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novel about love and loss'
The Bookseller

'Nadia Mikail has crafted a complex and
cathartic coming-of-age story that will leave
readers feeling a deluge of emotion'
Holden So, author of *If You Still Recognise Me*

'A truly beautiful novel, heart breaking and
mending all at once. Stunning and vulnerable,
Mikail is a much-needed, unique voice in YA'
Lizzie Huxley-Jones, author of *Reality Check*

'A moving and beautiful portrayal of grief, memory, and the complexity of trauma. *A Flood of Memories* is heart-wrenching and heart-warming in equal measures and is a book that will stay with you long past its last page'
Adiba Jaigirdar, author of *Four Eids and a Funeral*



GUPPY
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Content note: This book contains depictions of alcoholism, emotional abuse, loss of a parent and anxiety. For information on where to find support, please see page 301

A FLOOD OF MEMORIES
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A FLOOD OF MEMORIES

NADIA MIKAIL



GUPPY
BOOKS

Ke mana tumpahnya kuah kalau tidak ke nasi

Malay proverb

PROLOGUE

"He just made really strange choices," Leila told Poppy as the cast bowed to rapturous applause, or as close to rapturous as a school auditorium audience could deliver on a Wednesday night. "As a leading man."

"Oh, I don't know, I don't know," Poppy said. "He had charisma."

They walked out into the evening. Leila clutched her coat tighter around her. She resisted the urge to look at her watch. She was on time – but sometimes that didn't make a difference.

"But why would he play him like that?" she asked again.

Poppy looked amused. "He really made an impression, huh?"

"No, I mean," Leila said, "in the scenes with his cousin. He's gentle in them. In most adaptations George Farrer is miserable and dismissive. But the actor played him very kind. I've never seen an adaptation where he is."

"You're such a nerd," Poppy said affectionately.

"I could do it different tomorrow night," a voice offered from behind them.

"Oh, man," said Poppy. "This is the sort of thing that only happens in movies. And of course it would happen to us."

They turned and looked at the leading man. Under the streetlight he looked kinder than ever, his brown eyes glowing, his beanie tugged rather unsuccessfully over his large ears. He was beaming.

"I'm glad you noticed," he said. "I was pushing the director to let me play him like that."

"Why?" asked Leila.

"It's better if he *is* gentle with his cousin," the lead actor said very seriously. "Complexity is confusing. Something awful can often be hidden inside something very tender. Like in the second act, when he gives him the key." It was still in his hand. He lifted it up and rubbed his thumb

against the shiny ridge. "I wanted the top hat as a souvenir, but the prop team said that was on hire and they gave me this three-ringgit key that unlocks nothing instead."

"Maybe George is only tender when she's looking," Leila said, watching the light glint off the metal in his hand. "That's the facade."

"But I think he's tender when no one's looking, too," the lead actor said, playing with an earlobe thoughtfully. "It's when he is consumed with rage that's the issue. And he's so often consumed with rage. He feels he can't control it, either. Not that that excuses him."

"I think I'm getting very sleepy," Poppy said, bored and sly. "And if you want to continue this debate you can exchange numbers very quickly and let us get home."

The lead actor looked at Leila. He had really long lashes. During the play, he had mispronounced a word – *awry* – and because Leila had been second row and watching him, she'd seen him wince just a little at the end of the sentence. It had been inordinately endearing.

"Well, you're wrong," she said, but she was pulling out her phone.

"Oh! You just had to ask," he said, taking it from her.

Their fingers brushed. Leila fought the urge to shiver at the phantom touch.

Instead she rolled her eyes and bit back a grin. "I could just delete it."

"Please don't. You know, I could do it different tomorrow night," the lead actor said, programming his name into her phone as *Arthur Lemos*. "But it'd be a worse performance, I think."

"I won't be here tomorrow night," Leila said. But Arthur was too busy adding a tongue-out emoji, a key emoji and, bizarrely, a blue-waves emoji, to the end of his contact details.

"I've got to go," he said. "I was just eavesdropping. But please come tomorrow night. You'll see I'm right." He waved goodbye and started jogging away.

"I'm not coming back tomorrow night," Leila said to his retreating back. There were butterflies in her stomach that she'd never felt before.

"You're lying!" Poppy said gleefully.

"I'm not," Leila said, absently staring into the space he'd occupied. Arthur Lemos had returned her phone, but he'd also slipped her the key the prop team had deigned to give

him. Poppy hadn't seen it. Leila felt its blunt ridges with her thumb, warm where his had been.

Leila wasn't lying. She didn't go back. She didn't text him, either.

She did keep the key.



Memory was an aching thing.

"Close your eyes," said Pak, adjusting Leila's weight on his shoulders.

Leila swayed and giggled. "My eyes are closed," she insisted, peeking. "They are."

"Leila! I know you, my little girl," Pak said. "I can feel you looking out! Don't think that just because you're five years old now you can trick me. Ren, make sure she doesn't look."

Mak stood on her tiptoes and peered at Leila and told Pak, "Her eyes are closed."

"Hm. Now we're walking to the surprise," Pak said, and the world beneath Leila started moving, Pak steadying her feet with his hands. "Now we're going up a slight incline. Balance yourself, Leila."

"What's an incline?" Leila asked.

"It's when a road goes up," Pak explained, "like when we go up a hill, or a slope . . ." He huffed and readjusted his grip on her legs. "Like this one."

Leila squinted to see no one was checking – Mak was a few steps behind with their picnic basket and backpack, focused on going up the incline – then she peeked out from behind her fingers again.

It was a hot, sunny day. They were hiking along the trail, tall trees the only thing she could see apart from the path ahead, green moss all over the large rocks around them. The air was quiet except for the little chirpings of birds she could hear somewhere above their heads. A drop of sweat was rolling down Leila's cheek.

They walked and walked. Leila could feel Pak getting more and more sweaty, his hair damp against her T-shirt, but his hands were firmly on her calves and he didn't stop to rest, not until he said, "Leila, close your eyes again."

She did it this time, because Pak had known when she hadn't the last time. When she was told to finally open them, they were on the edge of a beach, no more trees blocking her view. The clean calm sand, the big, big sea.

She saw the sun, low in the sky, almost golden over the water. The sky was so blue and beautiful here. The clouds were white and fluffy.

"Wow," Leila said, awed.

"Won't you look at that," Pak said.

They walked forward, sand sloshing into their sandals, and found a spot to lay down their mat. Mak opened up the picnic basket and out came some of Leila's favourite foods: chocolate chip cookies, peanut butter and Nutella sandwiches, a carton of strawberry milk. Pak stuck a cookie in his mouth and asked Mak why she hadn't brought the six-pack he'd bought for today. Mak said she was sorry and they had a serious adult conversation that drifted vaguely in the background as Leila watched the endless motion of the waves and focused on picking the nutty bits out of her cookies. But then eventually Pak opened the backpack and out came pink goggles *just* like she'd been asking for, because it meant she could finally learn to do what Pak did every other day after work: sluice through the water like a fish for hours, while Leila sat on the benches by the pool and watched enviously.

Leila gasped with joy and reached out for them.

"Did you know your name means *night*?" Pak asked her, adjusting the straps on her goggles. "But the whole day is yours, kiddo – the whole world, all of this." He waved his hand over the sky, the sun, the sea. "You need to know that, or you won't go out to get it. Do you understand?"

Leila didn't really, but she nodded, looking out into the water, and Pak smiled down at her.

"Happy birthday, Leila. Today I'm going to teach you how to swim."