

opening extract from

the passionflower massacre

written by

nicola morgan

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Part One

The Year 2029

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Prison – Three Weeks Before Release

You had to be tough to do this, thought the little old woman as she looked up at the walls, hard and strong and cold and brutal. You had to have a touch of hardness yourself, when you spoke to the misguided souls inside. Prison was not supposed to be easy, she knew, but she had enjoyed playing her part in helping the occupants, making them ready for the world again. You had to do your best, your very best at all times, to make sure that they would commit no more crimes when they left.

You had to keep a part of yourself back, too, sometimes hide your true thoughts. Honesty is not always the best policy. Sometimes there is a higher aim.

To this higher aim, she would dedicate her remaining life. With passion.

A prison visitor she was, this old woman. Or Volunteer Friend, as they called them these days. Once a week, on a Tuesday, this gentle-faced little old woman

with her neat suit and her expensive handbag and her shoes from an exclusive shop in London, braved the cold sheer walls of Dartmoor prison. A thousand square eyes watched as she drove up in her battered red sports car. She had come to know those walls, to find comfort in their brooding strength and the way they kept their secrets, to love the raw liver colour of their bricks and how they sucked poison from the body of the world and swallowed it.

What did those walls contain? What was the poison? A distillation of evil? Or madness? Sadness? Hopelessness? But there was hope, too. For most would go free in the end.

It was one such man she came to visit each Tuesday. She wished she could come more often. She was gripped by this man, she was, this little old woman. And what he had done. But she must try not to think about that. She ought to focus on his battered soul, his guilt, his desire for forgiveness. And how he would soon be free. Her fingers twitched at this thought. Free as a bird he would fly and she would help him go.

For twenty-five years he had been locked away. His crime? Mass murder.

No one knew that he had become her obsession. The other prisoners whom she used to visit had only been a rehearsal for this one soul, the one soul she really wanted

to save. What he had done went too far. Perhaps even beyond the bounds of God's forgiveness. If God chose not to forgive him after all, she would not blame Him.

A few minutes later the old woman was entering the prison, passing her fingers over the security scanner that would let her in. She did not need to read the sign telling her to look at the iris-recognition system and wait for the green light to flash. A disembodied sing-song voice spoke: 'Good afternoon, Mrs Bailey. Come through, please.' The door slid into nowhere and, after a pleasant few words with the nice young man at the Control Centre, and a cheery wave from several of the pastel-suited Rehab officers, and a gentle stroke of the Facilitator's cat, she was on her way, along the familiar corridors painted a calming blue and exuding aromatic relaxing air from vents in the floor. She followed the yellow-clad female Rehab officer, who was young enough to be her granddaughter.

Not that she had a granddaughter.

As the door slid open, her heart spun and her breath caught fleetingly on something spiky in her throat. It always did, each time she saw his face. His gentle, soft-seeming face with its pale blue eyes and long hair. Hair that used to be corn-gold – she had seen the pictures on the news and in all the papers twenty-five years ago.

Now his hair was greying at the edges, but still it looked like a halo, it did. Always his hair had looked like a halo.

He really did look like the pictures of Jesus.

You could see why so many people were taken in. He just looked like every jumped-up Messiah who had ever believed he was God's gift to the world. A worm of hatred began to uncurl in her stomach. No! She must keep her true thoughts locked away. She must not judge. It should be for God to judge, it should. She must remember that. This was a man who, they said, was sorry for what he had done. Who had only acted through madness and now was cured.

The psychiatrist had confirmed it. A nice woman. Rather young perhaps, but she seemed to know what she was doing. Other psychiatrists had said the same over the years, each time his case came up for release. But each time, the politicians had responded to the outcry from the public, the Internet chat-coms, the huge flashing text-message boards that occupied every public space nowadays, the crowds of ugly strangers with their noisy electronic placards, who shouted and ranted about a life for a life, who hurled abuse and stones at the prison van each time he had a court appearance. Eventually, however, his lawyers and psychiatrists had won, and he would be freed.

Only three weeks from now.

Just when she was getting to know him properly, this little old woman with her nicely-tailored clothes and her carefully-cut fingernails, almond-shaped, in the old-fashioned style. And her hair that sat, just so, still and obedient. Just when she thought he was about to tell her everything, to reveal himself to her. She wanted that, needed to see the core of him – whether it was badness or madness, she didn't much care, but she wanted to know it. She wanted to hear how he would justify himself to God when the time came. Then God could judge. This she had promised. And if Peter had suffered too, then reliving that suffering would be his atonement. Part of his payment.

To begin, today, as always, they chatted. About this and that. He grew flowers. His sweet peas were in bloom now. He wanted to show her. Perhaps the Rehab officer would show her his sweet peas in the garden on her way out. He was looking forward to growing raspberries again when he was freed, he said. And tayberries. Blueberries to make smooth jelly. And tiny sweet green Muscat grapes in a greenhouse.

'So, you will definitely start your fruit farm again, will you?' she asked. It was the fruit farm where it had all happened.

'Well, not the same one as before, of course.' He smiled sadly. That delicate shiver of a half-smile that

came right from the heart and pierced anything in its way.

No, of course, not the same one, she thought. That would hardly be possible.

The smell of burning raspberry canes hit her nostrils. The sickly stench of wet charred straw and roasted . . . She swallowed.

There was a silence. He massaged the palm of one hand, then the other. As though he was in pain. Or as though he was trying to rub something away.

'I will miss our chats,' he said. He brushed a strand of hair from his eyes. She always noticed how long his fingers were, and soft and slow like feathers. Yes, she could see why women, younger women, fell for his charms. And his voice, his smooth vanilla voice.

'Yes, so will I,' said the old woman, fingering the diamond chunk on her wedding finger. 'But you must move on, you know. You must move on. You have been given a second chance.'

'But have I been forgiven? That's what I need to know. That's what I really need to know.' She heard a catch in his voice. Looked at him. He was looking away, towards the swimming-pool-blue square that was the window, like an abstract painting she had once seen that was just a blue square, no texture, no anything but flat, plain, bland, empty, meaningless blue. It had meant

nothing to her, at the time, that painting. It meant everything now, in here. It meant the world. It meant heaven.

She saw that at the corner of one eye glistened a tear. He wiped it away.

'Have I been forgiven, Sarah? I sense you would know. There is something special about you.' And he reached towards her hands as they rested on the table. Her dry, worn hands, her sad hands. He could tell they were sad hands. They reminded him of his mother's. Though his mother did not have diamond rings like that. If she had, she would have given them to the poor. Because his mother was good and knew everything there was to know about rich men and camels and heaven and the eyes of needles.

A small buzzer sounded. They looked towards the glass window in the wall. A Rehab officer wagged a finger. No touching. He must keep his hands to himself. Not that he had actually touched her – she had not moved her hands. He rubbed his palms again. Massaged away the pain, real or imaginary.

'Oh, yes. I am sure you have been forgiven,' she said, blandly, glibly. 'God forgives all who turn to Him, remember? And God loves you, of course. You know that, don't you?' She made herself think it, so that it came out with the sound of truth. Perhaps it was true?

God moves in mysterious ways, she reminded herself. Not for her to reason why.

'I don't know,' he said. 'I don't know.' There was silence as he seemed to wrestle with something inside himself. 'Sarah?'

'Yes?'

'Do you have children? I never asked before.'

She shook her head, hiding her thoughts. She did not trust herself to answer that one with words. With words that might spit and strangle their way from her and split her heart in two. She would not talk about that.

'If you did . . .' He paused. 'If you did, would you . . .' He stood up.

'What is it, Peter? What is it?'

'I want to tell you something. I did tell the psychiatrists but they didn't say much. Let me tell you. So you will see why it all happened. So you will see it was not my fault. Not really. Although, of course, I take the blame.'

He will manipulate you, they had told her. He will try to make you think he is an angel. He is no angel – he was a sick man and now he is healed. That is all. But don't listen to everything he says. With his warped memory, he probably *believes* everything he says.

He could not manipulate her. She was stronger than that. She might look like a plain little old woman but

there was an inner strength to her. No one knew how strong she was inside. You had to be tough, to do this, to do what she was doing. It was hot work on the edge of hell.

But this was what she had been waiting to hear. Why he thought he could justify what he had done. Why did he become the man – mad or bad – that he became? And if he *did* try to manipulate her, that would only test her, strengthening her.

And, of course, she had promised his confession to God. It was for God to judge. Of course.

He began to speak. Another small tear drying in one corner of his eye.

And as he spoke, eloquently, softly, sadly, she felt she could picture the scene exactly.

The son, a small boy, four years old, crouched in the corner of the cellar. He hugged his arms around his knees. His wet sheet was in a bundle in the corner. He would not look at it. It was his fault. He could smell the stale urine on his pyjamas. He had been in the cellar for two hours and in the mildewed air the wetness refused to dry.

As he crouched and hugged himself, he rocked and prayed, just as he had been taught. If he prayed hard enough he would be forgiven.

But he could not pray hard enough because one bad part of

his mind was listening for footsteps. Because he could not pray hard enough, he would be punished.

There they were. His heart quickened and he almost choked on a breath. The smell of urine rose and grew and stuck in his throat. The sound of a key grated in the lock. The door opened and light flooded in. The mother and father came in. The son stood up, the cold air clammy on his damp pyjamas.

'Take off your clothes.' Fumbling, desperate to please, he obeyed.

'The sheet.' He wrapped the wet sheet around his naked body, trying not to shiver in the cold and fear.

The father went over to the corner of the room. With difficulty, he lifted the familiar wooden structure from the floor and leaned it against the wall. The mother moved to help him. The father steadied it and the mother helped the son climb on to it. She smiled. The son stifled a small sob.

Together, the mother and the father gently and lovingly fastened the ropes to bind the son's wrists and ankles to the limbs of the cross.

Then the mother and the father knelt and prayed. Knife-like pain shot through their knees, but still they prayed. Their muscles went into spasm, but they did not stop praying. Their fingers and bare feet became cold and then numb, but still they never stopped loving their only son and praying.

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The little old woman sat in her tattered red sports car, a once aspirational Branson Mirage. With her hands on the mouldable squishtic steering-wheel, she leaned back in the seat and breathed out slowly.

It was a beautiful story.

She smiled.

It was a beautiful and terrible story. But it was not enough, surely? It was like saying one Hail Mary when more were needed. If Peter wanted God's forgiveness, he surely needed to have suffered much more. Atonement could not be so easy.

Surely God would want her to do more? And she had, of course, promised his soul to God.

The fact that she, too, wanted to see inside him and to know it all was entirely irrelevant, of course.

Peter leaned back on his bed and smiled peacefully to himself. Nearly there. So nearly there. In three more weeks he would be free. And now, just in time, there was a stupid little old woman who cared enough about him to listen to him. There had been other Volunteer Friends before her, but none of them had been the right one.

Not that he cared at all about the old woman. Only her money. Those rings must be worth a fortune. And he had seen her wear at least four different jewelled

brooches in the last few weeks. You could tell by the way she dressed that she had money. Even her hairstyle, old womanish though it was. Smooth. Like a silver rolling mist. None of the nicotine tinge of a poor old woman's hair. And she had no children, she'd said. Crucially, beautifully, perfectly, she had no children. No children to interfere or for her to leave her idle money to.

When he got out of here, he would need money. So that he could start it all over again. So that he could walk in strawberry fields again. So that he could do what God had put him on this earth to do.

To save souls and speed them to heaven. And the stupid old woman would help him. She would have no choice. She had come into his life and he would not let her go.

Until it was time.

As before. With the others.