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BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF FIFTEEN DOGS,  
WINNER OF THE SCOTIABANK GILLER PRIZE

*Prison*

# *Ring*

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## AN ENGAGEMENT AND A MARRIAGE

Gwenhwyfar Lloyd disliked Tancred Palmieri at first sight. There was something unsettling about the way he observed her: as if he were staring at a blemish on her face. Then, when their eyes met, he turned away, as if he lacked conviction, which made Gwen feel even more self-conscious.

His friend Olivier, in contrast, was charming. He asked if she'd like a glass of wine and, when she said she would, a coupe of Prosecco appeared, as if it had been waiting for her.

– Is this okay? he'd asked.

And when she thanked him, he said

– My name's Olivier. And this is my friend, Tancred.

Tancred had turned to her then and smiled, his demeanour changed. Now he seemed entirely at ease, confident. And why not? The man was tall, broad-shouldered, and handsome. His skin was dark and his eyes were a bright blue.

– It's nice to meet you, he said.

All his attention was hers, briefly, before he turned toward an older woman who'd called his name.

– There you are, Tan! said the woman. We should be going soon. Ten minutes?

The woman – lively and trim – wore a black evening dress. Her red lipstick was too much, but, aside from that, she was discreet, her wealth obvious only if you recognized her accessories: white-gold Buccellati earrings and a Serpent Bohème necklace. As it happened, Gwen recognized neither the accessories nor the woman. This was Simone Azarian-Thomson, one of the inheritors of the Azarian fortune.

They were all on the top floor of the Gardiner Museum at a fundraiser for the Toronto Symphony. Simone, who had not stopped to greet or even acknowledge Gwen, was obviously in her element. She must have attended hundreds of events like this one, whereas Gwen could not help feeling out of place. Even things that should have delighted her made her uneasy. The view of the Royal Ontario Museum, for instance. How wonderful to look over at the still-unmodernized face of the building, a place her father had often taken her. In her twenty-eight years, she'd never seen the museum from quite this angle, and the ROM seemed new, wonderful. But it also felt as if she were looking down on an old friend while in the company of men in suits and women in evening wear, all of them conversing as tidbits were presented to them on silver platters: mac and cheese with truffle oil, tuna tartare on crackers, finger-shaped eggplant-and-Parmesan sandwiches.

Gwen – five feet nine, the daughter of a Welsh-born man and a woman of African descent, a 'country girl,' having grown up near Sarnia – had come to keep her friend, Nadia, company. Nadia had got tickets to the fundraiser when one of the executives in the office where she worked could not attend.

– Is it formal? Nadia had asked.

– No, it's casual, had been the answer.

Apparently, a handful of people had been told the same thing, enough of them that Gwen did not feel out of place in her black

pencil skirt and dark blouse, her long, frizzy hair held up and out of her face by a navy hair band. But while there was informal wear to be seen, the fundraiser was only 'casual' the way nonchalant displays of wealth are casual.

Olivier was among those who were not flagrantly wealthy, but he was not casually dressed. There was something European about his appearance – a light growth of beard, deep-set hazel eyes, a strong jaw, his ears almost eccentric, one of them sticking out more than the other, his brown hair luxurious on top but neatly trimmed on the side – and his choice of clothes: dark grey chinos, a light-blue shirt (open at the neck), a blue jacket. And he smelled faintly, pleasingly, of sandalwood, vanilla, and citrus.

– Do you go to the symphony a lot? he asked.

Gwen admitted that she didn't, that she wished she could afford it. After that, they spoke – with an ease she found comforting – about a number of things: about music, about her preference for jazz, about her father, a working jazz pianist, about Olivier's parents, about the death of his mother, who'd been, in her time, a piano teacher, and about his admiration for Tancred, whom he'd known from childhood.

As she spoke to him, Gwenthwyfar felt herself at ease. Her self-consciousness dissipated to the point where she could composedly take in her surroundings. Yes, the fundraiser felt strange to her, the gathering a pretext for displays of wealth and standing, but so what? It was in the service of something she, too, believed in: music, which she'd learned to love through her parents. So the fundraiser was meant for someone like her as much as anyone else. This sudden feeling of 'arrival,' which she credited to Olivier, was so pleasant that she was disappointed when Tancred interrupted them.

– Gwen, he said, I'm sorry to take Ollie away from you, but we've got to go ...

He hesitated, looking into her eyes before turning away to say something to Olivier. He then turned back to her and said

– You’re from Sarnia, aren’t you?

She didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of being right, but his rightness disarmed her.

– How did you know? she asked.

– I’ll tell you next time, he said. I look forward to it.

He smiled, held up a hand in farewell, and went off. Olivier, meanwhile, apologized for leaving.

– I’ve enjoyed talking to you, he said. I hope we can do it again. Can I give you my number?

For the first time that evening, he sounded formal. She attributed this to his ‘European’ background, however, and handed him her phone. He entered his name, number, and email address and, both of them amused, they shook hands as if they’d come to a significant agreement.

Her disappointment at Olivier’s going didn’t last long. It didn’t have the chance, because his departure left her with Nadia and the fragrant cowboy – who smelled as if a clump of lilacs had lost a round to a raft of limes – trying to pick her up. ‘Cowboy’ in appearance anyway: white ten-gallon hat, brown brushed-suede shoes, faded blue denim shirt, a bolo tie with a ruby clasp, black jeans, and a leather jacket. You’d have thought he came from somewhere in the American South, but Gwen had heard him say he’d come from Barrow, a small town in southern Ontario. He was in Toronto to sell sod and pigs. His outfit was for his clients, most of whom assumed farmers dressed ‘country’ and were reassured to find that, at least in this case, they weren’t wrong.

So, Nadia had asked, what was he doing at a fundraiser for the symphony?

Well, he had a few days off, and one of his clients had offered to bring him to something ‘typically Toronto,’ and there you have it. His client had gone, but he’d stayed to soak up the culture, which was better than splashing around in cow shit, as he usually did.

– I thought you sold pigs, said Nadia.

– I do, said the cowboy, but that’s kind of a sideline. I sell your top-class, organic grain-fed pigs. Hell, those pigs eat better than my kids. But I help with the sod farm my wife inherited and I breed cattle, too. The difference between cows and pigs is I hate cows. I can’t stand the stupid things. And that’s why I like coming here. You all eat a lot of beef in this city.

Gwen was immediately wary of the man. He was just the kind of ‘farmer with attitude’ you’d meet travelling around Lambton County, where some of her father’s family lived. She could see Nadia was interested in him, though. In fact, Gwen could have predicted it. He was Nadia’s type: early thirties, by the look of him, and you could tell he was in good shape. Good-looking, in a way, but not the way she liked. He was like a Sears catalogue version of the ‘rugged man.’ On top of that, he was not, on first impression, what you’d call bright. Or, on second thought, he was indeed bright but played at being thick in order to attract women like Nadia who preferred stupid men. Nadia preferred men who were ‘slow’ because she thought them unpretentious. In Gwen’s experience, however, they were usually pretentious in their own ways.

Gwen had never seen her friend with a man who was her intellectual equal. A great shame, she thought. But there was no point to having that conversation with Nadia. Not again. For one thing, Nadia agreed with her. She knew herself well enough to identify her own weakness. For another, Nadia knew Gwen well enough to bring up *her* predilections: tall, sensitive, cultured. Now there was a discussion that Gwen, who’d been through a painful breakup a year and change before, did not want to have. Her ex, Roland, had been all the things Gwen found attractive. What he had failed to be was honest, considerate, or faithful. Worse, he’d acted as if it were *her* fault he slept with other women. And she’d forgiven him, and forgiven him again. She might have gone on forgiving him, but mercifully (as she now thought) he’d moved to Vancouver to be with the ‘love



of his life,' a conniving woman he'd been seeing while he was with her.

Nadia had seen her through the worst of all that, months and months of grief and humiliation that still seemed recent, though it was going on two years. The least she could do was support Nadia, whomever Nadia decided to be with. So it was easier to accept that men like this 'Robbie' would come and go in Nadia's life until Nadia found a man who met enough of her needs to last.

Robbie, married on top of everything else, would not last. Gwen was sure of this, but, for Nadia's sake, she smiled when he happened to look her way and feigned interest in his words.

– You know, he said, you remind me of someone. Where're you from?

– I'm from Bright's Grove, she answered.

– Oh, hell yeah! That's pretty much Sarnia. Had a friend who grew up there. Bet you were glad to get away.

He wasn't wrong, but Gwen didn't want to encourage him.

– Not really, she said.

– What do you mean? said Nadia. You couldn't wait to get out of Buzzard's Grove.

– My parents are there, said Gwen. I miss it. Besides, it's where my placenta's buried. So I've got a connection to it.

– Well, there you go, said Robbie. We've all got to come from somewhere. I'm from Barrow, born and raised. Got a wife and kids there. I can't see the good of bad-talking it. But I don't mind getting away every once in a while. Especially when I get to meet pretty women, like you two.

Under normal circumstances – that is, if she'd been alone with him – Gwen would have cringed at these words. The man had no idea how ridiculous he sounded. But Nadia was interested in him and, if she'd caught Gwen rolling her eyes, would have felt she needed to defend him, and that would have drawn the two closer. So Gwen again smiled politely.