

“Chokshi’s tale is as sweet
as a piece of fairy fruit,
and just as wicked.”

—V. E. SCHWAB,

#1 *New York Times* bestselling
author of *The Invisible Life*
of *Addie LaRue*

The
LAST TALE
of the
FLOWER
BRIDE

A NOVEL

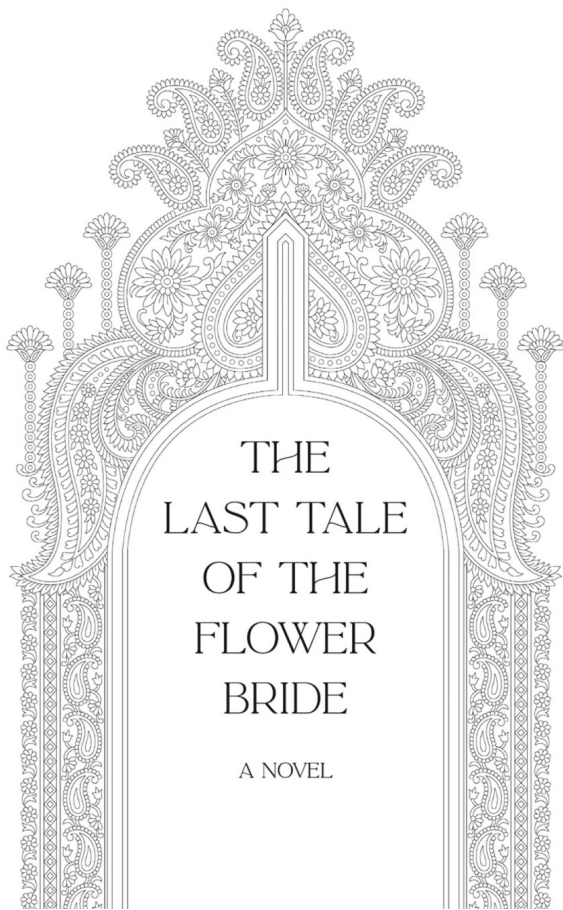
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ROSHANI CHOKSHI



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THE
LAST TALE
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A NOVEL

Dedication

*For Aman, whom I would wear out iron shoes for, and for Niv, whose
friendship is the rarest form of magic*

Epigraph

Myths are but lies breathed through silver.

—C. S. Lewis

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Prologue

You warned me that knowing your secret would destroy us.

At first, it sat in our marriage like a blue-lipped ghost, hardly noticeable until a trick of the light drew it into focus. But you could always tell the days when it gnawed at my thoughts. You tried to comfort me. You stroked my face and curled my fingers to your heart.

You said: "If you pry, you'll destroy our marriage."

But oh, my love, you lied.

Chapter One

The Bridegroom

Once upon a time, Indigo Maxwell-Casteñada found me.

I had been lost a long time and had grown comfortable in the dark. I didn't imagine anyone could lure me from it. But Indigo was one of those creatures that can hunt by scent alone, and the reek of my desperate wanting must have left a tantalizing, fluorescent trail.

Before Indigo, I avoided places where money served as pageantry rather than payment. I clung to the opinion that they were loud and crass, the shabby but sturdy armor of a poor man. In those days, I was poor. But I had become rich in expertise, and it was in this capacity that I served as a visiting curator to *L'Exposition Des Femmes Monstrueuses*. The exhibit had brought me to Paris on someone else's dime and, eventually, to the Hôtel de Casteñada.

Once one of the royal apartments of Louis XIV and Marie Antoinette, the Hôtel de Casteñada now ranked among the finest hotels in the world. The vaulted ceiling, a restoration of the original, I was told, still showed indifferent, muscular gods reclining amidst gold-bellied clouds. Ivy lined the walls, through which the snarling faces of stone satyrs peered and panted at the guests.

It was common knowledge that each of the Casteñada hotels centered on a fairy-tale motif. I gathered this one was an homage to Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve's *La Belle et la Bête*—Beauty and the Beast—and while I hated to admit it, something about it seemed not of this world. It was so lovely I could almost

ignore the crowd of models and DJs, red-faced businessmen and whatever other brilliantly arrayed and ostensibly vapid creatures such beautiful places attracted.

“Sir?” A slim, dark-skinned waitress appeared at my side. This was the second time she’d stopped by my table. I had chosen one near the back of the room so I might keep an eye on the entrance. “Are you sure I cannot get you anything?”

I glanced at the menu beside the haphazard collection of notes I’d prepared for the evening. The cocktails started at fifty euros. I smiled at the waitress, raised my half-filled glass of water, and then tapped the empty dish of complimentary spiced nuts.

“Perhaps another of these?” I asked. “My guest must be running late.”

The waitress managed a brittle smile and walked away without another word. She probably thought I was lying about meeting someone. Even I couldn’t quite believe my intended guest would deign to meet with me.

After months of searching for the whereabouts of a thirteenth-century grimoire, I had traced it to the private collection of the Casteñada family. Initially, my requests to view the piece had gone unanswered. This was not surprising. I was well known only in academic circles as a Middle Ages historian with an interest in the preservation of incunabula. I had nothing to lose but time. So I wrote letter after letter, stood for hours as the fax machine spit them out into offices around the world. I lost a tiny fortune in long-distance phone calls until, finally, I received a message one week before I flew to Paris.

*You may meet me at the hotel on the 7th of November.
8 o’clock.*

—I.M.C.

I.M.C. Indigo Maxwell-Casteñada. The heir of the Casteñada fortune.

I knew nothing about him, and I preferred it that way. I have never understood this preoccupation with the rich and famous and how they spend their existence. All that naked yearning for their lives, the

hushed surprise over the coincidence of a shared birthday . . . I preferred different fantasies.

I checked my watch: 8:45 P.M.

Perhaps he'd forgotten our meeting? Or maybe he was already here and simply wrapping up a previous engagement?

Across the room, I felt a pair of eyes on me. Twenty feet away sat a couple in an isolated booth that resembled a golden birdcage. The man caught me looking and grinned.

"A diamond martini for the lady!" he shouted, snapping his fingers.

The man had a mop of yellow hair, a head too heavy for his neck. He bore a distinct resemblance to a melting candle. Beside him sat a woman as voluptuous as a temple carving.

The bartender approached their booth, pushing a glass cart of cocktail accoutrements, and immediately set about measuring, pouring, shaking. He was followed close behind by a sharply dressed dark-skinned man carrying a velvet box. A jeweler. The man opened the box, revealing an assortment of diamonds.

"Pick," said the yellow-haired man to the woman. "The diamond is yours."

The woman pointed one pale finger to the brightest, largest carat. The bartender held out a frosted martini glass for the jeweler. He dropped in her chosen diamond, and it sank like a fallen star.

"À votre santé," said the jeweler as the bartender departed with the rattling cart.

The woman, still grinning, lifted her fingers as if she might pluck out the jewel. The old man beside her grabbed her wrist—

"I said the diamond was yours. I didn't say you could take it out of the fucking glass."

The woman appeared stung. She looked from the glass to the man, her eyes narrowing.

"I'm fucking serious," he said, even as he laughed. "If you want it so badly, you can find it in tomorrow's filth."

The woman was clearly disgusted. For a moment, I thought she might throw the drink in his face. Across the room, our eyes met. She drained the glass in one go, diamond and all. And then lifted her chin in defiance, her gaze full of ugly recognition: *You are starving prey. Just like me.*

I hid it well, but she was right: I was always hungry. A single moment of either madness or mystery had shaped my life. Ever since, I have sought proof of the impossible and bent my whole life around the feeding of it.

I fanned out the pages on the marble table, studying my notes for next week's speech on the myth of Melusine. The print before me showed Melusine with tangled, waist-length hair, bat wings, and a coiling, serpent tail. Her hands were clasped in demure horror, as if she were clinging to some last vestige of genteel shock before she could abandon her husband for his betrayal.

Melusine had been made famous in Jean d'Arras's fourteenth-century writing. Depending on the source material, she was something of a mermaid or a siren. One day, a nobleman came across her in a forest glade and begged her to be his wife. She agreed on the condition that he never spy on her while she bathed. The nobleman agreed, and for a time they were happy. But eventually, curiosity overwhelmed him and, one day, he spied on her as she bathed, saw her true nature, and lost her forever.

I have always been intrigued by these not-quite women, whether they were sirens or mermaids, kinnari or selkie. The world can't seem to decide whether to condemn, covet, or celebrate them. They're damned as reminders of lust, and yet the House of Luxembourg enthusiastically claimed descent from Melusine's unnatural bloodline, and inside an eleventh-century church in Durham Castle there lived a mermaid carved in stone. Hundreds of years ago, perhaps some pagan entering a church to escape the cold would have seen that carving as a message. A password, of sorts, that even in this strange place and strange religion lay something familiar . . .

Even if she is a devil.

"Sir?"

I looked up, ready to admit defeat to the waitress and leave when I saw that she was holding a platter with two drinks. She held out an envelope: "A gift from another guest."

The two drinks looked identical: a rich amber whiskey with a perfectly clear sphere of ice. I opened the letter.

The drink on the left will fill your belly for the rest of your days, but you will only be able to speak truths.

The drink on your right will leave you hungrier than before, but it will polish every lie that leaves your tongue.

I looked around the room; a strange tingling worked its way up from the base of my skull. Even before I reached for the glass on the right, I imagined that magic liquid gilding my tongue. I drank. The whiskey tasted like a hot knife, burnt and metallic.

Seconds later, I heard the softest laugh. I turned in my seat, and that was when I first laid eyes on Indigo Maxwell-Casteñada. Not a man at all, but a woman.

She leaned against the wall, hardly ten feet from me, wearing a column dress of shirred navy silk that looked as if it had been poured onto her body. Sapphires winked at her throat and ears. Silver flashed on her wrists.

She moved lightly. I want to say that it was gentle and serene, like a fawn through snow. But Indigo's grace was restrained, calculated, as if she knew that people like her could stomp the world into submission and she had no wish to bruise it further.

At first glance, Indigo was attractive. She did not become striking until one looked closer, noticed the way she held herself, or rather, how the light held her. As if she were something precious. Her skin was richly bronzed, her eyes large and dark, nose lightly snubbed, and her lips had a curious fullness—the bottom lip not quite as ripe as the top. This asymmetry transfixed me.

She made her way to my table, sank into the chair opposite me, and announced: "I am Indigo and *you* chose to go hungry." Her voice was low and rich. I had the deliciously absurd thought that each syllable was steeped in onyx and chords of music. "Why?"

"Between the two choices, I may not be able to live long without food, but I don't have a life worth living without the other."

She smiled.

Some individuals are like portals, the knowing of them makes the world a far vaster place. In Indigo's presence my world widened. Brightened. There was something about her that made the eye linger. It wasn't her beauty; it was the way she seemed

superimposed on the room. A mirage that might vanish if I looked away.

“What do you recommend I drink?” she asked.

This ease, this exchange of nonsense with Indigo Maxwell-Casteñada, could not possibly be real. Thus it was from a place of disbelief that I spoke in whimsy.

“I was hoping they might serve us something less human,” I said. “Ambrosia, if they have it.”

“Is it hard to come by?”

“A little. The ancient Hindus believe it resides in an ocean of cosmic milk.”

“The sea is too far,” said Indigo with a melodic sigh I could feel on my skin. “Maybe liquid gold? Or is that unappetizing?”

“Diane de Poitiers, a famous mistress of Henry II no less, drank gold to preserve her youth.”

“Did it work?”

“Supposedly she died of it, which is to say, she didn’t get any older.”

Indigo laughed. I caught her perfume. I thought she’d smell of amber and night-blooming jasmine, but she was adolescently sweet with the sort of synthetic, sugary green apple fragrance I associated with high school girls. On Indigo, it was like cover-up, a wolf rubbing sheep’s fat into its fur as camouflage.

She snapped her fingers and a waiter appeared, bearing two glasses of Champagne.

“To hope,” said Indigo, clinking her glass to mine. “And to all the beautiful ways in which we can forget its fatality.”

After a sip, she eyed me over the rim of her flute. “Are you not starved for something?”

That famished chamber of myself shivered. “I’m always starved.”

“Good,” said Indigo.

Platters of food began to arrive: tins of caviar in silver bowls filled with ice; quail braised in pomegranate molasses and wine; a rack of lamb so succulent the meat slid off the bone without protest.

Indigo made no mention of my request to see the grimoire from her private collection. Instead, she began by asking what I thought the eternal would taste like, which season I would want to live in for a

decade and why. If I tried to speak about my life, her smile dropped. If I spoke about current events, she'd turn her head. About an hour or so into our meal, I grew too curious.

"It seems that I'm offending you every time I bring up reality," I said.

"Reality?" she repeated, with a touch of scorn. "Reality is what you make of your surroundings. And the world outside my own cannot touch me." There was a note of sadness when she said this, as if she were a ghost and her hands now passed through things once reached for with ease.

"I know you feel the same way," she said in that smoked voice. "I've looked you up, Professor. I've even read your books."

The thought of Indigo trailing her elegant finger across one of my sentences made me feel exposed. She had not laid a hand on me, but I already knew the texture of her skin.

"You're fascinated with the world we cannot see, the creatures that might have lived within them but now only exist as fairy tales. I suppose that's why I wished to meet you." A shy softness flitted across her face. She hesitated, her full lips jutting into a pout before she continued. "You see, I wish to live a certain way, and I'm interviewing companions for that life."

Whenever I think of our first meeting, I am reminded that the word "seduction" comes from *seducer*, to draw aside. But Indigo did not draw me aside so much as she drew aside the world I had always lived in and showed me a way of living a world apart.

She saw straight to my naked hunger and smiled. Her chair scraped back as she leaned across the table. The flames danced; candlelight gilded her skin. She became a question, and the answer she saw on my face made her close the space between us and kiss me.

In her kiss lay wonders—the humming of firefly wings and the secret of alchemy. On her tongue was the ghost of roasted plums, forgotten poems. I was so entranced that I almost didn't notice when she bit down. When I pulled back, her teeth looked rusty.

And only then did I realize she'd drawn blood.