

The Devil's bouquet by Jasmine King

The calendulas. Those sweet-sweet calendulas. Those cursed calendulas.

A bouquet of orange calendulas, starting to turn black around the edges, sit in a vase by the window of her grey room in the asylum, where it feels like she is the only patient, lost in a labyrinth of madness and purgatory, his faceless face fading in and out of her head, laughing at her and taunting her, his stone eyes staring into her shrinking soul.

She wasn't always like this.

Not until that day...

It was a hazy summer afternoon and she was walking back from the well, the sun melting her olive skin in the Ebro river valley, the place she called home, famed for its eternal beauty and its flowers that grew all year in its rich hills. Incessantly, an orchestra of cicadas harmonised in tall grass, their melodies broken by the footsteps of Rosalía stumbling through dry meadows of sweet calendulas that peppered the baked earth, balancing cumbersome urns of water strapped to her back. The hallucinating mirages in the distance played tricks on her mind like nomads imagining an oasis in a fruitless land.

Rosalía was alone. She had always liked being alone, the calmness of it all, just her and the stream, studying the ebb and flow of the water as it cut through loose pebbles and the silky bellies of the fish as they glided through the current. She glanced into the distance.

A black shape suddenly emerged from the tall grass that wavered in the mirage and was straggling through the valley. What Rosalía had thought appeared to be a deer was now a figure. Her heart was racing, a cold sweat surfaced on her forehead, her veins pulsing. Dressed in a cloak and a rifle slung over its neck, it trampled over the rocks to the stream, where Rosalía could now make out what it was.

The figure bent down, gulping the water desperately. His head was ashen and grey but his face bore no features, as he suddenly turned his head towards the direction of Rosalía and she jumped out of her skin. With an intense curiosity, or malice, he was staring at her. His opaque eyes were empty, like stones, as if they had been carved out of rocks. Rosalía shivered.

He slowly advanced towards her, leaving behind him a trail of black dust like breadcrumbs. The stream turned into black ink and so did the flowers and the grass as he walked. Drawing into his black cloak, he produced his own bouquet of beautiful calendulas to her, the only thing he touched that didn't turn black, with such vehement colours that enraptured and enchanted Rosalía, who took them from him under their spell.

“You are mine now,” he cursed.

Panicking, Rosalía took her urn of water and threw it at him in agony, but he began fading like an aging photograph right before her eyes, his skin, the rifle, and his cloak disintegrating into black dust. The only thing he left was the valley shrouded in an impenetrable darkness.

The calendulas she was holding suddenly began to turn red, then a deep crimson, then black.

From that moment on, he was always there in the corner of her mind, shadowing every thought, every notion, every hope, every dream. He was always there invading her very soul until at the very heart of who she was, she had become him and he had become her. In essence they were the same person. She was permanently distracted and bemused, confused and disturbed. His satanic, negative, destructive thoughts overshadowed her everyday existence, haunting the cold corridors of her mind.

She would go out to buy flowers and return empty handed, having turned the flowers black with her fingertips. She tried to walk through the meadows in the valley but the water in the well beckoned for her to fall in. She looked in the mirror and all she could see was a shadow. He was always there. Everywhere she went would be in darkness, as if he had given her his eyes of stone.

At last, she gave way to the destruction, she let it all consume her core. What looked like a cry for help was a last ditched attempt to bring him to his knees. To stop him relishing in her world, pretending he was her.

The asylum was her revenge. It brought her quiet. It brought her calm. He could no longer behave as the devil- there was no point. He had no audience. She looked at the blackening Calendulas.

In a strange reverse logic, she had won.

