



THE BLUE VIRGIN

*“When we want to read of the deeds that are done for love,
whither do we turn? To the murder column;
and there are rarely disappointed.”*

— George Bernard Shaw



CHAPTER ONE

“All around us everything was changing in the order of things we had fashioned for ourselves.”

— Chaim Potok, *The Promise*

Oxford in August

Thursday

6:30 PM

The device that set The Blue Virgin apart from other clubs of similar taste was the flashes of pornographic films projected into the room. They flooded the large white-walled room at uneven intervals, competing with the pulsing music, shocking and suggestive and enticing all at once. The club was known in that haven of academia and tradition as the premiere alternative-lifestyle meeting place. The stone building formerly housed a video store, which had boasted the area’s largest collection of blue movies in its back room. The current renters had pressed into service several cartons’ worth, left carelessly behind by the previous tenant when he fulfilled a lifelong yearning to move to Amsterdam.

Bryn Wallace sank gratefully onto a padded stool at the bar, breathing in the scents of old wood and warm ale, nodding to two men she’d seen at Val’s art co-operative. “A glass of Merlot, please,” she ordered from the bartender, resisting the urge to stare at the woman’s multiple nose piercings.

It had been a grueling day at the Miles Belcher Studio of Photographic Portraiture, and not for the first time, Bryn was questioning her decision to leave the runway and pursue pho-

tography on the other side of the camera. She loved the camera the way it loved her and had made a decent living from local magazine work. But she had quickly tired of people leering at her lithe body and sculpted features, her chocolate brown eyes and glossy brunette hair; tired, too, of fighting off the cocaine so easily obtained.

Bryn sipped her wine and reflected on the relationship most models had with the camera. She loved photography, capturing an idea, letting the walls down and acting for the lens trained on her, making love to it, in fact. Once she'd become intrigued with the idea of becoming the person who could cause that reaction, she'd resolved to learn the other side of the camera from a master: Miles Belcher.

Miles had the talent of portraying his subjects in their most flattering light. He had achieved a reputation in Oxford for making the most odious of families appear pleasing and harmonious; even the least comely face was softened with grace. As much as he annoyed her personally, Bryn knew she'd snagged a good apprenticeship. Her job was to get the client sorted for a sitting, then take digitals Miles would approve or change while he sipped his double mocha cappo in his office overlooking Clarendon Street.

"Move the boy in closer to his mother's arm and try again," he'd announced this morning, resuming his review of the latest month's issue of *Photography News*. Once he was satisfied she'd achieved the pose and lighting to show off the best bits of the Freeth family, he appeared. Sporting a huge smile, his long white hair dropping foppishly over his brow, Miles commenced the color shots. Wagging his left hand in the direction he wanted their eyes trained, Miles snapped away, eliciting giggles effortlessly from the children.

Bryn checked her watch and wondered how Val was doing

with the shopping list. She was cooking for Val tonight, as she did at least once a week. A warm sense of comfort filled her at the thought of Val Rogan. An extraordinary textile artist, Val had started The Artists' Co-operative to provide exposure to Oxford's new talent. Bryn's own photographs had been shown there just last month. There was just one small snag in their growing relationship, but Bryn would try to explain it to Val tonight and smooth it over, hoping Val's legendary temper stayed in check.

Bryn smiled and raised her glass to the light, enjoying the ruby color, thinking back to the spring art show. At the time, Bryn had considered herself heterosexual and had chosen her past lovers accordingly. When she'd been introduced to Val that night she had been acutely aware of a shift in the air. At first she admired the creative joy of Valentine Rogan, her odd golden eyes and artistic flair, the way she zipped through life with good humor and a snappy word for everyone. Because they traveled the same artistic circles, they kept meeting, and Bryn soon found herself looking forward to evenings when Val would be present. Bryn increasingly felt a kind of comfort in Val's presence she hadn't experienced before. She also found herself tingling whenever they touched and began to realize she was engineering such moments. To her credit, Val never came on to her sexually, sensing Bryn's lack of experience.

Bryn checked her watch, remembering the night Val had driven her home from a gallery show. She'd invited Val up to her flat, and over glasses of wine, confessed her attraction and her lack of experience with same-sex partners.

"How did you decide you were a lesbian?" she asked Val, coloring.

"I tried to like boys. Especially when I was twelve-ish. But I found myself admiring the girls more. It wasn't just those nubile breasts I saw in gym class, either," Val said with a laugh. "It had

to do with the goodness women project—maybe I’m really looking for a mother, not having had mine for long.” Val recounted her anguished fifteenth summer when she had confronted her feelings then hid them from her father and stepmother for another three years. Finally, on her way to art school on a full scholarship, her father bursting at the seams with pride, she’d confided her feelings to him. After a moment’s shock and a few more of rational thought, he pragmatically had been quietly supportive of what he called her “exploration,” as though it were a class she would be taking at The Glasgow School.

“I guess the biggest attraction for me is that women don’t hide their emotions like men. I crave that accessibility and having it in return without pulling teeth to get it.”

Bryn remembered nodding in understanding as Val elaborated.

“That all adds to the physical side when I’m with a partner. Besides, I know how to please her—sometimes it’s almost like making love to me.”

Not moving, Val had waited for Bryn to absorb it all. By the end of that evening two things had happened to Bryn Wallace: she experienced what it must feel like when a man made love to *her*—the soft skin, the velvet places—and she decided she had fallen in love with someone she respected and admired, a person who just happened to be a woman.

Twisting her watch, Bryn checked the time. She looked up at the entrance and there was Val, her pleased smile crinkling those golden eyes. Val gave her a hug and settled on the stool beside her. “I got everything on your list and then some,” she pronounced, waving to the bartender, who brought Val her usual glass of Shiraz. “How was Belcher today?”

Bryn smirked and described today’s family, including two boys who were hellions. “They’ll probably look angelic when the prints are done,” she admitted. “Miles does have that special touch.”

Val drained her glass. "So do you, my dear. Let's see what you do with this list of ingredients I've got in my backseat."



Bryn had to admit the dinner was an enormous success. Her one-bedroom flat on the trendy Magdalen Road in Oxford's spiritual Mecca became a lavish home whenever Val visited. In Bryn's mind the photographs she used as decoration became museum art pieces; the noise of the busy outside road diminished, elevating the cheap ground-floor space to an elegant penthouse.

The two of them had taken their time cooking, Val acting as sous chef under Bryn's direction. Eating late gave Bryn the feeling she was in France or Italy. Val had eaten with gusto, enjoying the pork loin stuffed with prunes and rosemary, and an eggplant dish with pine nuts, feta cheese and cinnamon. Over coffee and fruit, Bryn looked over at Val, feeling a rush of exhilaration mixed with trepidation as they chatted. She thought of Cameron for a moment, but Val had none of his huge ego, nor his fondness for drugs. Definitely a better choice of partner.

"I know you've met Nora, but you'll love Simon, too, I promise." Val was talking about her best friend Nora Tierney, who was driving from the Lake District back to Oxford on the weekend to pack up her flat for a permanent move to Cumbria. "I can't believe we've been renting in the same Summertown building for six years, ever since Nora came to Oxford. I'm going to miss her."

Bryn sipped her coffee, happy to talk about Val's friend or anything to postpone the argument she predicted. "Simon's the artist who gave you the new design for the co-op. He's illustrating Nora's book, right?"

Val nodded. "He showed me how to rearrange the stalls for maximum traffic and exposure. And you should see the figures

he's come up with for Nora's fairies. Kids will adore them. I hope Nora figures out soon what a prince she has in him. He's crazy about her."

"It can't be easy for Nora to be pregnant when the father's dead, much less make a commitment to someone else," Bryn pointed out. "What a sad situation to find herself in. Tough in the best of circumstances, but to take on a dead man's child? This Simon must be a jewel."

"Nora will be a great mom. And Simon would be a wonderful father if she'd give him the chance." Val ruffled her short hair. "I don't see how they can work on this collaboration and not let their chemistry interfere." She finished her coffee. "Simon will just have to be patient and let Mother Nature work her magic."

"I'm looking forward to seeing the draft of her children's book," Bryn said. "After work Saturday I'll come over and help with the packing, get to know them better."

"I'd like that." Val sat back with a contented sigh. "That was a stupendous meal. After we do the dishes, I'll show you the brochures I brought from the estate agents."

Bryn twisted the silver Luckenbooth pendant she wore, two intertwined hearts topped with a crown, a gift from Val. She traced the outline as she groped for the words she needed to say. Feeling distinct dread, she rose to clear the table.

"That is what is known as a pregnant silence," Val observed, bringing in a stack of plates. "We agreed we'd need a bigger place if we're going to move in together."

Bryn's eyes filled with tears as she ran the hot water and squirted soap on her sponge. The lobby buzzer sounded.

"Oh, Christ," Val said, going to the door and hitting the intercom. "Who is it?"

"It's Davey," a wavering male voice said. "I've left a box outside your door."

Opening the flat door, Val picked up the hot pink box on the door mat and brought it inside. Bryn applied herself to washing up, back straight, avoiding confrontation.

Val opened the box. “A delightful assortment of pastries from your downstairs admirer,” she pronounced stiffly.

Just stay calm, Bryn repeated silently in a mantra. She was aware of Val studying her rigid back. Val changed the disc, which was playing melancholy strains of Erik Satie, to the soundtrack from a movie they’d enjoyed, *Notting Hill*. Skipping tracks, Val stopped at Elvis Costello singing “She.” The song held special meaning for them; they’d seen the movie the same night they’d agreed to live together. Val had copied the lyrics in elegant calligraphy and framed it for Bryn only last month.

Bryn swallowed hard, trying to find words. Val picked up a dish towel and dried plates and pans, stacking them on the counter, putting utensils away in drawers. She’s waiting for the sappy song to get to me, Bryn thought.

“Unfair, definitely unfair,” Bryn said at last, turning off the taps as she finished the washing up, reaching to dry her hands on the end of the towel Val was using, finally meeting her tawny eyes.

“Do you want to tell me what’s going on?” Val said in an even tone.

Bryn immediately dropped her gaze, turning to fuss with the dishes.

“Christ, this is one of those times I wish I still smoked,” Val said, her patience starting to wear thin.

A thread of anxiety wound itself around Bryn’s stomach, knotting tightly. Bryn abruptly turned to face her, summoning up her courage.

“Nothing’s really wrong. It’s just that moving in together has to be postponed a bit.” She strove for casual, leaning back against the sink, wiping the harried expression off her face.

“I see,” Val said. “Now that you’ve sucked the air out of me, mind telling me what’s gone wrong?”

“You don’t see—not at all. Look, I really want to move in together, it’s just not economical for me right now. I don’t have as much saved as I thought I would—my bonus was delayed.” She gulped and scowled at her false tone.

“I think I’ve told you money is not an issue.” Val’s voice got louder. “I’ve the money from my father and can do the deposit and security without a problem.”

“We’ve been through this before. I pay my own way,” Bryn snapped back just as loudly. This was going all wrong.

Val’s voice kept rising. “And what if I want to lay it out for you? Can’t you allow me to do that? You can repay me if you insist, when you’re a famous photographer.” Bryn snorted and Val pressed her advantage. “Why postpone our lives together for a financial issue?”

Bryn’s voice hardened in the face of Val’s insistence. “Why can’t you understand I’m not comfortable being taken care of like that? I need to feel this is a partnership on all fronts.” She crossed her slender arms defiantly in front of her.

“And I don’t like being put off like this.” Val’s hard tone matched Bryn’s. “Unless there’s some other reason you don’t want to move in together? Is Cam pressuring you?”

“Don’t think that, please,” Bryn assured her in a rush. “That’s over. I love *you*. You’re the first person who’s made me feel whole. I just need a little time to save money—it’s important to me that things are equal.” Val sucked in a breath of air and Bryn knew at last she was listening instead of reacting. “I don’t ever want to take advantage of you and your goodness.” Val let out her breath heavily and Bryn hurried on. “Does it help if I admit it’s totally my hang-up?” Her brown eyes pleaded with Val for understanding. She didn’t want to ruin this.

At last Val sighed. “As long as you really mean it’s financial, not anything to do with us.”

“It’s nothing to do with us. Just give me time to save more, all right? Then I’ll feel comfortable with the whole thing.” She approached Val and gave her a warm hug. “Go on then, you look exhausted. You have co-op duty tomorrow, and you’re helping Nora pack up this weekend. I’ll finish up here, it’s almost done.”

Val nodded and left quietly, looking subdued and hurt.



Bryn rummaged through her medicine chest, swallowing two paracetamol tablets to stop the throbbing headache from her argument with Val. Although Val seemed reassured when she’d gone, Bryn hated any thread of tension between them. She couldn’t bring herself to tell Val the real reason she didn’t have quite the bank account she’d been hoping to produce.

As she left the bathroom, a tentative but insistent knock came at the door. Bryn waited a few moments before moving to answer it. Whoever was there had avoided the lobby buzzer. Crossing to the door, she reluctantly opened it, fearing another bout of arguing with Val—and certain it would not be productive. Things were changing rapidly and she was changing with them, but she felt drained on all fronts.

“What you are doing? . . . Oh, look, forgive me, I’m so confused. You’d better come in and help me sort things out.”