

Guillaume Musso

GIRL ON PAPER

a novel



When I Met You

One must have chaos within oneself to give birth to a dancing star.
Friedrich NIETZSCHE

AN EXPLOSION A WOMAN'S CRY A CRY FOR HELP!

The noise of breaking glass wrenched me from my nightmare; I opened my eyes with a start. The room was plunged into darkness, and rain pounded on the windows. I painfully pulled myself up into a sitting position, my throat parched. I was feverish and drenched in sweat. I had trouble breathing, but I was still alive. I glanced at the alarm clock:

03: 16

I had heard some movement downstairs and distinctly heard the shutters banging against the wall. I turned on my bedside lamp but nothing happened; as often happens, the storm had caused a blackout in Malibu Colony.

I hauled myself out of bed and somehow managed to stand. I was nauseous, and my head felt heavy. My heart was pounding, as if I had just run a marathon. Suddenly seized by a dizzy spell, I had to lean against the wall to keep myself from falling. Maybe the sleeping pills hadn't killed me but they had certainly sent me to Limbo and I was having trouble getting myself out. My eyes especially worried me: it felt like someone had scratched them, and they burned so badly I had trouble keeping them open.

Tortured by a migraine, I forced myself to go downstairs, holding tightly to the banister. With every step, I had the impression that my stomach was turning over and that I was going to throw up all over the staircase. Outside, the storm raged. In the glare of the lightning, the house resembled a lighthouse in the middle of a tempest. At the bottom of the stairs, I studied the damage: the wind had blown a picture window wide open, knocking over a crystal vase that had shattered on the floor, and the torrential rain was beginning to flood my living room.

Shit!

I ran over to close the window then dragged myself to the kitchen to look for a box of matches. As I was going back into the living room, I suddenly sensed a presence and heard someone breathing.

I spun around and...

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A svelte, graceful female form was silhouetted against the night-blue light from outside. I jumped and squinted: from the little bit I could see, the young woman seemed naked, one hand on her crotch, the other hiding her breasts.

This is all I need!

“Who are you?” I demanded, heading towards her and looking her over from head to foot.

“Hey, do you mind!” she cried, grabbing the plaid blanket lying on the sofa and wrapping it around her waist.

“What do you mean, ‘Do you mind?’? That’s priceless! May I remind you that you’re in my house?”

“That may be, but it’s no reason to...”

“Who the hell are you?” I asked again.

“I thought you’d recognize me.”

I couldn’t see her clearly, but her voice, in any case, did not sound familiar, and I was hardly in the mood to play games. I struck a match and lit the wick of an old hurricane lamp that I’d picked up at a Pasadena flea market. A soft light filled the room, revealing my intruder’s physical appearance: a young woman of about 25 with half-frightened, half-mischiefous blue eyes and honey-colored hair dripping with rain.

“I don’t see how I could have recognized you—we’ve never met.”

She let out a small, mocking laugh, but I refused to play along with her.

“OK, that’s enough, Miss! What are you doing here?”

“It’s me: Billie!” she said as if it were obvious, pulling the blanket up over her shoulders.

I noticed that she was shivering and her lips were trembling—hardly surprising: she was drenched, and the room was icy.

“I don’t know any Billie,” I answered, walking over to the large walnut cupboard where I stowed all my junk. I opened the door and rummaged around in a sport bag, finally laying my hand on a Hawaiian-patterned beach towel.

“Here!” I shouted, tossing her the towel from the other end of the room. She caught it in mid-air and dried her face and hair with a defiant look.

“Billie Donelly,” she specified, waiting for my reaction.

For a few seconds, I remained motionless, without really understanding the sense of her words. Billie Donelly was a minor character in my novels, a fairly appealing girl but

somewhat clueless, who worked as a nurse in a public hospital in Boston. I knew that a lot of female readers had identified with this “girl next door” who had one screwed-up love affair after another. Taken aback, I took a few steps in her direction and shined my lamp on her. She did have Billie’s slender, dynamic and sensual look, her luminous, small face, slightly angular and dotted with discreet freckles.

But who was this girl? An obsessed fan? A reader who identified with my character? An admirer yearning for recognition?

“You don’t believe me, do you?” she said, sitting down on a stool behind the bar in the kitchen and grabbing an apple from the fruit basket, biting into it with gusto.

I set the lamp down on the wooden countertop. Despite the acute pain searing through my brain, I was determined to remain calm. Intrusive behavior in celebrities’ homes was commonplace in Los Angeles: I knew that one morning Stephen King had found a man armed with a knife in his bathroom; that a would-be scriptwriter had gotten into Spielberg’s house just to get him to read a script; and that an unbalanced fan of Madonna’s had threatened to slit her throat if she refused to marry him...

I had long been spared this sort of phenomenon. I avoided TV programs, refused most requests for interviews and, despite Milo’s insistence, did not go out of my way to promote my books. I took a certain pride in the fact that my readers apparently liked my plots and my characters more than my modest self, but the media’s coverage of my relationship with Aurore had, in spite of myself, tilted me from the category of writers into the less prestigious one of “people”.

“Yoo-hoo! Anyone there?” “Billie” called out, waving her arms. “God, you’re like a walking zombie and the bags under your eyes look like a donkey’s ball sack.”

The same colorful vocabulary...

“OK, that’s enough now. Put some clothes on and go home quietly like a nice girl.”

“I don’t quite see how I’d get home...”

“Why?”

“Because my home is in your books. For a so-called literary genius, I find you a bit slow on the uptake.”

I sighed without giving in to exasperation. I preferred trying to reason with her:

“Miss, Billie Donelly is a fictional character...”

“OK, I agree up to that point.”

Well, that was a start...

“But tonight, here in this house, this is called reality.”

“That seems clear to me.”

Ok, now we’re getting somewhere.

“So, if you were a character in a novel, you could not be here.”

“On the contrary!”

I knew it was too good to be true.

“Explain how, then, but explain quickly because I’m really exhausted.”

“Because I fell.”

“Fell from where?”

“Fell from a book—well from your story, I mean.”

I stared at her, incredulous, without understanding a damn word of her ravings.

“I fell from a line in the middle of an unfinished sentence,” she added. To convince me, she pointed at the book on the table, which Milo had given me at lunch. She stood up, brought it to me and opened to page 266. For the second time today, I skimmed the passage where the story suddenly came to a stop:

Billie dried her eyes, surrounded by dark streaks left by her running mascara.

“Please, Jack, don’t leave like that.”

But the man had put on his coat and opened the door, without so much as a glance at his mistress.

“Please!” she screamed, falling.

“You see, it’s written: ‘she screamed, falling’. And it’s into your house that I fell.”