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Opening extract from

The Robber Baron's Daughter

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Chapter One

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Memories and Secrets

A figure came out of the darkness. He stood in the hall; motionless; breathless still; silent as space. A dim light caught his shadow and it began to expand and grow, blotting out the light, as if Satan himself had spread his wings, creating a black hole which was devouring the whole house.

'I want to know more about you. As far back as you can go,' said Nettie's new tutor.

Far back . . . earliest memories . . . back and back. Sounds and images swirled in her head as she put pencil to paper, and she seemed to disintegrate. She was stardust again – that was how Miss Kovachev, her previous tutor, had described her. 'Antonietta Roberts, you are nothing but *stardust*.' Nettie could hear her

voice now – high, sometimes edgy, as if she might burst into tears any minute, other times tinkling with laughter and excitement. 'Out there in the universe, stars have been exploding forever,' Miss Kovachev had whispered with awe. They often stood on the balcony of Nettie's bedroom, which looked out across the park, gazing up at the night sky, sometimes gasping at the sight of a shooting star.

'Who knows what they've seen, these stars: fire flaring for thousands of miles, a maelstrom of meteors hurtling past, huge torrents of rocks and boulders tumbling through space in an eternal flood. Throughout aeons of time, stardust has been sprinkling through the cosmos, landing on other planets, mixing with all sorts of minerals and gases, creating life – dinosaurs, pterodactyls, lungfish; creating you. You are made up of all the elements in stars: hydrogen, calcium, iron, magnesium, salt; 0.005 per cent of you is sea water. It's all carbon: all living things are made of carbon, and carbon comes from stars. Antonietta, you are made of stardust.'

'I hope I won't be dusted up by the old woman who

swept the cobwebs from the sky,' Nettie had giggled, humming the nursery rhyme as she bent over her exercise book. She had tried to think how it would feel to be stardust; whether she could remember whirling through the universe until, caught in the gravitational pull of the earth, she had descended like fine rain, gleaming silver and gold in the dawn light, some of her particles falling on land still steaming with heat from exploded volcanoes, some of her falling into water – deep, dark, unfathomable water. 'Was I alive?' she had asked Miss Kovachev.

'You were neither alive nor dead. You were life.'

Life – even the solid things of the house seemed alive: the walls, the water pipes, the hollow spaces behind the wooden panels and the staircase winding round the hollow heart of the house. All seemed to breathe, observe, listen; all seemed to mutter and gossip among themselves with creaks and groans, gurgles and knocks, as if conferring with each other.

And the Boy understood.

*

'You won't get anything written with your pencil hanging in the air,' her new tutor chided, as she stared into space. 'Come on, there must be something you remember.'

His name was Don. Funny that she had always called Miss Kovachev 'Miss Kovachev'. She had never known what her first name was – and then she was gone. Nettie hadn't seen her go, saw no suitcase ready to be packed – and no one told her why, or where, and she still didn't know what her first name had been. But she was to call this one 'Don', and was never to know his last name.

Somehow, she didn't want to tell Don about her memories, or her secrets. *She certainly wouldn't tell him about the Boy.*

'Can you remember being in your pram?' asked Don, trying to sound encouraging, but Nettie saw him glance at his watch as he asked her.

Miss Kovachev's voice would have been probing, inviting her to explore her memories with all the excitement of travellers discovering new countries,

rivers, jungles or outer space. But Don's voice was dispassionate. It was a task for him that needed to be done, and she found his lack of enthusiasm left her blank, and her memories stifled.

Yet she knew that in the chambers of her brain, there were thousands of memories. She could go back to when everything was above her head: sounds of voices, laughter, discussions, arguments, anger, tears and, sometimes, the soft words of making up. She seemed always to be looking upwards. Looking up at the grown-ups was like looking up at the sky, making out shapes and faces in the clouds. And when she was lying in bed, faces swam into her sight. Her mother in shining silks, her pretty face, smooth as alabaster, somehow always backlit, the edges of her dark red hair dancing with lights as she bent to smother her with perfumed kisses in a goodnight embrace. Sometimes her father came in too, and she would giggle and wriggle, trying to escape his tickling hands. Darling Daddy, he was so handsome and kind – everyone said so, and Mother grumbled and pouted because so many

women liked him for his strong athletic figure, his long, swept-back light brown hair, his smoky blue eyes, his elegant courtesy, and the way he made you feel the centre of the universe when he talked to you. But everyone agreed he was such a good father.

As long as she could remember there had been those grown-up parties her parents were always throwing, wherever they were in the world. Ever since she was a young child, Nettie had been sneaking out of bed to spy on everyone, peering through banisters, edging her way step by step down staircases, and hiding behind pillars or potted plants.

Sometimes they spotted her, and laughed. 'What are you up to, little Nettie?' they exclaimed. And if they came upon her eavesdropping on a conversation, they would hold up a warning finger and say, 'Hush! Little pitchers have big ears.' She knew that meant her – and the more she felt adults had secrets, the more she wanted to know.

As she grew older, she got to know that Olga, the cook, secretly liked her vodka and often drank it

straight from the bottle; that Gimley, the butler, had a girlfriend who waited for him on his days off; that Ella, her own personal maid, sometimes cried when no one was looking, because she loved Tamas but he didn't love her; and Mrs Bainbridge, the housekeeper, waged war on everyone.

Tamas was her mother's bodyguard. Nettie called him 'Swivel Eyes', because whenever they went out Tamas came too, always a little behind, looking as if he wasn't with them, his eyes constantly on the move, scanning faces, doorways, windows and rooftops. He was like one of those cameras you find in banks, always watching, always panning smoothly and silently, all the way through ninety degrees then back again.

But sometimes, as Nettie wandered unnoticed, knee-high, and later waist-high, among her parents' friends, she picked up snatches of conversation which she didn't completely understand: that Tommy just went and blew fifty grand at the casino last night, or that Marky came through with another *consignment* – whatever that meant, or that the price of shares in

commodities was dancing a bit, or that Lenny gave Marissa a hundred thousand pound diamond necklace for her birthday, and she was still discontented with her marriage!

Her father was called Vlad, short for Vladimir, and sometimes his name was mentioned in undertones, as if they didn't want to be heard. 'Vlad impaled that soft-bellied idiot. Gottit coming to him,' Nettie once heard, but Nanny came and whisked her away to bed.

As she grew older, Nettie was allowed to appear before the guests, all dressed up like a princess, and everyone would come over to pat her head, stroke her cheeks, and give her hugs and kisses. And Daddy would say proudly, 'This is my greatest asset – along with Peachy.' He drew his wife and daughter into the curved clasp of each arm, while everyone sighed and smiled to see such family bliss.

But though she still listened, and asked questions, no one was able to tell her where Miss Kovachev had gone. Somehow, there would be a strain in the air if she spoke her name, which Nettie detected but couldn't

understand. *Well, if they wouldn't tell her where Miss Kovachev was, she wouldn't tell them about the Boy she had seen sneaking and creeping around.*

'You must at least be able to remember moving into Regent Mansion,' suggested Don, with exaggerated patience. Write this down, and then carry on: 'I remember the first time I saw Regent Mansion, and I thought it was . . .'

'Horrible,' wrote Nettie. 'That's what I thought it was going to be. It had no swimming pool, no tennis courts, no jacuzzi in the bathroom, no hot tub in the garden . . .' She came to a stop again, and remembered her father's words. 'This will be our pad in London,' he had said when he had shown her the house.

More like a dark castle, Nettie thought at first. Yet, though she had lived in villas in Sicily, chalets in Switzerland and Bulgaria, apartments in Paris, bungalows in Bermuda, and their high-as-the-stars sky-scraper apartment in New York, she had never lived in a town house as darkly mysterious as this, with four main floors linked by a winding staircase and an

elevator which ascended all the way up to a penthouse apartment. As she set out to explore, she felt a strange quiver of excitement, as though she was discovering a new land.

They had stood in the centre of the chequered floor of the lobby, gloomy, empty and echoing, their voices resonating. Nettie had looked up into the circular atrium, up and up, her eyes following the dusty, coiling oak banister spiralling and diminishing as it rose higher. The ceiling at the top was domed with grimy glass, and dust drifted slowly in the shadowy light. On that first day, she had leapt up the stairs, compelled to follow the banister, as if it had magical properties and was luring her to the top. She rushed in and out of empty rooms, opening panelled cupboards, discovering shutters which swung aside like fans and interconnecting doors which led into unexpected rooms.

She had reached the top and burst into the empty penthouse apartment, and frozen at the sight of a wall of windows, high as a bird, through which

London spread before her. Beyond the wide, sweeping greenery of the park, with its trees and flower beds and winding walks, she glimpsed the distant Post Office Tower pointing upwards in an eastern sky above spires and office blocks, hotels and residences, in a rising and falling skyline; and, though she couldn't see it, she knew that further beyond, winding through the city like a gleaming serpent, was the River Thames. She had crept forward till she had stood with her hands pressed up against the glass, feeling she could burst through into space. After that she had flying dreams.

But the room she loved best, and wanted for herself, was the round room in the tower. She had found it by groping up some dark side steps between the third and fourth floors, which she almost missed in her exploration. There was a door at the top. She tried the handle. Her fingers hesitated for a split second before she turned it. What would she find: an old lady sitting at a spinning wheel? Or Rapunzel, imprisoned by a wicked witch? Or might there be something more

terrible like the murdered wives in the secret locked room in Bluebeard's castle?

She stepped inside with held breath. It was dark and gloomy and yet full of a strange enchantment. Everything was round: the walls were round, the ceiling was round and the floor was round. It was like standing in the very centre of everything; like the pupil in the centre of an eye, or a hub in the centre of a wheel. She felt she was at the very heart of the whole world, and that she could feel it rotating in space.

Only the windows, instead of being round, were slits like the windows you find in castles. Perhaps archers had once guarded the house, peering out of the narrow openings with their bows fitted and the arrows resting on the sill, ready to be fired. Daylight shone through the slits and threaded across the bare wooden floor.

When she peered through the slits, though they were narrow, she found she could see the park in almost every direction, and the streets beyond, and the broad sky as wide as an ocean, in which silver aeroplanes

circled like sharks before diminishing into the distance as they hunted for their airport runway.

The room made her quiver with strange excitement. *I wish this could be mine,* she thought, and ran back down to her parents to stake a claim.

'We'll see, darling,' soothed Peachy. 'Whatever room you have, it will be beautiful, I promise you.'

'Only the best for my darling daughter,' laughed Daddy.

The Boy resented them coming. This house was his territory. He didn't want to give it up. He knew every inch of it: cellars and attics, its cupboards and pantries; he moved in and out of its rooms, up and down its stairways; he knew its secrets and understood its language. Creeping through dark passages, or threading in and out of rooms dusty with sunbeams, he sensed the spirits of past owners. They were watching too, just as he had watched the renovation begin – to make this old house new.

He tried sabotage. When teams of builders, electricians, plumbers and carpenters took over he teased them, threw them into confusion, and laughed at them when they began to ask fearfully,

'Is this a haunted house?' How could the tins of cream paint get moved to the room which was being painted green? Who muddled up the paintbrushes? Who unrolled the wallpaper and left it spread across the floor? Who removed the hammer from the tool-kit in the kitchen and put it in the bath? And who upset Bill the electrician who, when he found all his light bulbs had been unscrewed and placed, unbroken, on the floor beneath the sockets, walked out? 'Not staying here. It's spooked!'

But in the end, it all got done, and by the time Nettie moved in, the house had finally been transformed. It was like a palace. The gloom had been banished. The dingy hall floors had been replaced by glistening white marble flanked by Grecian-style columns and the ceilings hung with dangling crystal chandeliers; light and colour glowed throughout, reflecting in mirrors, dancing on Persian and Turkish carpets, and illuminating a rainbow of satin cushions scattered on sofas, armchairs and beds. Walls and woodwork had been painted in light creams, sunshine yellows and earthy browns; other walls were covered in wallpaper of

coiling leaves and exotic birds, and a bold, red velvet carpet rippled up four flights of stairs, gleaming in between the polished oak banisters.

It was a game. The Boy crept out to inspect what had been done and spy on the new owners. He tested the chairs and sofas, lay on the beds, turned on the showers and wallowed in the jacuzzi. He went to every floor, examining how each room had been designed and fitted for its particular function.

Mrs Bainbridge, the housekeeper, was beside herself. Someone had left all the lights on in the sleek new kitchen; someone had switched on the blender which she found going round and round with nothing in it; in the dining room someone had muddled up the silver cutlery, mixing the fish forks with the meat forks and the soup spoons with the teaspoons, which she had so carefully set for dinner on the vast walnut table, and someone had thought it very funny to turn upside down the traditional French gold-gilt armchairs in her lady's magnificent drawing room, and scatter the sofa

cushions across the floor. She was sure it was Nettie, but Nettie, the adored one and only child, was one person she couldn't touch even though she thought she was a spoilt little thing.

Mrs Bainbridge was exasperated and complained to Nanny George. 'For goodness' sake, control that child.'

Nanny wasn't at all convinced it was Nettie, and suggested it was probably one of the new young man-servants, but she did question Nettie's personal maid, Ella, about it. Ella just shrugged with bewilderment. Nettie herself denied all knowledge.

'Nettie may be a little spoilt,' Nanny reported back to Mrs Bainbridge, 'but she doesn't lie.'

However, despite the unexplained mischief, no harm was ever done, and the house soon looked as distinguished as any in England with its spacious rooms adorned with ornaments and paintings: here a Picasso, over there a David Hockney, in an alcove a Vermeer and over the mantelpiece a Monet. Nettie's father loved to be thought a cultivated man, and often attended the art auctions in New York, Paris or London.

On every landing, in every room, were vases festooned with flowers. Mother always said: 'I must have flowers,' and every day the flower van arrived, and the maids brought in armfuls of English roses and lilies, gardenias from Kenya or orchids freshly flown in from Thailand. Their perfume invaded the house. Luckily, it was Gimley who came across the newly delivered irises scattered across the marble floors of the hallway, otherwise someone's head would have rolled. He did wonder whether Cook was right about the house being haunted.

The old elevator had been ripped out, and a new glass lift rose like a bubble up one side of the atrium, passing the largest chandelier of all – a vast, shimmering constellation of crystal droplets, which hung on a looped iron chain as thick as a ship's anchor, lighting up all four floors. Once, before they had moved in, one of the night guards saw the elevator rising silently upwards, empty, as though someone had summoned it, only to descend, still empty.

The first thing Nettie had done, the day they moved

in, was to get into the lift, counting the floors as it carried her up to the top. She inspected Vlad and Peachy's apartment: their own private suite of rooms with bedroom, living room, study, kitchen and bathroom, now sumptuously furnished with soft white carpets, delicate embroidered curtains and mirrors held by golden cherubs. She tried out their vast bed, lying spread-eagled, feeling as if she could just float out of the windows and sleep among the clouds.

But when she was told which was to be her own suite of rooms on the third floor, she couldn't help giving a groan of disappointment. Even though they were light and airy: her bedroom, her sitting room, bathroom, play room and study, all painted and decorated in white and her favourite rose pink; even though she had tall French windows, with soft billowing curtains of white and pink, which opened on to an iron-wrought balcony festooned with wisteria and climbing rose, and even though her rooms all overlooked the park, she couldn't help exclaiming with regret, 'Oh! I did so want the Round Tower!'

'Darling, it's far too small for you, and cut off from the rest of the house,' explained her mother. 'We don't like you being out on a limb and so separate from all of us. Anyway, it's such a dark, gloomy room. I'm sure you'd have bad dreams. That's why we've given you this lovely, sunny suite, and you've got Nanny adjoining you so you won't be lonely.'

'But who will have the Round Tower?' Nettie sighed.

'That will be for Miss Kovachev.'