

BENEATH THE MARIGOLDS

by Emily C. Whitson

EXCERPT

Prologue

I knew too much. On that island, on that godforsaken singles' retreat. I knew too much.

I ruminated on that thought, chewing it carefully, repeatedly, while Magda, the makeup artist, transformed me into a life-size nightmarish porcelain doll. Ghastly white face, penciled-in eyebrows, blood-red lips. I'd look beautiful from a distance, she had told me, leaving the other part of the sentence unspoken: *up close, it's frightening*. She tsked as she dabbed my damp forehead for the fourth time, her Russian accent thickening with frustration.

"Why you sweating so much?"

I worried my voice would come out haggard, so I shrugged, a little too forcefully. Magda shook her head, her pink bob sashaying in the grand all-white bathroom as she muttered something foreign under her breath. My gaze danced across the various makeup brushes on the vanity until it landed on one in particular. I shifted my weight in the silk-cushioned chair, toyed with my watch.

"Magda, what do you want out of this retreat?" No response.

Did she not hear me, or did she choose not to respond? In the silence, I was able to hear Christina's high-heeled feet outside the bathroom.

Click, clack. Click, clack.

When I first met the host of the singles' retreat, I was in awe of her presence, her unflappable poise. Shoulders back, she walked with a purpose, one foot in front of another, and though she was a couple inches shorter than I was, she seemed larger than life. Her icy eyes, colored only the faintest shade of blue, seemed to hold the secrets of the world—secrets she intended to keep. But I had stumbled upon them just a few short hours before, and I was now afraid her gait represented something more sinister: the march of an executioner.

Click, clack. Click, clack.

Her stride matched the even tick of my watch, and a drop of sweat trickled down my back. Was I being ridiculous? Surely Christina wouldn't hurt me. She had been reasonable with me earlier, hadn't

she? “One meenute,” Magda shouted at the retreat’s host. She doused my fire-red curls in hairspray one last time before asking me if I was ready to go.

“I just need to use the bathroom.” I wheezed through shallow breaths. “I’ll be right out.”

Magda exaggerated her sigh before shuffling out of the white-marble immurement, closing the doors behind her with a huff. My last remnants of safety and rational thinking left with her.

I shoved the vanity chair underneath the door handle. I grabbed the makeup brush with the flattest head and hurried to the bathroom. I gingerly closed the lid of the toilet and slipped off my heels before tip-toeing on top so I could face the window. After removing the beading, I inserted the head of the makeup brush between the frame and glass. The brush’s handle cracked under the pressure, but it was enough to lever the glass out of its mounting. I placed the glass on the floor as gently as I’ve ever handled any object, trying not to make even the slightest sound, before hoisting myself up and through the window. I jumped into the black night, only partially illuminated by the full moon and the artificial lights of the mansion. I allowed my eyes to adjust.

And then I ran.

The loose branches of the island forest whipped at my cheeks, my limbs, my mouth. The soles of my feet split open from fallen twigs and other debris, but the adrenaline kept the pain at bay. I tripped over something unseen, and my hands broke my fall. Just a few cuts, and a little blood. I couldn’t see it, but I could feel it.

I jumped up, forcing myself to keep moving. The near darkness was blinding, so I held my bloody hands up, trying to block my face. The farther I ran, the more similar the trunks of the trees became. How long had I been running? I gauged about a mile. I slowed down to gather my bearings. Behind me, the lights of the mansion brightened the sky, but they were only the size of my palm from that distance.

I heard the hum of a moving car come and go. I must have been near the road. I was about to start moving again when I heard the snap of twigs. Footsteps. I stopped breathing. I swiveled to my left and right, but nothing. I exhaled. It was just my imagination. I continued away from the lights. Away from the retreat.

And then someone stepped toward me: Christina. Her face was partially obscured by darkness, but her pale eyes stood out like fireflies. “It doesn’t have to be like this,” she said. Her expression remained a mystery in the darkness.

I turned around, but one of her handlers was blocking that path.

Christina took another step forward, and I jerked away, tripping over the gnarled roots of the forest in the process. My head broke the fall this time, and my ears rang from the pain.

Her handler reached for my left hand, and for a moment, I thought he was going to help me stand. Instead, he twisted my ring finger into an unnatural position. As my bone cracked, my screams reverberated through the woods.

It was showtime.