

The Bookseller's Daughter -- Episode 1

San Francisco – 2011

Gina

Here's what I think.

We've all been wounded by war. Some wounds come from big, brutal wars, but others are from smaller blood-lettings that don't make the front pages. Sometimes the injury arrives in a personal way – in a one-on-one encounter that invades your body, your life, and your soul. But it's always there somewhere. And if you really want to understand a person, you have to find that wound.

That's true of me. And it's true of the person lying next to me – whom, I should note, is a first-time visitor to my bed. There are sleep noises coming from that other pillow, which are comforting to hear from someone who has had a close brush with death. Peace and sleep are what we both need at the moment. But at some point we'll have to share our experiences and try to make sense of them. What happens then depends upon whether our memories – our war-wounds – provide us any understanding or whether they'll just grate on each other and move us further apart.

I have another thought, but this one I'm not as sure about.

I think reality only exists in our life stories. I'm a character in your story, and you're a character in mine. And both of us intrude upon the stories of hundreds, thousands – maybe millions – of others. Trying to isolate our own story is a mistake, because everything that makes life worth living occurs at the place where our stories intersect. People in my profession just add to the confusion. Downstairs from where I'm lying at the moment are thousands of books on the shelves of the bookstore, waiting for you to walk in and pick them up – and maybe find characters who will invite themselves into your life.

These are the kinds of thoughts you have when you wake up at 4:00 in the morning and can't go back to sleep. I've been lying here for a while. The wind has been battering the trees against the front

window of the apartment. Now the foghorns are starting their wail, telling me that the morning fog is beginning to roll down the San Francisco hills and head our way.

And at times like this when you can't sleep, you might as well start telling stories.

Bosnia -- 1996

She kept watching the soldier, but the last breath had disappeared. He'd writhed in pain in the middle of the street when he was first shot, but he must have realized he was in even greater danger if he couldn't get out of the intersection and crawl over to the buildings. He pulled himself across the pavement, dragging his wounded leg through the dirt, trying to stop the flow of blood with his free hand. The agony on his face was harrowing. She found herself quietly cheering him on, even though in another part of her brain she knew he was her enemy. He was part of the Militia – a brutal group of killers that showed no mercy. But that didn't stop her from hoping that this soldier—the one outside her window – might survive.

She watched him from the window at the top of the cellar. That was the only place where she felt safe at the moment, and that one broken window was her only connection with the outside world. The soldier's last movements were slow and painful, as he kept trying to reach the comparative safety of the alley. He didn't make it. After he'd crawled only a few meters, there was another crack of rifle fire. It came from the roof, where her brother and his friends had set themselves up as snipers. And with the sound of that gunfire, there was an eruption of blood from the soldier's chest. After that, he didn't move at all.

When the shooting first started, she tried to sort out the individual sounds, wondering where each burst of bullets was coming from. But as the gunfire became more incessant, she realized it could be coming from anywhere. The Militia troops were shouting in a dialect of Serbo-Croatian that she thought was spoken only in the villages across the canyon. She knew they were patrolling the streets, and she

shuddered at the idea that they might be getting ready to burst into the house. The electricity and phone lines had been out for days, so she was by herself in the dark, hovered up against the wall, trying to stay safe and keep warm. The only blankets she had belonged to their family dog, who had fled when the explosions began. She had no idea where he'd gone.

The day before a shell had ripped through the nearby house where her friend lived, setting it afire. When she saw that, she ran screeching upstairs, trying to force her way through the door and out into the street. But her brother grabbed her. *You can't go out*, he said. *It's too dangerous*. She started screaming that she'd never see her friend again, but his grip got tighter. She tried arguing with him. *You and your friends sneak out every night. Let me go!* But he pushed her back. *Listen to me*, he said, *we're risking our lives to protect you from these animals. We know how to avoid getting killed. There's no place for girls in this fight*. She seethed at his words, but she couldn't force her way past him. She headed back to the cellar, where she began burrowing into the dark.

From the cellar window she could see the smoking hulk of their local store. By now, they were almost out of food in the house. When she first headed down to the cellar, she'd grabbed a few slices of bread and a hunk of cheese, leaving as much as she could for the others. Her mother kept repeating that her sister would be coming back soon and bringing food with her. But her mother was talking more and more to herself. A day earlier she'd walked in front of the window by the sink and was met by a flurry of bullets that sent a shower of broken pottery down on top of her. But she refused to leave the kitchen. Even now she was upstairs, wandering around, sadly trying to prepare a meal with no food and for no one who would sit down to eat it. She was going mad like everyone else.

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He felt a shove in the small of his back that caused him to stumble into the debris from a collapsed wall. He managed to step to the side of the alley and avoid the sharpest nails.

“Keep moving, you little sissy.”

The rifle hit him again between his shoulders. “Are you going to act like a soldier, or are you going to keep being a coward?”

His tormentor let out a high-pitched noise that started deep in his throat and twisted its way into a screech. It was an obnoxious, grating sound, but he didn’t dare act like it was funny. No one ever did. The man doing the laughing was far too dangerous. He had a whole series of animal-like sounds that became even more chilling when he was enjoying some sadistic pleasure. Among the Militia troops, it had earned him the name *Hijena* – the Hyena.

The *Hijena* kept pushing him down the street toward their unit’s temporary headquarters, slowing down only as they passed the burnt-out remains of a store. The *Hijena* stopped for a second, shoving aside some rubble that covered a bottle of Slivovitz. It was somehow still intact. He tore off the top and downed a couple of swallows.

The rest of the men in the unit were sitting on broken boxes or lying against abandoned automobiles, smoking and talking, watching the two-man parade that the *Hijena* was leading in front of them. There was some laughter – but it was uneasy. They all knew the *Hijena* was sending them a message that their turn could be next. The *Hijena* and his older brother, the *Komandant*, didn’t hesitate to take even the harshest measures whenever they felt the need. Two days earlier they’d tied a soldier – whom they claimed was a deserter – to a pole in the street and ordered the others to shoot him. When none of the soldiers in the line made any move to open fire, the *Komandant* walked up to the prisoner, put a pistol against the man’s temple, and fired. With the gun still in hand, he then walked slowly down the line in front of the reluctant firing-squad, staring at each man.

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The brutality of it sickened her. It seemed like the Militia would just keep shooting until there was no one left. Her brother and the others had been warning her for weeks that this would happen. These militiamen were dogs, they said – filthy animals that were capable of anything. Rumors had swept

through town about terrible things going on in other parts of the country. There were stories of mass killings – murders in places like Srebrenica and other towns to the north.

And there was more, they warned. There was rape. That thought made her sick to her stomach. She couldn't even grasp the idea that a soldier could stop to assault a woman in the midst of all the killing going on around him. The madness of it was unbearable. Was being raped worse than being killed? That made no sense to her. But the idea that someone attacking her might *think* that it was worse left her gripped in fear. And it was more than just the Militia she was worried about. She was fearful about what was going on in the heads of her brother and his friends. These young, would-be soldiers had decided that the rape of a woman was an attack against them. This was an intolerable offense, they kept saying – an intrusion into their territory. An attack on their women was an attack on their sense of pride. It demanded retaliation.

The things that had held her together were falling apart – her family, her school, and her friends were all spinning away. This was the time of day when she'd be on the phone with her girlfriends, talking about things that had happened in school, planning their next shopping trip, or chatting about their upcoming vacation. It was becoming harder and harder to hold on to that. Her clothes, her books, and her other things were upstairs in her room, but when she went up to get them she'd been totally exposed. There was gunfire just outside her window, and bullets had ricocheted off the outside walls. She'd grabbed some underwear and a couple of books, scooping some clothing off of her chair as she raced for the stairs. By the time she got down to the cellar and looked at what she had had, she realized she had only one item of real clothing in her hands. It was her favorite party dress.

Her piano was upstairs, but it was as good as gone. It was buried under rubble from a shell that had struck the other side of the compound, causing a living room wall to collapse. That piano had been in their family for 80 years, and her grandmother had left it to her in her Will. She'd thought about her grandmother, as she played it every afternoon, trying to learn the Bach Fugue in G minor. Her music teacher had said it might too difficult for her to master, but she kept working at it. The sheet music was

still open to that piece when the artillery shell hit the building. Now the main theme of the Fugue was running through her head as she sat there in the cellar, moving her fingers, trying to remember the sequence of notes.

She picked up the dress and stared at it in the dark, trying to get a sense of its color and design, resisting the temptation to burst into tears. The memories hiding in that soft material seemed to be mocking her, reminding her of times spent celebrating with her friends, flirting with the local boys, dancing at parties – things that she had now lost. But as she ran her fingers around the bows and straps of the dress, it started to come alive to her touch. She allowed herself to be lost in its textures and sensations. Without really thinking about it, she'd slipped out of her other clothes. Now that dress was hovering above her head, as she let it slide slowly over her body. The noise of artillery shells was getting louder, but she tuned that out of her mind for the moment. The dress now covered her completely. She felt herself swaying slightly. Was she going mad, she wondered? Was she really dancing in the cellar to the silent music of the Fugue? She caught herself for a second but then gave way to the feeling, letting loose the emotions she had almost lost.

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The *Hijena* kept prodding and shoving him until they got to a small open space at the back of the alley. They were in the middle of a make-shift office, where the *Komandant* was hunched over a temporary desk pieced together from packing crates. He was reading a map and checking it against some other papers. A cigarette dangled from his mouth, holding an ash that looked ready to break loose. He took one ferocious drag and then tossed it away. He reached for the pack on this desk and, finding it empty, squashed it and threw it in the direction of the cigarette.

One hard push by the *Hijena* sent him sprawling against the desk, coming face to face with the *Komandant*. The other man looked down at him with an icy stare. His eyes were uneven, with the right one open wide and arched while the left one drooped slightly. But the two eyes had one thing in common – they both seemed bottomless.

“What’s going on?” Even as the *Komandant* was staring at him, he was directing his voice at his brother.

“It’s this little coward.” The *Hijena* shoved him again. “He’s a slacker, and he’ll desert us at the first opportunity.”

“What do you want me to do about it?”

“It was your idea to put him in this unit in the first place,” the *Hijena* shouted. “He never should have been here.”

“Just shut up for a minute. You may be my brother, but I’m in charge here.”

The *Hijena* didn’t back off. “You should take him out and shoot him as an example to the others.”

As the back-and-forth continued between the two brothers, spasms of weakness rushed through his knees. He was afraid to move. He tried to think of a way out of the nightmare, but there was nowhere to go. As they debated what to do with him, his life was swinging in the balance.

“You’re the one who picked him out of all the other garbage at the orphanage. You should have sold him like the others and made some money for yourself instead of sticking me with him.”

He had been dragged out of the orphanage a year earlier. At the time, the man standing in front of him wasn’t known as the *Komandant*, and he wasn’t wearing any kind of a uniform. Whether he had any kind of military authority, no one said. He just appeared one day at the orphanage in Sarajevo, walking slowly behind the Director, peering at the children lined up in front of him. He said nothing, but he didn’t have to. He had the air of someone you needed to listen to – someone you needed to fear. As he walked down the line, he stared at each of the orphans and strays who were unlucky enough to be there, sometimes grabbing one of the children for a better look, often turning the youngster’s head from side to side, as if to assess how much it was worth. The rumor around the orphanage was that he was a child broker. With one flick of the finger he could pack you up and send you off to God-only-knows where.

“What’s so important that you had to come bursting in here?”

“Here – look at the books I found in his pack.” The *Hijena* grabbed the backpack and dumped the contents on the desk. “Take a look at these.”

“Oh, sit down.” The *Komandant* flicked his hand at his brother. “You look like you’re drunk.”

“What are these books?” The *Komandant* picked one up and turned it over. “You just carry these books around with you? This writing here in the margin – is that poetry? Did you write that?”

“Yes.” He could feel his voice breaking.

“When do you find time to write poetry?”

“He doesn’t even find time to fire his rifle straight,” the *Hijena* broke in. “I’ve watched him. He always fires into the air.”

The *Komandant* gave his brother a gesture to be quiet. He grabbed another cigarette from a pack that he kept in a drawer, holding it between his yellow finger tips as he lit it. His teeth were gritted together, as the smoke escaped from the sides of his mouth. He stared straight ahead without blinking.

“What is this, more poetry? It looks like these books are in English.”

“They’re American . . . They’re American poets.”

The *Komandant* poked through the pages. “What are these, women poets?”

“Yes, sir, they’re . . . they’re mostly women.”

“And what’s this?” He picked a couple of petals out from the pages and rubbed them between his fingers. “You put flowers between the pages?”

“They’re just local . . . I mean, they’re not really flowers. They’re wild plants that I found at one of our camps and used as bookmarks.”

The *Komandant* gave a short grunt and threw the book down. He picked up another one. His gaze grew more menacing, as he thumbed through the pages.

“What does this mean, ‘The Laws of War’?”

He looked up sharply, his eyes reaching out like a pair of tentacles. “Where did you get this?”

He flipped it over and looked at the back, and then he opened it and scanned a few more pages. “It says this is the text of the Geneva Conventions. What’s this all about?”

“It was in a bookshop. I took it ... I mean, I bought it. It was in a shop in Sarajevo.”

The *Hijena* leapt out of his chair and poked at him. “What are you doing with all these books? Are you sitting there and reading them and playing with yourself?”

The *Komandant* kept glaring at him, ignoring his brother’s outburst. “Do you think you are in Geneva?”

It was phrased as a question, but he knew not to answer it.

“Do you look around every day and think, ‘I am in Switzerland?’ Do you see some laws hanging out there on the trees, saying ‘you can do this, but you can’t do that?’ Do you think there is a set of rules out there that everyone plays by?”

He managed a faint “no.” The *Komandant* kept going as if he hadn’t heard him.

“Do you think there is some little rule book that we look at to see what we can do?” He picked up the book and spat on it. “That’s what I think of your book.”

“We have one of our soldiers lying out there dead. He’s there right now – lying in the middle of the town square with the dogs sniffing at him. There’ll be maggots there before long. Do you think that we can send these people a nice little letter and quote them some section of your law book? Do you think we can say, ‘May we please go out there to recover the body’? Do you?”

He tried to shake his head, but he was afraid to move.

“Because if you do, let me tell you that it was those same people who shot him from the roof of the house. And then they shot him again as he was trying to get to safety. And it’s those same people who will shoot us if we try to get his body back.”

He walked around the desk and grabbed him by his shirt. “There’s only one law out here. Shoot them before they shoot you. Attack their women before they attack yours. Do you understand that?”

The *Komandant* gave him a shove against the wall. Then he picked up the books one by one, ripping them down the spine and throwing them into the corner.

“What do you want me to do with him?” the *Hijena* asked.

“Get him out of my sight.”

The *Hijena* prodded him back towards the alley.

“Just take him somewhere and make a man out of him.”

He exhaled a long line of smoke.

“And when you’re through with that, get rid of him.”

* * *

An artillery shell hit somewhere close to her house, sending a shock through the cellar. She squeezed against the wall, but it was shaking. There was more rifle fire, louder than before, coming in short, staccato bursts from somewhere nearby. She heard unfamiliar voices, men screaming commands, as they ran from room to room above her. Suddenly, the door to the cellar smashed open, and a group of armed men poured down the stairs.

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He’d been running up the street with the others, trying to stay invisible in the pack of sweating, panting soldiers. They reached one of the houses, and the lead man shot at the door until it gave way. The *Hijena* was screaming orders as they scrambled through the hallway. Two of the men raced over to the cellar stairs and kicked at the door. The first jolt knocked it off its hinges, and the second one sent it clattering down the stairs. As the two men jumped over the debris, he felt a rifle butt in his back, shoving him down the stairs behind the others. The *Hijena* was shouting commands and warning them that it might be an ambush.

Could it be a trap? He looked around quickly, trying to see if there was anyone lying in wait. From the dark corner, he suddenly saw a pair of eyes staring at him. It was a girl – maybe a little younger than him – and she was trying to make herself invisible behind a pile of blankets. He saw fear in her eyes.

He’d been the first one to see her.

The *Hijena* saw her next.

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She could see him shaking. She could almost feel his fear, as he seemed to be quietly pleading with her to hide, to dig a little deeper into the corner. He was a soldier of some sort, but she knew he didn't belong there. He was carrying a rifle, but he was pointing it into the air like he didn't know what to do with it.

But there was another man – a very different kind of man. And he had just seen her.

The second man had a high, screeching voice that sent a chill through her. He pushed at the young soldier, forcing him to get closer and closer to her. Then he held up for a second, but only long enough to yell at the other two men to go back upstairs and check the other rooms. She suddenly realized she didn't want the other two soldiers to leave. Every instinct told her she would be in more danger if they left than if they stayed.

Now there were only the three of them. The man with the screeching voice shoved the terrified soldier on top of her. He pushed down hard on him, yelling at him to get even closer.

* * *

“This is how we teach these animals a lesson.”

He felt the pressure from above pushing down hard on him, but his body kept refusing to move. The pair of eyes under him were terrified, and he thought he couldn't bring any more pain to those eyes without bringing incalculable pain to himself.

“Rip the dress off of her!” The *Hijena*'s hot breath enveloped him. “Do I have to kill you in order to teach you anything?”

He was caught up in the pile of rags with the girl pinned underneath him. His tormentor was on top of both of them, shouting in his ear.

* * *

He's going to get himself killed. That thought spun through her head until it became a certainty: He was about to be shot. The things she been taught as a child raced through her mind, but none of them had anything to do with what was happening at that moment. Nothing made any sense.

The young soldier was pushing down on her, while at the same time he himself was being pushed. The madman hovering over both of them was going to shoot him, and then he would shoot her. They would both be left to die like a pair of pathetic lovers with their bodies entwined in a pool of blood.

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He tried to get free, but the *Hijena* was on him, yelling in his ear, and reaching under him to tear at the girl's dress. As her clothes came off in shreds, she seemed to be letting up. Was she giving up, or was she trying to protect him?

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His eyes had a tearful message: *I'm so sorry.*

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The eyes below him seem to answer: *I know.*

* * *

The *Hijena* finally grabbed him by the shirt collar and pulled him back up.

"You're through with that. Now, we have to get out of here."

He looked down at the girl and then back at the soldier.

"Now, shoot her."

The *Hijena* waited a second and then yelled at him again.

"Did you hear what I said? I told you to shoot her. You can't leave witnesses around for this kind of thing. Do you want me to shoot her for you?"

He stared at him.

"You have a gun, use it."

San Francisco – 2011

Gina

It was a happy crowd. Friday night in a mid-town restaurant in San Francisco can be pretty lively. I was by myself, but there was a guy eyeing me from the other end of the bar. I'd seen him earlier, when he was chatting up the bartender. She hadn't responded to his advances, so he'd turned his attention towards me. I could see why she wasn't impressed. He preened every time he moved his body. I'd picked up enough women's intuition along the way to know that was a bad sign.

I did a quick assessment, trying to decide where he fit on my internal scale. Most women develop an alert-system as they're growing up – an instinctive gauge that measures the threat or benefit of every man who approaches them. My situation was more complicated. I didn't start out with that skill, but I learned a version of it later on. Right now the system was working, and I was pretty sure of one thing. This guy was not in my green zone.

But where did he fit in? If he wasn't at the top of the scale, was he all the way at the bottom where my fear gets tangled up in paranoia? I tried to visualize him in a war-like setting with hate in his eyes. That's a quick judgment I make with every man I meet. If I sense anything, my body tenses up and the old wounds come roaring to the surface. My fears have never really left me. I can be standing in the middle of the bookstore – thousands of miles away on another continent – and suddenly everything might drop out from underneath me. Then I'm back in a dark room staring down the barrel of a rifle.

But this guy hadn't touched that hot wire. As I watched him swirl his drink at the end of that big, brass bar, I decided there wasn't much to worry about. I climbed down from my fears and stuffed them back in their cage. He was still looking at me, but he wasn't much more than a nuisance. He'd turned his body so that he was facing me, probably trying to decide when he should slide down the bar and make his

move. He wanted to be cool about it, but he was failing completely. At that point it was pretty easy to see that he was just some character out by himself on a Friday night, trying to get laid.

I should have been flattered – maybe even gratified – that my feminine charms were working so well, but instead I was just uncomfortable. I’m not that kind of woman. I know that sounds a bit prissy, but I mean it more literally than figuratively. There are things I don’t really talk about until I know you pretty well.

When Silvia texted me earlier, saying that she’d be late, she said to meet her at the bar. But right then I was wishing I’d told her no and just sat at one of the tables near the door. I had an advance-reader’s copy of Isabel Allende’s new novel that I planned to give her, and I would have enjoyed re-reading a few pages while I waited. I could have sat with my legs demurely crossed, looking a bit bookish. And those twenty feet or so between me and the others at the bar would have made all the difference. I would no longer be a pickup-waiting-to-happen. Even in the most sexually sophisticated city in the world, when a man sees a woman standing alone at a bar he thinks he owns her.

The bartender placed a Rye Manhattan in front of me, and I took a slow taste, enjoying the quick, bracing effect of the first sip. I stared ahead, focusing on the array of gourmet wines and liquors that covered the long front window behind the bar. The early evening light from Market Street filtered in through the glass behind the bottles, twinkling through the browns, ambers, and yellows of the liquids, creating a soft, unexpected light show. It was one of the subtle touches that made the Zuni Café my favorite restaurant in the City.

That guy – I didn’t even bother to look at him anymore – was going nowhere because I could sense how clueless he was. He wasn’t the only one like that. My search for some sort of sensitivity in men had been utterly fruitless, and the selection seemed to be getting worse. I wasn’t sure what attracted me anymore. They all seemed to miss the stuff that’s important to a woman – important to me, anyway. I’d had my brown hair cut earlier in the day, and it curled softly around the collar of my slate-colored jacket. But ten minutes from now, this guy – and probably all the rest of them – couldn’t have told you the color

of my hair or my jacket. I was wearing a pair of opal drop-earrings and a hand-crafted necklace that I'd picked up at a vintage jewelry store on Hayes Street, and there was a trio of bracelets on my right wrist in a matching color. The skirt was something I'd found in a thrift shop on Fillmore Street, and it went with an old pair of shoes that I had. My ensemble wouldn't have won any fashion awards, but it reflected who I was at the moment.

The thing I needed in a relationship was proving elusive. I longed for someone who would enjoy the subtleties of my feminine persona, but that kind of man wasn't easy to find. The field, I knew, was very limited. I needed a person I could trust with a long, unpleasant list of things from my past. He had to be someone who wouldn't be shocked by my wartime experiences or freaked out to learn there were people still trying to track me down. If my fears kicked in from time to time, he'd just have to accept it. And he'd have to put up with my dwindling hope of finding a lost child who by now was on her way to becoming a grown-up. And, of course, there was the big thing – the secret about me that wasn't really much of a secret at all. He would have to do more than just accept that part of me – he would have to rejoice in it. My special someone had to be willing to get beyond the outer-me and draw on my inner yearning for love.

But the guys I'd been meeting were nothing like that. They were like this one at the bar. I have big brown eyes that draw some attention, and I have long hands that I use to gesture a lot. But that's not where most men stare. When they look at me, they only see a woman in her late thirties with somewhat angular features and a slightly skinny ass. I probably fit some vague idea of what an evening's companion should look like. But guys like this, if they got that far, would be in for a surprise.