

WHAT MEETS THE EYE by Alex Kenna

EXCERPT

CHAPTER 1: Six Months Ago – Margot

All week long, I'd felt a fire in my belly. The spirit passed through me like lightning, brushes flying from wet canvas to wet canvas. Cooking was a waste of time, so I ordered takeout and drank whiskey. Sleep was out of the question. I cranked up the music and worked to the beat. Sometimes I sang along, dripping globs of color onto the floor. The paint went on smooth, like buttery icing. After a while, my brushes stayed in their jar and my fingers danced across the canvas. No bristles between skin and cloth.

Soon the images came alive. I'd been studying the Spanish greats: Velasquez, Goya, Zurbaran, Ribera. For them, it was all about bottomless darks with hints of warm, mellow light. I took a break from bold colors, indulging in white and yellow ochre on burnt sienna. The effect was sinister but mesmerizing. One after another, my hands pulled ghostly figures out of a dark void.

I finally passed out around dawn on Thursday, just as the birds were starting to chatter. When I woke, it was midafternoon, and the magic was gone. My mouth tasted of bile and I felt like someone had scooped out my eyeballs and punched me in the sockets.

I wandered into the bathroom and looked at myself in the mirror. One of Goya's haggard witches stared back at me. My skin was the color of rice pudding. There were purple half-moons under my eyes and a cadmium streak in my hair. I picked at my nail beds, filled with Prussian blue. The thought of cleaning them was exhausting so I didn't bother.

My stomach let out a growl and I stumbled over to the fridge. Nothing inside was fresh enough to tempt me. I turned to a soggy takeout container on the kitchen table. The waxed cardboard had partially melted, and a puddle of sauce oozed onto the table. A dead fruit fly was trapped inside the congealed orange liquid like a mosquito in amber. I pulled a half-eaten egg roll off last night's dinner plate and popped it in my mouth. At least it was still crispy.

After lunch-breakfast-dinner, I had an edible and downed a pot of coffee. I tried to get back to work, but the electricity was gone. The images that were so alive last night now looked dull and

mannered. A self-portrait smirked at me. I'd given myself a pouty red mouth like an Instagram twat and artificial jolly-rancher-green eyes. It was pathetic. The last desperate cry of a lonely train wreck nearing forty. I felt worthless. I should go jump off a bridge or wander onto the freeway.

I lay on the couch for what must have been hours, binge watching some show about British aristocrats and their servants. Thank God I wasn't born in nineteenth century England. You can't be a British lady if you're a mouthy alcoholic who screws half the landed gentry. I would've done worse as a servant. I can barely fry an egg and half the time I'm too paralyzed by my own shit to get out of bed. I'd end up as a consumptive whore blowing sailors for my supper in a London tenement.

The curtains were drawn, and eventually light stopped leaking in from the window edges. I usually do better when the sun goes down. But nightfall didn't bring me a second wind. It made me feel worse. I poured myself another drink and lit a cigarette.

My cell kept blowing up with a number I didn't recognize. I'd had this phone for six months and never transferred my contacts over from the last one. Now my caller ID served as a kind of litmus test. If someone hadn't reached out in half a year, they weren't worth my time. I let it go to voicemail and turned back to the aristocrats. The only decent one was dead now. This show was making me tired.

There was a knock on the door. Probably the neighbor coming to tell me her baby couldn't sleep because I make use of my electronics. I ignored it, took a swig of whiskey, and lit another cigarette.

Then whoever it was started pounding. "Margot, open up," said a loud baritone. The voice was familiar, but I couldn't place it. His tone had an edge of desperation. Could it be that cop from last week? A wave of dread flowed through me. My hands started shaking and a clump of ash fell on the couch. If I kept very still, maybe he'd think I wasn't home and go away. No, the TV was too loud. He knew I was in here.

I tiptoed over to the keyhole and gasped. My drink flew from my hand and shattered, coating the floor in alcohol and shards of glass.