heaviness in his heart, reluctant to visit the caravanserai. The sugar merchants had found a girl wrapped in a wool cloak. Her body had been charred. They had taken her for dead and called on *Mevlana* Rumi to perform the girl's funeral.

Rumi rose slowly from his bed and stepped into the triangle of light coming in from the window. He crept to his closet, hoping not to wake his wife when the wooden doors creaked on their hinges. She was still a beauty at 40. Her thick hair was dark and shone so much in the morning light it looked like she had stepped out of the bathhouse—cheeks flushed, skin dewy, lips full and turned up in a half smile. He regretted that she tasted pleasure only in her dreams these days, and he had the impulse to go back to the bed, bend down and kiss her cheek when the words struck.

*Be silent*, he heard.

*Spring is here.  
The rose is dancing with its thorn  
Beauties have come from the invisible  
To call you home.*

He stood there, unable to move while the poem moved through his body and pounded him to the floor. He had no control over when the poetry would happen, like an invisible flood inside his house. It often made a mess of things—mostly his relationships.

He told his disciples it felt like a hard rain; and it had given him even more compassion for the earth.

He would have liked to remember this small poem. It spoke to him of something fragile that he could not name but wished to know. He drew in a deep breath and waited for more words but nothing came. And without speaking the poems aloud as he heard them, he would almost always forget, especially now at the age of sixty. Without Hosam or other disciples near him, the poems would go unrecorded. It was not as if he could write them all down himself; it was impossible to keep up with the torrent of poetry that had flooded him for the last ten years. The compulsion to write had become a sort of madness, and though he was relieved to stop today, he did not favor a funeral.

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Rumi savored the walk through the streets at this early hour. It was already unseasonably warm for March, and the spring sun had melted the snow on the high plain almost overnight. The heavy scent of the *igde* tree filled the air but did not override the smell of roses that perfumed the city and kept everyone in suspense. Not a gardener in Konya had seen their roses blossom yet. It was too early. Perhaps it was the earth's way of welcoming the girl to Konya's soil, making room for her.

*Beauties have come from the invisible to call you home.*

Fragments of the poem whirled in his head as he walked past the citadel on the western side of the city and followed the old city wall, toward Sultan Alaeddin Kaykobod's palace, its marble portal gleaming in the eastern light. He climbed the hill to

step inside the Alaeddin Camii, the old Arabic designed pillared mosque, where he prayed to know what the poem meant.

He stood under the forty-two antique columns supporting the mosque's huge wooden ceiling and touched his lips and limbs to the floor, feeling a knot in his stomach. He hoped the girl had not died in fear, but had anticipated her death as a chance to meet the Beloved. He had spent his lifetime teaching others to love God, not from fear or hope, but because of all the beauty in the world that is God. Tears ran down his cheeks when he considered the possibility that the girl did not understand this.

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Morning light poured through the rounded arched galleries of the caravanserai and across its open courtyard, where camels stood like golden statues tethered by long hemp ropes, their drivers against the walls, slumped and drooling, still asleep.

Rumi followed a group of small boys tending to the men just waking, delivering coffee in small white cups and tea in tulip glasses. The clanging of cups and small nickel saucers, teaspoons and sugar bowls, sounded like music. It was the first time in a decade that he had not come here seeking news of his beloved friend Shams. He missed the energy of the caravanserai and marveled at the distances these men had traveled, transporting sugar from Egypt, silk from Iraq, cinnamon and cumin from India. Stacks of silver candlesticks and chessboards carved from mother-of-pearl glinted in the early light.

A boy in a colorful wool cap carried a copper tray of fresh *simet*. He stared wide-eyed at Rumi and rushed toward him. "Fresh, fresh, *Mevlana*. You will like them very

much. My mother baked these this morning," obligating the old man to buy a stack of sesame rings. Rumi dug into his pocket and gave the boy a gold coin. He bit into the savory, ring-shaped pastry and thought he cracked a tooth. The *simet* had been over-baked, the sesame seeds toasted black but he swallowed it all and laughed.

"I am sorry it was a bit scorched. Is it bad?" the boy asked.

"No. Do not be sorry."

The boy stared at him, perplexed.

"It is a good reminder of all that burns and nourishes," Rumi said and took another *simet* from the boy's tray and continued through the square-shaped building, passing small shops, guest rooms, and elaborate baths. The whole place felt more familiar than his home, and he shared an intimate understanding of its details. He took in the sweetness of the air, filled with the scent of fresh hay and the smoke of mint tobacco bubbling up from the hookahs of men seated cross-legged on bright red and blue carpets. In his deepest despair, he always appreciated the companionship of the merchants, even if they had had no news to share about Shams of Tabriz. He still refused to believe his friend had died, but now the merchants delivered news of the legendary girl saint from the mountain monastery in Bulgaria. A girl whose body had been wrapped in black wool.

A young boy carrying a shiny samovar of Turkish tea nudged Rumi's leg.

"*Great Mevlana*," he whispered and pointed. "Go. They are waiting for you."

Rumi looked down at the boy who had already set the samovar on the ground and prostrated himself. Rumi bent down and kissed the boy's head then walked to the center of the inner courtyard where a cluster of merchants gathered around the sugar wagons.

They stopped talking and parted when Rumi appeared. Grown men, like the boy,



immediately prostrated themselves to the old man. Rumi gently tapped them on the shoulders, resisting the urge to sigh. He was not weary of their reverence; he only wished it were for God, not him. "Please stand," he said, gesturing for them to get up off the floor. "You will ruin your knees on me."

There was only one man among them who did not get on his knees. A man, his face unshaven, dirt-smearred, stared transfixed at the girl wrapped in black wool. His head was shaved and he wore the threads of what appeared to be a monk's dark brown robe that had been cut and frayed.

Rumi recognized him as a Christian without the arrogance of a crusader. He was moved by the monk's connection to the girl, as if they had known each other for lifetimes and shared the same heart. The monk trembled when Rumi stepped toward him.

"Do you know her?" Rumi asked, looking down at the body in black wool.

The monk lifted his head to the old man. His mouth opened but no words came. Rumi looked into his mouth and saw that his tongue had been partially cut out. His teeth had rotted and a foul smell wafted out of the blackened cavity.

Rumi met the monk with a gentle gaze.

"Did you travel with her?"

The monk nodded.

"Is she your sister?"

The monk looked wide-eyed, stricken.

"She is your Sister," Rumi concluded gently. Aren't we all spiritual siblings, he thought? "She is my Sister too," he said, and studied the girl, doubtful the monk had given her the cloak. The black wool cloak was not part of the order of any monastery,

only the Sufi orders, which was why Rumi, of all people, had been called to help with her funeral.

He lifted the black wool cloak, seeing the blistered skin on her left leg and arms, the oozing wounds on her hands and wrists. She was barefoot and the melted stubs of her left toes stuck out beneath the edges of the cloak like the nubs of wasted candles.

"My god," he muttered. He had never seen anyone burned as badly as the girl. Her hair was completely singed and lay in dark clumps under the cloak, as if she had been rolled in dead leaves and twigs. He was surprised the monk and the girl had made it through the Rhodope Mountains. Surely they knew the perils of such a journey. Death was a risk every man in the caravanserai had taken for the chance to explore the world and expand their minds, second to the thrill of scandal, intrigue and thievery along *ipek yolu*, the Silk Road that defined this greatly traveled trade route.

"Welcome to Konya, my sister," Rumi said, his voice soft yet reverberating. *May you be free of pain in your death*, he thought, feeling the rhythmic wave of words wash through him again. He lowered his head and sang aloud the poem he heard in Persian, a ballad of longing and separation. His voice mimicked the somber tone of the reed flute.

*Bahar amad bahar amad bahar-I mushkbar amad  
an yar amad an yar amad an yar-I burd-bar amad...*

*The spring has come, the spring has come,  
the spring with loads of musk has come,  
The friend has come, the friend has come,  
the burden-bearing friend has come.*

Not a merchant moved. They sat, enchanted, and listened. Rumi crouched to perform an ablution. He rolled up his sleeves and washed his hands and face in the basin of lemon water under the sugar wagon. He dipped his hand in the water and stroked the

girl's face, then withdrew it immediately and lifted it to the sky, hearing small gasps from the merchants who understood that he was about to perform *sema*. He did not apologize for making the sacred dance public. He pointed his left hand down to the earth then walked around the girl, slowly at first, until the rhythm of the poem altered his cadence and he was twirling around her like a child playing barefoot in the streets after a storm.

*Biya biya dildar-i man dildar-man  
dar a dar a dar kar-i man dar kar-i man  
Tu-i tu-i gulzar-i man gulzar-i man,  
bi-gu bigu asrar-i man asrar-i man*

*Come, come my beloved, my beloved,  
Enter, enter into my work, into my work!  
You are, you are my rose garden, my rose garden:  
Speak, speak my secrets, my secrets.*

The words came faster and when he circled the girl for the third and last time, the scent of a rose sweeter than he had ever smelled filled the air. It was the kind of scent that could intoxicate even the purest among them. The boys with the samovars and *simet* stumbled like old drunks, pawing at each other's bony shoulders for support.

The monk let out a cry. Not a man spoke except for Rumi.

"The girl does not need a funeral," he announced.

A young sugar merchant spoke out. His voice echoed in the stillness.

"But you gave us your word, *Mevlana*," he said, igniting uproar among the other merchants. Tea cups rattled. Fists pounded the dirt floor.

A man with a fiery beard stood—a Gallic Turk with a temper.

"Have mercy on your brothers who have been so kind to sit with the girl and keep her spirit company. For all we know it has already departed in your absence."

Someone booed. Rumi turned his left hand toward the ground. He had always

appreciated a good debate. Let them talk, he thought. The sugar merchant turned to him.

"Please help the girl, *Mevlana*."

"I can not help her with a funeral," Rumi said.

"What? You think your dancing is what she needs?"

"The girl does not need dancing or poems! She needs a funeral!"

"God is counting on you to deliver the girl's soul!"

Rumi nodded and bowed. "*Khamush!*" he whispered in Turkish. Quiet. He felt light-headed and drunken, slightly intoxicated by the scent of roses. He steadied himself against the sugar wagon, his gaze on the girl. The air flickered with anticipation.

"Take in her scent," he commanded. "Does it not console you?"

The merchants turned to each other, perplexed when Rumi lifted both hands and opened his palms to the sky, offering gratitude for the miracle he was witnessing: the girl had just then blinked and opened her eyes—revealing two luminous blue green pools that seemed to glow in the dim light. She was not dead. She did not need a funeral.

When the girl met his gaze, Rumi recognized her instantly as his final companion.

## [Part I]

The rose speaks of love silently, in a language known only to the heart.

- Unknown

## [One]

**Rila Mountains, Bulgaria 1256**

The girl was born beneath the shadow of a dance on the sixth day of the sixth month in the year 1256. Hers was the first birth in the monastery and it riled the young friar, Ivan Balev, to have to clean up her mother's blood. He stood inside the chapel door with a mop and bucket, fingers stiff with the chill of dawn, and he could hear, between the woman's screams, the laughter hissed by the monks who had assigned him this duty.

He was eighteen and assumed they wanted to test him, to see if his massive body stiffened when he saw her breasts. He felt nothing more than astonishment and disgust—not at her body, but at what her body could endure. He had known no man, other than Jesus Christ himself, who had suffered more, and he wondered if giving birth was akin to a crucifixion. If it was, he wanted to know why there was only a son of God. He figured there ought to be a daughter of God, too, if she had to go through this.

The woman buckled and pawed the base of the baptismal fountain. Her wet hands slipped and left bloodied prints on the marble. She tilted her head and threw her arms into the air, gasping something indecipherable, most likely a curse, at the ruby flame burning inside the lantern dangling from the ceiling.

Ivan's own stomach cramped when she pushed out the baby. She moaned, beat the air, punched the floor and pushed until a small bald head, not much bigger than the palm of his hand, emerged between her legs. Her voice softened and grew hoarse as she pulled the wrinkled bag of skin and bones from her body. She held the baby against her chest and cried and laughed and cried again.

At first, Ivan wanted to alleviate her pain and offer the kind of relief that the saint after which he was named might have brought. But Ivan Balev was not like the mystical hermit Ivan Rilsky—who became a priest at the age of twenty-five, after spending years in a cave near the monastery. Young Ivan Balev was an archer, whose bow could travel nearly three hundred fifty yards, rivaling the longest range of Mongol warriors. He had been trained since childhood and had the strength to draw the bow fully up to one hundred pounds since he was twelve.

Why Ivan's mother had named him after the most respected saint in Orthodox Christianity, a man known as 'the revealer of heavenly mysteries,' was perhaps the greatest mystery of his life. Ivan had never felt his mother's respect. He knew nothing about heaven, aside from what he had heard, and he did not like mystery.

Ivan Balev had no curative powers, no hands that could heal, no true way of knowing if he could ever bless anyone, and for this he felt like less of a man watching the woman struggle with her baby. He wanted to carry her out of the chapel and into a proper bed, but he could not move. Not because he was terrified of what he had just witnessed, but because the moment the baby entered the chapel, the smell of roses leaked from its walls. He pressed his nose against the door and smelled roses in the wood. He tested the sleeve of his robe, expecting the smell of dirt and sweat, but it, too, smelled like roses.

Roses did not typically grow so high in the Rila Mountains of Bulgaria. They grew in the valleys between the Balkan Range and this one, and in his mother's home garden in Sofia, but not at nearly a thousand meters above the sea. He turned to see if anyone was watching, but saw only a passing cloud that flashed red when he looked at the sky, where a stork made circles above the chapel, throwing shadows against the glass.

These were strange things to witness, even in a monastery where Saints had performed miracles and spirit guides appeared. But a red sky, a stork, and the mysterious smell of roses spooked Ivan Balev, who had only days before studied with the abbot from the book of Revelations. He was too young to experience the end of the world. If Ivan could have moved, he would have run—not just to his room—to his mother's house in Sofia, but he could not turn away from the baby or her mother.

The woman moaned, wiped her brow, lifted her pelvis off the floor and sat up with the baby at her breast. Her hair was soaked with sweat. Ivan thought whoever said birth was beautiful was lying. Even the rose-smelling baby, who suckled at her mother's breast, looked like a wrinkled old woman who had seen too much of the sun.

The mother ran her finger along the length of the baby's umbilical cord, studying it in the light as if it were made of the finest silk. She reached behind her for a small knife and sliced through the gray cord, depositing it into one of two small pouches dangling from the thin copper wire around her neck. She rolled the stub of the cord from the baby's belly into a knot, then stood in the pool of her own blood.

Suddenly, the flames above the baptismal fountain flickered and the tapestries billowed from the stone walls, though no wind was blowing from the mountain. It felt as though a strange force had entered the chapel just then, and to Ivan's astonishment, the woman extended her arms, as if to touch whatever it was—and let go of the baby.

Ivan shrieked. The woman was clearly possessed, which was the only explanation he could give for the way the baby appeared to be floating in mid-air. He expected her to fall to the ground but she circled her mother once, then without dropping out of the air, she moved around the chapel in a wide arc as if she were flying on the cape of the devil.



Ivan dropped the mop and bucket and tore through the front door, slid across the bloody mess, and snatched the baby out of the air. He had never held an infant, and he trembled feeling how light she was in his arms. And the smell! My god. He had never smelled anything as sweet as this child.

She cried. He tried to shush her by humming then turned to her mother, desperate for the woman to take her baby back. She seemed distant, her gaze transfixed on the front door. Her face was neither contorted with regret, nor blank with apathy, but something far more subtle and harder to detect, though Ivan caught the tear welling inside her eye.

She walked toward him. "You know, don't you."

Ivan shook his head. He knew nothing. He watched her hands carefully, expectant, anxious. She unhooked the second pouch from the copper wire around her neck and handed it to him. He felt something smooth and round through the thin silk sack. At first, he was unsure if the smell of roses was coming from the pouch or the baby.

"What are they?"

"Rose hips. From the *rosa damascena*."

The woman lowered her gaze to the floor, reached out to Ivan and laid her bloodied hand on his, curling her long fingers around the pouch of rose seeds.

"Damascena," the woman said. "You will call her Damascena."

The baby opened her eyes, hearing her name.

Ivan swallowed. He felt a strange pulsing, as if the whole chapel shook. A current charged the air. He smelled lightning and heard a trickling, like the cascade of a waterfall in spring.

The woman lifted her bloodied hands from his and stepped away.

"Can you keep a promise?"

Ivan nodded, moored in his trance.

The woman continued. "Grow cuttings from the seeds and plant them on the first full moon. If she wants to know where I am, tell her I will always be in the roses."

The baby lifted her small wrinkled arm off Ivan's shoulder and groped the air as if to protest, while her mother turned and quickly walked out the chapel door and down the dirt road outside the monastery—then disappeared into the morning light.

## [Two]

For weeks after the birth, Ivan prayed that an angel would come and take the child. Every morning, he rose early, not to pray, but to run to the end of the road hoping to find the woman returning for Damascena. He chased the phantasmal forms of fog that wrapped themselves around the trees. On his knees, he bargained with God. He did not need a baby added to his burdens.

He cursed his own mother for wanting to "fix him" by sending him to the monastery in the first place. He was certain she would assure him that the baby was God's answer to his own unique sexuality. She had hurled his clothes out the window the morning after he was caught, then hissed her final words in a whisper: "The sailor came to ask about you and I told him you had married God." Since then, he begged for mercy, but mercy was no more part of the plan than convenience or luck or relief.

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Ivan pleaded with the abbot; he was no more prepared to parent a child than he was ready to parent himself. A huge oak desk separated them in the abbot's office, a dark, musty room that smelled of brandy and snuff and vibrated with the abbot's throaty timbre. A shard of light cleaved through the only window, a narrow pane of glass, no wider than the abbot's arm, and fell across the Bible on the desk.

"Maybe that is the point, Ivan."

"There is no point, abbot! There is only a crisis," Ivan said and stomped his foot, raising his shaking hands. Ever since he had touched the rose hips, he had developed a palsy, and even in his deepest meditations, the shaking never stopped. It had already compromised his aim with the bow, and he feared he would lose his greatest skill. He longed to be back in Veliko Turnovo, shooting birds and other game for the king of the Second Kingdom, not the monks in this lesser fortress.

The abbot directed his gray eyes on Ivan's face, refusing to look at his hands.

"Ah, if you see a crisis, then there is a crisis. But this is God's will. It is up to you to see the opportunity," he offered. "Perhaps you have lost focus? Or faith?"

Ivan didn't want to hear such theories. He had not lost faith. Looking after the baby was distracting him from hunting. He could not imagine the abbot wanted anyone to starve to death. Without his help hunting game, they would have nothing but bread to eat.

He loathed that they loved his sudden transformation into a parent. It spurred him to fling dirty diapers out the window of his room and bark, "I'm no miracle worker. You can't turn shit into wine!" When their howls echoed up to him from the transept, he'd slam the shutters on their mocking, "At least her shit smells like a rose!"

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Ivan became their court jester, hands full of feces, soft foods, spittle dried and caked on the collar of his robe. And the lullabies. God have mercy on him. He should have never opened his mouth to sing, but it was the only way to keep Damascena from crying. It was not easy, and he wondered how anyone could do it alone. He bemoaned the Lord, the father of mankind, for giving this kind of responsibility to any human being.

Ivan Balev wore his disdain in the droop of his lips, and the slope of his shoulders that were slung with Damascena. When Ivan turned to the abbot, desperate, the abbot assured the young friar that there was nothing out of the ordinary about his new role.

"You've become a father," he said and shrugged, looking out at the granite cliff though the window behind his desk. "Stranger things have happened on Lozen Mountain. This is your service, Ivan Balev. Remember, St. Ivan never wanted to come out of his hermitage, but it was God's will for him to do so." He chuckled, "Consider yourself a most blessed young man, for God could have asked you to marry a woman."

"I assure you this was no mercy. This child was sent to punish me," Ivan said, standing in the doorway of the abbot's office.

"If that's your belief. I hope it is not the way you will explain it to Damascena."

Ivan looked up and caught the abbot's unsteady gaze. He had not considered that he would have to explain anything to the girl, and he wiped his cheek as if this string of responsibilities had landed there as a clump of phlegm.

"How can I explain when I don't fully know myself?" Ivan asked, too afraid of ridicule to tell the abbot what he had seen in the chapel on the day of her birth.

“You will ask God for understanding. That is our job, Ivan. To help others understand the tragedies of life. To give them faith despite their misfortunes. Heaven is not on earth, of this I am most certain.”

The abbot stood and patted him on the back, not hard, not lightly, and his hand lingered longer than Ivan expected. Besides the baby's small hands, this was the only touch Ivan had received from anyone since he arrived one year ago.

Ivan wanted to press that same, heavy hand against his chest—any hand would do, but the abbot flicked his eyes away from Ivan, then waved him off when he heard the baby's familiar wailing. She was hungry. Again. Ivan excused himself, hating that he ran.

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In the first three months, Ivan had managed to decipher Damascena's octaves of outrage, so distorted and exaggerated in infancy. He wondered how a person so small and inexperienced in life could have so much power over someone eight times her size. Or why someone his size didn't kill her. He had considered drowning her by disposing of her in the well. It was not like the abbot and the other monks would miss her. Aside from the way she smelled at birth, her novelty had worn off, eclipsed by their duties to God.

This did not surprise Ivan. What startled him were the instincts Damascena stoked inside him: cradling her soft head, making sure her milk was not too hot or cold, and that she drank enough of it, carrying her on his shoulder while she slept and filled his ears with the sound of her breathing.

And this secret. Behind closed doors, closed shutters, closed mouths, when Ivan

Balev looked into Damascena's eyes, the color of a blue-green tourmaline, half sea, half lake, and as luminous as the sun, he found a reason for his own existence. Even his ailing father had never made him feel as needed as the baby did when she gazed up at him, pleading, begging for his mercy to keep her alive another hour. Another day. Another month. He had no such luck with his father, the kingdom's legendary archer who could hunt on a horse with such prowess that he acquired the moniker, the Tall Mongol. Even with those same skills, Ivan could not hunt down his father's illness like a deer or a bird, and his mother never let him forget it. He was six years old and his mother blamed him for his father's death. "All because you wanted to hunt in the rain!" she said. She refused to touch him as he wept by his father's grave, apologizing for the storm, the illness and all the things he could not control—why his mother struck him and turned his cheeks purple.

"Why do you hate me?" he asked, years later, when he had grown taller than her.

She had turned to him, startled. "My son, I do not hate you. I hate that you destroyed my love! I begged you to stay home that day, to wait for the storm to pass, but you insisted, like a spoiled child, and your father indulged you like he always did."

There were countless things Ivan regretted about the baby, too, but she trusted him, and for this reason, he liked Damascena. Though he suffered many sleepless nights, he had taken an odd comfort in his purpose, even if he could not fully understand it.

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The abbot had given them a small first floor apartment with their own outhouse and a pipe to the well, another godsend, considering how many times Ivan had to change

the girl's rags. They had a window overlooking a massive green hill, and beyond that the ridgeline of mountains—the stage for the shadows of clouds to enact an etheric theater of light. The first time he saw the monastery, he mistook it as a fortress with its twenty-four meter stone walls, hundreds of arches, colonnades and carved verandas. Ivan Rilsky's vision was far more elaborate than the simple cave in which he mediated. The monastery seemed to be in a constant state of development, with artisans and craftsman coming in and out so often that they outnumbered the one hundred monks who dwelled there. Soon, Ivan Balev fantasized about hiding Damascena in one of the carpenter's bags, hoping someone would fall in love and take her to their village. He welcomed any plan other than the one God dictated. As the days turned to weeks and the weeks to months, and the new seasons dictated the life of the monks, Ivan worried not so much about the health of the girl, but of the rose hips that he failed to plant on the first full moon after her birth.

Time was running out for Ivan Balev. He had to plant the rose hips before the girl learned to talk. He prayed that a rose garden, god willing it took root in the mountains, would prevent Damascena from asking the question he dreaded most—why her mother left. How would the girl ever believe that she would find her mother in the roses?

Day and night, Ivan calculated the severity of the truth and could find no words to soften it. His mother taught him that women were cruel and more powerful than he would like to admit. He had seen it with his own eyes, God damn them. If all else failed, Damascena would have to understand that misery and joy often share the same face.

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After six months, there was a change in Damascena. She no longer responded to Ivan's care. No matter how bright the lantern that Ivan set beside her, she lived inside a perpetual darkness. She lay listless for hours, staring through the slats of the bassinet, eyes lifted to the window, as if she was waiting for her mother to appear.

Ivan thought that the rose hips might help to stimulate her, but when he dangled them above her, she grabbed at the pouch and whimpered. She would not sleep on those nights, as if by holding the pouch of rose hips, she had smelled her mother again.

The monks believed she would soon die of a broken heart. Ivan stood over her powerless, uncertain he could do anything to stop her sadness, until one day, her eyes fluttered open when a stork flew to the window and perched on the ledge. The bird caught Ivan's gaze and he stiffened, seeing human eyes looking out from the bird's. He felt a chill through his whole body, wondering if it was the same bird he had seen on the day of Damascena's birth. The huge white creature seemed to calm the baby immediately, and she fell asleep in its presence, as if she understood it had been sent to watch over her.

### [Three]

The stork's presence awakened something in Damascena. When she started to crawl, the bird never left her window, soliciting curiosity and awe among the monks.

The storks of Bulgaria sought the warmer climates of the valleys, not the cold mountain air enveloping the monastery. Not a single stork had ever built a nest there, at least not to their knowledge, so no one could deny the phenomenon.



The monks attributed the stork to Damascena's arrival, reviving their interest in her and giving thanks to God for their good fortune. Even Ivan believed the legend associating storks with good health and prosperity—the coming of spring, even though it was the dead of winter with snow as thick as wet flour.

Soon, the monks snatched Damascena out of Ivan's arms in the rectory and kissed her cheeks, chanting, *Blessed is the baby who smells like a rose and brings storks. May she be healthy. May she be happy.* They offered to babysit, noticing the beleaguered face of the young friar. You're exhausted, they told him. Take respite. Sleep awhile. We can look after her now.

Ivan grabbed the baby, left his soup to chill and stormed out of the rectory, vowing from that moment forth, he would eat alone and keep Damascena from everyone. They did not deserve her blessings. In the first few weeks, he would have gladly accepted help, but it was too late after nine months. He'd be damned if he needed assistance now. He would prove to everyone, including his mother, he was capable of caring for the baby.

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The rose seeds continued to haunt the young monk, exhausting him more than the baby. He had heard about bleeding crosses but had refused to believe such phenomena until he discovered blood dripping from the pouch of rose seeds. He panicked, assuming Damascena had cut herself crawling. He followed the trail of blood on the floor of the apartment to the silk pouch she had reached up and grabbed off the table beside his bed.

"Give me that!" he shrieked. As he snatched the pouch from the baby's bloody fingers, he heard a man's voice.

*To go guided by fragrance is a hundred times better than following tracks.*

The words seized his heart and his body trembled.

"Who speaks?" he said, panicked, but the voice did not speak again.

Ivan wiped the baby's fingers with the sleeve of his robe and cleaned up the floor.

He did not sleep that night but stayed up praying with the rose seeds in his hands. They bled again at dawn, and this time the voice returned with the wind from the mountain.

*If you do not plant the rose seeds, you will meet a wretched fate.*

Terrified, he turned to the abbot for help, praying the rose seeds did not bleed again. He did not want the abbot to blame him, should the rose seeds invite misfortune to the monastery. He had waited long enough to plant them, but despite the resentment he had toward her mother, Rasa, he would oblige her request only to stop the horrible mess.

The abbot explained that roses do not actually grow from rose hips exactly, but from the cuttings that grow from the seeds inside the hips. Ivan's guess was as good as any on how to open the rose hips and get the rose seeds to sprout.

"Then how will I ever get the roses to grow?" Ivan asked.

"Start believing in miracles," the abbot suggested and handed Ivan a letter.

"What is this?"

"A letter from Rasa. It arrived by pigeon carrier this morning."

Ivan snatched the letter, feeling a pang of relief and panic. He removed the seal and opened it, fingers trembling as he read. Rasa was sorry she had not returned for her baby. She had been in bed for months from birth complications. She would not be able to make the journey from Veliko Turnovo until the fall. The king refused to shorten the indenture. He looked up at the abbot, perplexed. "The woman is a servant to the king?"

The abbot nodded. "That is why we agreed to allow her to give birth here."

Ivan took a deep breath, incensed. He felt as though the whole world had conspired against him. He continued to read, finally understanding why Rasa and her baby looked so foreign. Her mother had survived her family's assailants in Khorosan only to surrender to the Second Kingdom. Apparently, two days before Rasa was born, the king's men hung her own father in Baldwin's Tower, simply because he was competition for the men in his own court. He shuddered, reading the letter.

*"We have been working ever since to pay back the debt of having our lives spared and my mother has never once complained. The king's men have done awful things to us but she gives thanks every day for our lives. When we found out I was with child, we prayed that the king would permit me to keep the baby. We were not so fortunate, but my mother had a vision of a mountain hermitage where I would be safe to give birth, believing it was a sign that the secret of the rose was meant to continue."*

Ivan's hands trembled, detesting what he now knew of the baby and her mother.

*"My mother received God's word: Damascena would be blessed with the gift of life as long as the roses grew. I will be forever indebted to you for caring for her all these months. I pray for both of your health every day. Please tell Damascena that I am coming soon and that I love her very much. May God's grace shine upon you, Ivan Balev."*

That night, Ivan broke open one of the rose hips and scattered the seeds into a shallow hole he dug with his bare hands. But rain came and turned the soil to mud.

Ivan needed a gardener to show him what to do. On his knees with stones under his shins, he closed his eyes and prayed for this miracle, since there was no gardener at the monastery. *I will give you my life*, he promised, and when he opened his eyes, he saw

the stork standing in front of him.

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Ivan refused to believe that the stork was any indication that the Heavenly Father of All Beings heard Ivan Balev's plea. Ivan considered giving up. So what if he never told Damascena about the roses? So what if he told her that her mother was dead? The words sounded smooth in his mouth, about the creamiest of lies he'd ever tasted.

No one would ever know. Or care. Her mother was a whore.

In his walks through the woods outside the monastery, Ivan imagined all the ways her mother could have died or should have died by now. On the days when Damascena was fussiest, when nothing could quiet her, he allowed his mind to roll around muddy thoughts, how, if the girl's mother was still alive and ever returned, he would murder her.

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One night, when the stars of winter filled the sky like chunks of ice, the threat of Rasa's impending return darkened Ivan's mind again. Though the nightmare would end in six months, Ivan was certain a new one would begin. After all this time of exhaustion and worry, it struck him that if he lost Damascena, he would lose her love. He could not handle that kind of heartache again, not after his mother had driven away Petur.

Rasa was only proving what he knew to be true of the women in his life; he refused to let her take away the only love he had left. Damascena had been teething and feverish, and he had carried her for hours, walking back and forth trying to get her to

sleep, when it struck him that *he*, not her mother, was her master. He startled her awake with his voice.

"I make the rules from here on out! Do you understand? You will listen to *me*."

"Bird," she cried, her tiny voice struggling beneath her sobs.

Ivan grabbed her small chin and slapped his hand over her mouth. The girl shrank under his touch. "*Bird*," he hissed, regretting the girl's first word and the pure love with which she spoke of the stork. It was the bird she called out to in the middle of the night. The bird she demanded first thing in the morning. The bird she played with, the bird who amused her and shaded her from the harsh sun with its wings. After everything he had done for her, he wanted her first word to be Ivan, not bird. If he didn't believe in the ancient legend, he would have destroyed the stork's nest and turned the bird into stew—but he feared the misfortunes that would befall him. God had already taken away his father, his lover and made his mother cruel. He could not imagine life getting any worse.

"The bird will not save you and neither will these!" he screamed, ripping the pouch off his neck like a leech that had sucked his skin. He shook the rose hips in front of Damascena's eyes, and just as he flung them through the trees and into the snow—the stork suddenly flew out of the tree above him, as if it had been watching all along.

That night, Ivan dreamed of roses and slept until sunrise for the first time since the girl's birth. In his dream, he saw beams of sunlight reflecting off delicate pink petals. The rose grew by itself on a lonely rock outcrop, pinned against the stones by the wind.

It was cold inside the dream and Ivan shivered in his sleep. He reached out to touch the lace-like frost that had wrapped itself around the leaves, then slid his finger down the stem, so deeply frozen that it shattered beneath his touch.

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When wood smoke filled the air in September, Ivan spent hours hunting. He was not looking for game like his father had taught him, he was searching for signs of Rasa. For the first time in his life, he wished to use his own hands, rather than a bow, to seize his prey. Each day, he waited by the river, knowing she would have to cross it in order to continue on the sinuous trail to the monastery. He left Damascena to nap in their quarters and hunkered down among the bushes. The snap of a twig was all he needed to know her mother had arrived. No other animal would have followed the trail with the scent of his piss. He had marked it to be sure that he did not mistake Rasa for any other creature.

He was surprised that she looked so well now. Gone was the protruding belly. She was lean and strong, her shoulders and neck gilded with sweat. Her green eyes glowed in the diffuse light through the trees. She was one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen. No wonder the king had indentured her to the needs of his own men. The thought disgusted him, and he spat on the ground. He would make sure she returned ugly and of no use to them, or anyone else, especially her daughter.

Ivan waited until she approached the river to make his move. Rasa stared across the water, as if strategizing her way across the rocks. He wondered how she had ever crossed it when she was pregnant, with all the snowmelt flowing in the spring. He crept up behind her while she took off her shoes, and pinned her on the ground.

Rasa lay on her back, startled.

"Ivan? It's me. Rasa! What are you doing?"

"Making sure you never see Damascena again!"

She let out a whimper.

"Please, don't hurt me! I came to take my daughter home!"

"She is home. You made her home with *me*, and you will never see her again."

She stared at him, shocked. "Why?" she asked, eyes spilling with tears.

His plan was simple. He would maim her first, then drown her. He slapped his hand over her mouth and raised the knife, slashing into her left cheek. She howled, writhing on the ground, kicking him away. When he pulled the knife out of her flesh, he suddenly felt the claws of a bird digging into his eyes. He saw a mass of white feathers and shrieked, trying to get the stork off him. Wretched bird, he thought. Storks have no voice. He had not heard it sneak up. He batted at the creature, trying to tear off its wings, but the bird thrust its talons into his arms, until he dropped the knife, and Rasa fled.

"You don't deserve her love!" he cried into the woods, hearing her footfall, while the stork continued to circle, preventing him from any attempt to chase her.