

Chapter 4

*Bohemian Rhapsody*

A concert of trash bins rattled through the window, trailed by a quartet of coughs, shouts, grunts, and phlegms. It was the first day of a miraculous new world.

My joy from the previous night had settled now into a humming vibration. It was as if I were floating, encased in a warm kind of globe. Inside me, I could feel a strange new energy pulsing in my cells the elixir of immortality. All within me—physical and spiritual—sang in perfect unanimity, like a choir of baby angels. Everything was soaked in creamy, dream-like slowness. And everything was him, and I felt him everywhere.

Skippping, I jumped out of bed. I played *No Ordinary Love* on blast. Then I went into the bathroom. After I washed my face and combed my hair into a bun, I went back in the bedroom, opened the dresser door, hugged it—in fact wrapped my leg around it—and kissed the mirror slowly.

“Helen?!” I suddenly heard. “Helen?! Wake up! You have a presentation today!”

The last thing on my mind was my *Perspective* presentation. All perspective, in general, had entered the shadow of my new spiritual interest. What, after all, was more worthy of effort than this creative force of selfless devotion to another human being? I say selfless because—at least in the first stages of love—there is a superhuman drive that conquers all the ego’s devices. The spirit, fortified to a peak, absorbs the body and self, suspending you in a pink bubble of advanced consciousness. Those who have truly been in love know this feeling very well. Concepts reign here, images, dreams. A simple reverie is enough to fill you with strength. The mere idea of your lover is equally cathartic as the image of God. With these profound meditations, I poured my legs into some black tights, a peach-colored skirt, a pair of boots. Then I went downstairs.

The house we lived in then was all marble and parquet, and carried an air of makeshift Versailles. It was stuffed with glossy furniture, timid chandeliers, silk-shaded lamps, and all sorts of silver trinkets. Mornings, notably, had a special luster owing to the butter-painted walls. In any case, it was a beautiful house, where one coiled up in velvet and forgot the ugliness outside.

My mother waited at the table. When I saw her, I smiled as though I was seeing her for the first time in my life. She wore an ivory cashmere sweater. Her pale hair was gathered in a bun. Her lips glimmered with pink and her smooth chocolate eyes gazed at me with love, a trace of fatigue, much understanding. Beside the silverware, her wrists resembled selenite. She was slicing an avocado. She was breathtaking.

"Finally," she said, raising her eyebrows in a gently scolding way. "You went to bed late, didn't you?"

I told her yes.

"Did you have fun?"

"Yes."

"Good. Come, eat something."

I noticed then the glossy yolks, the salmon with cucumbers and butter, the asparagus, strawberries, apricot jam, oats with yogurt, and other charming colorful things, arranged like doll food.

"Thank you. You shouldn't have gone through the trouble."

"The trouble?" She laughed a surprised, sparkling laugh. "It's just the ordinary lunch."

"Yes, I know. But so much food."

"Have you forgotten you've got brothers?" I had, indeed, *completely* forgotten them.

"Lucian! Felix! Get down here, my darlings! Now!" Footsteps rustled upstairs. Then, turning to me, she said, "So, are you ready?"

"Ready for what?"

"What do you mean, for what?" The same surprised, sparkling laugh. "For the presentation!"

"Oh, yes," I said quickly, then too affected: "Yes, of course I'm ready!"

"Helen, are you all right? You've been drinking, haven't you?"

"No."

"You're not okay, or you haven't been drinking?"

"I'm fine. Just a little tired." I wasn't tired at all and could have skipped the Himalayas naked.

"Perhaps you should've stayed home? "

"I don't know. I don't think so."

"I should've listened to your father."

I shot her a fake, understanding smile. My mother was a soft, submissive woman, married to a tough and domineering man. Out of some innate fear of conflict, she rarely disobeyed him and behaved as though he had eyes and ears in the air. She was, in every sense, the absolute wife. From the small, repetitive, domestic hells she had managed to make Heaven. She was a great celery juice maker and when she wasn't in the kitchen, she was with the ironing board. I don't recall ever seeing my mother read, though she was quite fond of architecture magazines. Her private life was rich in style, sparkling kitchen appliances, yoga mats, serums—all those highly-curated rituals of tasteful prosperity. At forty-five, she weighed fifty-five kilos, wore white pants with billowy blouses, and radiated a certain frightened-virgin charm. She was impossibly elegant, and I think she was happy. Her idols were Ralph Lauren and God.

"What are you doing with the fork?"

"What? "

"Why are you eating your oats with the fork?"

"Um—"

"I hope you're not on drugs."

"You don't give me enough money for drugs."

"You're acting quite strange."

For reasons you will deduce, the discovery of my new erotic state seemed fatal to the evolution my happiness. And I felt that I would burst soon, into one of those terrible smiles displayed by criminals on death row. Still, I had to keep it together.

Summoning the fertile creativity of Aphrodite, I straightened my back, looked at her coolly, and, lowering my voice, I said:

"I'm not acting strange at all. If you must know, I'm nervous. I'm nervous, as I have a presentation today which I've thoroughly prepared for and I've set myself the goal of no less than an A." Her proud smile filled me with encouragement. "And later on, |" I said "I have to meet with the Professor. Yes, I know it's a lot, but it's all for the best. I—I want to make you proud of me, Mother. So, I'm networking. It's what they call it these days. I don't know how to explain it. It's this new business-culture claptrap, hi-im-dan-and-I-hold-the-wineglass-by-the-stem type nonsense. People from different backgrounds meet up in a bar and the first thing they ask is '*Who are you and what do you do?*'" Yes, rude indeed. I think they watch too many American shows. It's all quite funny. Balkan version of *Suits*." She shook her head in puzzled amusement. "Plus, it's not like I have much to say. But neither do they. Good for connections, though. In five years, I could go into Politics. You always say I have the gift of persuasion. Perhaps I don't want to spend my whole life at construction sites. Perhaps I could do more."

She looked at me with sweet, infinite curiosity and trust. I went on:

"If you really want to know, I've sort of set my mind on becoming a Culture secretary. Really change something, you know? Fund the Opera, the Ballet, introduce 'Etiquette' in pre-schools. And you'd be my second-in-command. Oh, we could do so many beautiful things! And all this vision needs to be thought out, planned ahead, every step, every move. And if you add to all this that I'm a diligent student, that I refuse—out of pride—to earn anything less than a B, then I hope you understand my absorption, and if I seem a bit strange, it's just because I've got a lot to think about."

I gasped for air. My mother was transfixed with emotion. Behind me, I heard ripples of laughter.

"Long live Madam Secretary!" More laughing.

"Enough. Sit down. Well done, my dear. But don't overwork yourself. And you haven't eaten anything. Do you want some strawberries with toast?"

"And what will be your first assignment, Madam Secretary?"

My mother eyed him sternly.

"Mum, she's drooling over some diplomat and feeds you these pathetic lie—"

"Stuff it, lame brain."

"You're the lame one, Helen! I see you smiling like a moron—aaalll the time! Did you know, Mum, that she smokes in the bathroom 'til two in the morning?!"

"I told you that I've caught the workers smoking," I said toward my mother, whose eyes had ballooned. And you—", I turned to Felix.

"Don't worry, Helen. The way you lie, I think you'll end up in the White House."

"Felix!" said Mother.

At this point, some description of my brothers is in order, who have briefly stumbled on the stage. There are five and six years between us, I being the oldest, Felix the youngest. I am the creative in the family. They were the practical ones. I am, in essence, a thinker—driven by my interests, curiosities, and passions. Their passion was directed at annoying me. By age fourteen, they oozed with self-sufficiency and charm. Meanwhile, at fourteen, I battled a depression that threatened to exterminate me. And yet, every leap in practicality came at the expense of something else. For in terms of creativity, they had just as much as a dead slab of chicken, slapped with mayonnaise and crammed into the freezer. Yes, the dark forces of imagination had avoided them completely. I often deployed these forces to quash them in arguments.

"What have I told you, countless times?," said my mother. "You must be united! Defend one another! It's like you're enemies, sometimes!"

"You don't even talk to your sister," said Lucian.

"Of course I talk to her! It's just a matter of distance. We live in different countries, we have different lives. Doesn't mean we don't talk. I just called her. On Christmas."

"Everybody talks on Christmas," said Lucian.

Then Felix said: "Did you speak to Dad?"

She nodded. "He was just checking in when I called. Which reminds me—maybe this will cheer you up a bit."

With huge effort, I simulated interest. I was still enveloped in my altered state of consciousness, and the words melted at my ears like marshmallows in the sun. As she spoke, she spread some butter on toast. The scraping sound took me back to childhood, to Christmas mornings with lemon tart and cold milk, and a crying fit over a wardrobe scandal, then shopping at Saks. Although it wasn't noon yet, the sun shone brightly through the curtains, covering the room in a peach-coloured mist. Three bands of light hovered on the table. The edges of dishes sparkled like fireflies. My mother's words—indescipherable—floating in the air like a Moroccan song. Everything exuded light, cleanliness, infinity, warmth. I had the feeling that I was in some sort of womb. Or perhaps a coma dream.

"So when are we leaving?" asked Felix.

My stomach fell into my ankles.

"Well, nothing's certain yet."

"Wh-aaat?" I moaned.

"It's going well for him in New York, you know. And we thought, why not go back after all? What's keeping us here? And perhaps your words have finally caught up to me," she said while eyeing me. "It's like I'm starting to see all the misery."

I blinked in disbelief.

"Look, I know I often disagree with you. In my mind, I still see the country I grew up in. Sure, even then it wasn't Switzerland, but—how do I say it—people were different, kinder. Perhaps some people really are nicer in oppression. Freedom lets them be themselves. Anyway," she said, biting a cucumber, "as I was saying, nothing's keeping us here. We'll sell the house in a few months. With that money, we'll open a café. I've always wanted a café in SoHo. Can you imagine it? You can even decorate it yourself, dear."

I already had three arguments to counter this madness, and listening with fake exasperated gladness, I considered which one to begin with. There was no room for rebellion. Rebellion would sow only persistence. I had to give the idea its appropriate weight, consider it matter-of-factly, analyze it scrupulously, and finally, after exposing its weaknesses, crush it in the cradle.

I said, "It sounds like you've considered this for some time."

"Not long, but—"

"I think it's a brilliant idea," said Felix.

"There are also good high-schools in New York," added Lucian.

They had beat me to it. I had planned to launch my strategy with the academic argument.

"I'm sorry, but I don't understand," said Mother. "I thought you'd be over the moon. You're always giving us speeches about how unhappy you are here."

That was true. I had built an entire persona as an adversary of Romania. But abandoning this stance too quickly would have been a foolish move. No, the situation called for a gradual, oblique approach.

"You're right," I said. "I *am* unhappy here. But I've only started getting used to it."

"To being unhappy?" Mother laughed. "Good Lord, you're such a Thespian!"

"When are we leaving, mummy?"

"Cut it out." Then she said to me, "First of all, the reason I had this conversation with your father is you. You've covered us in criticism! That we took you from your precious New York, brought you here, exported your childhood—no, wait, *murdered* your childhood!"

Precisely. And now they wanted to murder me, too.

"Mum, don't get me wrong, I'm not opposed—"

"You're not exactly hopping either!"

"If you must know—" I said, deciding to unleash the malignant powers of emotion "—the reason I'm not thrilled is because I finally have a life here. After all this time, I finally feel some sense of home. I have my routines, my places, even a group of friends, and—"

"The hillbillies with a diploma?" said Felix.

"Not all of them are like that," I said slowly, clenching my teeth.

"Go on."

"Plus, I've also got Georgina and Mikaela."

"Wasn't it just a month ago that you had nothing to say to them?"

"Liar! I didn't say that, because it's not true!"

"You'd told them about some British chick—"

"Virginia Woolf."

"And they asked you if she starred in Grey's Anatomy."

"Fine! I said it about Mikaela."

"You said she was as dumb as a panda."

"Did I? Well—I've learned in the meantime. And what's the point of having friends the same as you? Who's to say anything new? She didn't have my opportunities."

"How charitable you've become, sister. I wonder what has caused it."

"Alright," Mother said, "I understand, darling, but at the same time you do realise that a decision like this shouldn't be based on some friends?"

"What decision?" I said. "I thought it was just an idea."

"Only til your father signs the contract. And, well, there's every chance that he will, because it's Vlad we're talking about. They've known each other since high school."

"Vlad married to Matilda?" asked Lucian.

"He's no longer married to Matilda."

"Why?" I asked. "Did he kill her?"

"Divorced."

"Same thing. How much did the scoundrel take? He must've taken five, at least."

"Ten," said Mother.

"Ten million and an American citizenship? Now, that's a career!"

"It's not our place to judge."

"Yes, why judge a business partner?" I said. "More fun to judge the Catholics."

"The thing is," she continued, ignoring my comment in her deeply personal way, "Vlad is doing great in Connecticut. Wants to expand. It's true that he wouldn't have done it without Matilda, but it's not like we eat at the same table. He's just a partner. The issue is this: if they start building together, your father won't be around much."

"None of us are crying," I said.

"Yes, but why split up the family? Not to mention that the decision to come to Romania was a financial one. We caught the right moment. And I'd say it went pretty well, didn't it? Now it could be even *better*."

"You know, mum, for someone so in love with money, you could at least have been Jewish."

"God brings abundance, my dear. And if you hate money, it's just because your parents worked for it, so that you could stay home, and read, and afford all these wonderful opinions."

"When do we know for sure?" I said.

"About the contract?"

"No, not about the contract, Mother. About the excavation of Troy!"

"Whatever is the matter with you? You seem quite frantic today! He'll call me tomorrow. On Friday he said they were meeting with some Serb. And if everything goes smooth, in two weeks they'll be seeing the lawyer in New York."

"I'm sorry, is it just me, or did you just describe the makings of a fraud?"

Her round eyes bloated with offense.

"Fine, never mind. Let's assume they sign, and Dad goes into business with a traitor and the Albanian mob."

"Helen!"

"Sorry, Serbian."

"Shame on you."

"But how do we go about it? How long is the fuss going to take?"

"Oh, I don't know. I mean, it shouldn't take long. The packing is more of a hassle, but I'll call Lyla—"

"And the house?"

"What about the house? Lucian, isn't Filip's father in real estate? " Lucian nodded. "See? But that could take up to a year."

"You still haven't answered me."

"I really don't see why you're so bothered! I don't know! Two months!"

"Two months???!!"

"Yes! Perhaps less! For Heaven's sake, what's with you today?! I thought you wanted to escape this hellhole!"

I realized then that the decision was made. That Mum missed Dad, and this small but deeply private precondition had paved the way for considering the move. That in finally considering it, it had struck her that America indeed had better schools and a more sophisticated social landscape. That all their money was better spent there anyway, with those townhouse neighborhoods, and city buzz, and children running in their Catholic uniforms. Not to speak of *Bloomingdales*, or the home floor at *Macy's*, or *Bed, Bath & Beyond* after a Sunday at *Rizzoli*. And all those things I had tirelessly advocated, for six long, soul-sucking years.

"I think you're making a mistake," I said.

Felix began laughing, rubbing his palms together.

Mother looked at me, stunned. "But you always say—"

"I know what I say!" Searching for an explanation for what I always said, a meadow of ideas bloomed inside my mind. I plucked the most bombastic ones in a lavish bouquet and, with calm firmness, delivered my speech:

"In the mind, everything is beautiful. It's only when you seriously consider something, it's only when it almost happens—I mean when you weigh it in the real world, with all its consequences, efforts, choices—"

"God, you're full of—"

"Felix!"

I continued: "*Then* you can judge it at its true value! What I mean! Listen to me! What I mean is that it's very easy to imagine that New York is going to save you. That you're happily running about, eating lox bagels and . . . and pepperoni pizza. Without getting fat, or cold, or—" At this moment, a gigantic idea infiltrated me, so perfidious that it was very hard to keep a serious face.

"By the way, an interesting thing, can you imagine being cold? Look—just a second, be patient, you'll see what I mean. Imagine, for example—let's see—a landscape in Alaska. Are you imagining it? Okay. Now fill it with beautiful things. With sparkling snow, and baby deer, and a blue sky, and—and colorful birds.

Add some hot chocolate too. Listen! Please! What does it matter where you got the chocolate?! Add it! Okay. And now here you are with the mug in your hand. A fresh breeze blows on your cheek, and a fluffy, cappuccino cow nudges you to pet it. Almost there! Imagine the cow! Okay. You might think, during this time, that you'd experience some catharsis. But did you ever think of the cold? No one does. And yet, if right now, you were teleported to the place in conditions identical to your imagination, I assure you that the following things would ensue. One, you would die of the cold, literally. Two, after five minutes, all your fantasy would crumble, and you'd want to take shelter. And three, you would face so many logistical problems—mud, no signal, wet socks, boredom—that you'd instantly regret it all. And, very possibly, miss home."

Like moths in front of an eternal fire, all of them froze. I took advantage of the moment to deliver the finale: "Some things have a greater meaning in the mind. Romania, for better or worse, is our *home* now. And there are good things about it, after all. The people, for example, the people are . . . are . . . are authentic! Yes! Or do you prefer the American who laughs like a madman in the morning: *Hiii, how is your day?* The day hasn't even started and already he wants explanations! At least, here, people are real . . ."

"How touching!" Mother shouted. "Just the other day they were all dumb animals!

Then Felix said: "And toothless to boot!"

I had underestimated them, but still had sufficient inspiration in the tank. I roared wildly:

"Better toothless than heartless!"

"Brutes! Scoundrels! Fart-stinking gypsies!"

"That's right!" I shouted back. "That's right, indeed! And even gypsies are more honest than a Wall Street man!"

"Dear girl, are you on drugs?! If you're on drugs, say it now!"

"She's in love!" yelled Felix. "Look into her eyes, mummy! She's finished!"

"I am not in love! Look, let's ask Lucian! Lucian, don't you think this move is a bit rash?!"

"Helen", Lucian said calmly, "sometimes the best—"

"Stop!" I said, raising a palm. "If you've started like that, you can stuff it."

"Helen?" said my mother, beaming. "Is that so, my darling? Are you in love? If you are, why don't you tell mummy?"

"I AM NOT IN LOVE! But . . . but . . ."

A claw had gripped my throat. I felt very full and very warm, and a bit dizzy from the mix of feelings simmering inside. Clearly, I'd miscalculated my persuasive powers. But also my mother's resolve. As this resolve was new, nothing like the ease with which she managed my predicaments. All those years I'd begged her to go back—none of it had mattered to her. In the end, her own desires mattered. I felt that if I moved an inch, tears would gush from me like a tropical waterfall. Naturally, this only fueled my anger. My brother I hated. For a moment I thought of hiding my derangement beneath a well-deserved pounding. All I had to do was throw the salmon at him, and the stage would be set for all kinds of liberating violence. Still, considering he was a vicious bastard, I could expect a nasty fight that would involve my mother calling on the holy powers to separate us. This would then lead to her beautiful, condemning tears, and a final round of a demonic screaming match. On the other hand I felt—in that soft peach fuzzy daylight—that I couldn't taint the first day of the new world with such filth. I had no choice but to squeeze the jewels of sorrow, and then I remembered some proverb from a bookmark and—rising—I spoke tearfully: "BUT A PLANT OFTEN MOVED WILL NEVER GROW ROOTS!"

I shoved Lucian hard, who came to embrace me.

"Dear girl," Mother chuckled in concern. "I really think you mixed up your career. We should've taken you to Drama school!"

"Me too!" I said.

"And what about you?" she laughed.

"I think I mixed up my career!" Then I rushed through the hallway where I tugged my coat on crazily, right before a splendid door-slam, but not before shouting:

"I THINK I WANTED TO DO SOMETHING ELSE!"

Three days later, I nearly died of shock when, trembling with a familiar emotion, I opened a text that read:

*The Odyssean galley docks in Macondo!*