

THE DAMNED LOVELY by Adam Frost

EXCERPT

I took a sip and checked my phone. Waiting for the screen to *siiiiing*. Praying. Hoping.

She held her ground and I lost the fight.

The empty telephone. Reminding me, I had no excuses. To be in a better place. To be successful.

I was an American.

I was white.

I grew up safe and surrounded by love.

There was money for birthday parties and proper schools.

I had a college degree in communications.

I'd traveled to Southeast Asia. Seen Europe. Touched down in South Africa. I had a sweet girl who liked to cook and wanted a ring. We had an apartment in West Hollywood with good light.

I'd found a marketing gig early and wrote ad copy for seven years. Logos. Corporate promos. Internet ribbons. Microcopy drawl. Quippy garbage that paid the rent and then some.

I was on the right track.

Until I broke. Crashed the cart and pulled the plug on my world of California lies.

Staring into those smiling faces across a Doheny dinner table one night.

The masquerade of happiness.

The Instagram sham.

There was no substance. No truth. No intent for anything more than gain.

I had sealed the truth for years. Locked and bottled that depression south, convinced I could kick it. Convinced the gnaw would pass.

Things are great, I kept saying. Things are great.

But something about those faces on that very Doheny night popped the cork and shattered the glass. I called it out. I let it rip ugly. These weren't my friends. They were assets. Nothing more.

This wasn't love. This was compliance on rails.

I needed something pure. Something with purpose and mine all mine. That I truly adored.

So I quit the girl who liked to cook. Lost the apartment with the light and moved to Glendale. Where it was cheaper. Where there was no good light.

And worst of all. I was compelled by a force inside my bones to write something real. Something long and from the heart. Something maybe even wise.

This, more and more it seemed, may have been a grave mistake.

It was in no way working out.

Still, I refused to believe in misery. *An honest rut is all.* It'll turn around soon. It *has* to. Because when you're going through hell in Glendale, keep going. *Right?*

So. Soldier on. Live with intent and drown those voices out.

Drown. Them. Out. Soldier!

Swish. Swish.

A red Trojan alpha bro was swipin' right at the bar. Americana run off sipping a sea breezer with a skinny lime. Slice and I shared a healthy glare of disdain when Jewels crossed behind me and nodded to stool 9.

"She's baaaack," Jewels cooed.

And there she was. Hiding her green eyes under a black felt fedora and a worn-out paperback of *To the Lighthouse*. She had dark brown hair pinned low at the back. Wore a simple tight white V-neck tee exposing that soft skin around her collarbones. She sat straight. With her legs crossed in black jeans that pinched in at her waist and exposing a band of flawless smooth lower back. She kept her face down. Never spoke to a soul beyond ordering a drink. And never looked at her phone. Not once. Not once had I seen her look at her phone. Instead, she just buried her eyes in that book. Drowning out the world with a Negroni and Woolf's words like some kinda mystery from a different era. She'd been in four times now by my count. And it was consistent. Early in the afternoon. Same drink. Same book. Alone. Like an oasis in this godforsaken Glendale desert.