

THE AMETHYST ROAD

Louise Spiegler



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藏书章

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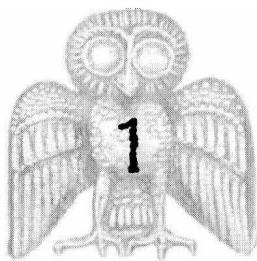
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*Dedicated, with love, to both my clans: the Spiegler and the Moores
and
In memory of Ora Lee Page Franklin*



*Even if the house falls down,
You're still the sweetest baby in town.
Say, darling, say . . .*

—Paria lullaby

We are collectors.

Magpies, the Gorgios call us. They find their silver hidden away in our nests.

All my life I've heard that. To the Gorgios, all the Yulang are the same, from my mother's prosperous Kereskedo tribe, who amass great fortunes in trade, to the miserable Paria outcasts, among whom my sister and I were forced to live. All alike and all thieves, kidnappers, and worse.

It was hard not to believe it as I walked home through the Paria enclave, past collision shops and pawnbrokers, backroom psychics and overflowing trash bins. A gang of boys on the corner was digging a battery out of a long black sedan. When Willow and I first moved to this neighborhood, I would have assumed they were fixing the engine. But I quickly learned.

I crossed the street to our apartment building and rounded the corner to the front. Four flights of outdoor steps. It wasn't the climb so much as the people that made it a chore. I adjusted my book bag and started up. As always, on the landings and along the balconies I had to squeeze past Paria girls rocking their babies in packing-box cradles and boys gambling with peanut shells. No one sent a glance my way. I could always feel them not looking at me. One of the middle-aged

women hanging laundry over the balcony rails threw me a curt greeting, and that was as much notice as I ever got.

Our front door was unlocked again. When would Willow learn to be more careful? When there was another break-in?

I pushed the door open and immediately tripped over a bag of beer bottles and lost my balance. Books spilled out of my school satchel as I crashed to the floor. My *Romanae* text slid into a puddle of blackberry jam.

My two-year-old niece, Zara, toddled over and burst into delighted laughter, as if I'd staged the performance just for her. She tried to clap but couldn't manage it, since she was clutching something in her fist. I held out my hand to her.

"What's in your paw, monster-girl? Show Auntie Reena."

It was an electric plug. Attached to a cord. Attached to a toaster.

"Who— What idiot let you play with this?"

I snatched the plug out of her blackberry-smearred fingers and carried the toaster to the kitchen counter. Zara howled with outrage.

"Willow!" I bellowed.

My sister was nowhere in sight, but two of her Gorgio friends were sprawled on our kitchen floor, fast asleep. I knew Alex, the one with the red hair and the wispy goatee. He was always here. The other I couldn't distinguish from any of Willow's other layabout friends. The two of them snored amid cups of cold coffee and plates littered with blackened crusts. That explained the floor-level toaster. An open bottle of hangover tablets lay at their feet. I picked it up and got down on my hands and knees to search for spilled pills.

While I was looking, I kept shouting, "Willow! Get out here! You need to clean up this mess!" She was probably in the bathroom, plucking her eyebrows or plaiting her hair.

The Gorgios snoozed on. They'd still been up drinking and reciting

bad poetry to Willow when I left for school that morning, so it didn't surprise me that they were sleeping like the dead far into the afternoon.

I'd just found the last loose pill and shoved the cotton back in the bottle when Willow dragged herself to the doorway, wearing a lacy bathrobe. She yawned until I could see her molars and mumbled drowsily, "Give us mercy, Serena. What are you screaming for?"

Even with shadows under her eyes and curlers in her hair, my big sister looked like the lead dancer in a ballet troupe. It was that delicate, cat-shaped face of hers and the graceful way she moved. Usually I was proud of Willow's looks. Now all her fragile beauty just annoyed me.

I thrust the bottle of pills into her left hand and pointed at the toaster.

"That's what your baby's been playing with while you get your beauty sleep."

"Beauty sleep? You must be joking. She was wailing all morning, little beast." Willow placidly put the pills away in the cupboard over the sink, bent down, and poked her fingers into Zara's round belly. "Yes, you! You're a beast, aren't you?" She jerked her head toward the boys passed out on the floor. "It's Jet and Alex's fault, anyway. They promised they'd watch her while I napped."

"And they broke their promise? What a shock!" I glared at Willow. "They're here for the parties and the free crash pad, Willow. Not to babysit. I don't know why that confuses you so much."

Willow made a face and started spooning coffee into our dented brass coffeepot. "Spare me the lecture, Serena! Why are you always such a bear?"

"Why do you think? It was too loud last night, Willow! I had a Romanae test first thing this morning, and I could barely sleep. Someone could have strangled a cat in here and you'd never have heard it!"

“So? The louder the better.” Willow placed the coffeepot on the burner and added softly, “I want to drown out those marchers. I don’t want Zara to hear them.”

“There weren’t any White Shirts last night, Willow.”

“There could have been. You never know when they’ll come.” Willow shuddered. “They frighten me—twirling those lightsticks, tossing bricks, chanting for us to get out!”

They scared me, too, the White Shirts bands who marched through our neighborhoods every once in a while, breaking windows and beating up anyone unlucky enough to be found out on the streets. But if I told Willow that I was frightened, too, the next thing I knew, we would have a full-time bodyguard of her admirers, and we would never rid the house of Gorgio boys. To me, that was worse than a few crazed fanatics in the street.

“That’s just like you, Willow,” I said airily. “You’ll deal with the White Shirts by having more parties? Good thinking. They’ll be shaking in their boots.”

Zara had followed me into the kitchen and was leaning her head against my leg. I crouched down, cuddled her in my arms, and realized her diaper needed changing. As usual, Willow hadn’t noticed. I went to the storage cupboard, pulled out the little ribbed blanket I had bleached until it was thin as tissue paper, and laid it down on the cracked linoleum by the diaper pail.

Willow was busy unrolling a pink curler from her hair. “When did you become so sarky, Serena? It must be that snotty school of yours.”

“It’s not snotty,” I said, more to contradict Willow than anything. The Lyceum is the best school in Oestia. And it certainly *is* snotty. Who knew that better than me? I was the only Yulang student in the whole place, and I’d only been allowed to enroll because my Gorgio grandmother pulled some strings a long time ago.

“It is so snotty,” Willow snapped back. “I don’t know what’s happened to you. You didn’t used to study all the time. And you used to love parties.”

That was true. I did. When our dad was alive, we had loads of people in and out of our home. Mother followed the Yulang traditions of hospitality, and Daddy, though a Gorgio, had taken to her easygoing ways. There had always been music, and games and food to share, and lots of other kids to play with.

But things were different after Daddy died. We were on our own. Mother left, and even our Gorgio grandmother, who had kept us on sufferance after Daddy’s funeral, kicked us out once Willow’s waist began to bulge—not that we’d brought friends to Grandmother’s house, anyway. And now that Willow’s unwed motherhood had set us outside any decent Yulang society, parties meant this gang of Gorgio boys sleeping off their beer on our mother’s hooked rug and styling themselves the rebel poets. Rebellng against what? I had never been sure about that. Maybe against the burden of having a trust fund.

Willow was looking thoughtfully at the red-haired boy, who lay with his head flung back and his mouth hanging open. “Whatever you say, my friends aren’t just here for the parties. And I think Alex sort of likes Zara. You know? He’s really good with her.”

I rolled my eyes. I’d never noticed him being good with Zara, aside from not offering her sips of his beer—a pastime that convulsed the others. It was just another of Willow’s daydreams. She imagined that one of these boys who hung about drinking and swooning over the sound of his own voice was going to find life so unbearable without her and the baby that he would swoop them off to a life of luxury.

Willow caught my dubious look and added, “His family’s very rich, you know. Alex’s.”

“And just dying for a Yulang daughter-in-law.”

“Why not?” Willow held up her arm as if examining it for a rash. “I’m pretty fair. Not like you, Serena. I could pass. And just look at Zara.”

I couldn’t help looking at Zara, since I was trying to wrestle her wriggling bottom into a diaper. Zara was a china doll, all blue eyes and floating gold elf locks. The Gorgio boys teased Willow that we had kidnapped Zara and were bringing her up as our own. Sidesplitting, that was.

“Besides,” Willow mooned, “Alex *likes* Yulang girls. He says we have more soul. Why else would he spend so much time here?”

Lately, it took about ten minutes of conversation with Willow for me to feel like smacking her, and my inner timer was just about to ring.

With Zara cleaned up and the old diaper disposed of, I went and changed out of my school uniform into a pair of charcoal gray trousers I wore for cleaning the apartment, and a long-sleeved shirt.

“I’m going to take Zara to the playground at Plaza Ridizio,” I told Willow.

“Yay!” Zara squealed.

Willow was staring out the window, lost in thought, with Mother’s blue moon cup in her hands.

“Did you at least pick up our money?” I asked her, spotting my old red sweater in a pile of clothes and pulling it over my head.

Willow broke out of her reverie. “I got it when I met the new social worker. Did I tell you? She’s the mother of one of the girls in your class. The classy one, with the clothes. What’s her name?”

“Janet Palmer?”

“That’s it.”

My heart sank. Janet’s mother was our social worker. That meant she could quiz Willow about what cut of meat we were eating and what kind of underwear we bought and where we got Zara’s diapers. She

could come around any time she liked to examine Zara, like a judge inspecting a piglet at a county fair. They all did that. This time, though, because it was Mrs. Palmer, word would get around my school. And I was a freak of nature there already. . . .

“Well, hand over the money, Willow, and I’ll pick up some groceries on the way.”

I stuffed the banknotes into my pocket, gloomily.

For Zara’s sake I tried to shake my bad mood as we set off along the balcony and back down the stairs. The Yulang believe that children Zara’s age are purifying, like horses and beautifully wrought gold. You have to do your best by them, my mother always told me, no matter how you’re feeling.

My heart squeezed, as it always did when I thought of Mother. She’d been gone almost three years. What would she say if she knew she had a two-year-old granddaughter?

Zara and I crossed the square in front of our building, heading north.

At least I knew Mother would say I was right to take Zara to a better playground than this little tramped-down square of grass in the Paria neighborhood, where the seesaw was broken and the sandpit was full of cigarette butts and the leavings of neighborhood cats. I wanted Zara to play where the sandbox was clean and the swings were new and the street cleaners and city gardeners took away the rubbish and planted flowers. But those places were almost always Gorgio places.

Except for Plaza Ridizio.

Plaza Ridizio is the dividing line here in Oestia between Yulang and Gorgio—who still don’t live together, except in those rare cases like my parents’, where love dissolves the boundaries.

From Plaza Ridizio, the Yulang neighborhoods run south to the industrial docks, broken up into tribal enclaves: the metalworkers and

mechanics, the traders, the musicians, the acrobats and animal trainers, and those, like the Parias, who catch as they can. As we walked past the different neighborhoods, Zara pointed at the tribal amulets hanging from lampposts at the intersections, signs for the different districts: King David's harp dangling from the lamps on the streets of the Zimbali musicians, Hephaestus's hammer and anvil on the Ha'ari metalworkers' streets, Fortuna's wheel for the Ammorine acrobats, and the unblinking owls for the sharp-eyed Kereskedo merchants. Those last I could never see without a pang, for the Kereskedo council had confiscated all the owl amulets Mother had left us, and I'd never felt our home was quite safe without them.

The Gorgio neighborhoods run north from the plaza. Instead of the noisy docks, they have waterfront promenades, and instead of the smell of the canneries, they have fresh salmon dinners on outdoor patios with views of the sun going down over the sound. My Gorgio grandmother lives in a mansion on the north side of the city. Not that we had been allowed to set foot there these past few years.

Despite these rigid divisions, at Plaza Ridizio everyone comes together. The Gorgio come to the outdoor market to buy the wares of the Kereskedo Yulang and the crafts of the Jersain people, who are neither Yulang nor Gorgio. And the Yulang come to window-shop at the Gorgio emporiums that line the square and to spread their bright picnic cloths on the grass. Children shriek on the carousel, students argue on the edge of the fountain, and old men play chess at the tables under the trees. Yulang acrobats of the Ammorine tribe perform in the open spaces and musicians of the Zimbali tribe play violins, cymbaloms, and calliopes on the bandstand while the Kereskedo merchants offer everything from mushrooms to gold at their stalls in the open market.

As Zara and I threaded our way through the market, I saw a Kereskedo woman smiling to herself as she measured out grams of yel-

low spice for a customer. My mother ran a stall once, and I remembered her smiling to herself just like that on a good selling day.

The memory quickly turned sour. If Mother ever returned, I thought, she would hardly smile at seeing what Willow and I had made of ourselves. More likely, she'd die of shame when she learned that a ritual court, under the hand of Nico Brassi, bora chan of the Kereskedo tribe, had declared Willow outcast—*ma'hane*—once her baby started to swell her belly. And that I also fell outcast, by association.

I turned quickly away from the Kereskedo stalls and took Zara to the fountain, where we knelt to cast in good-luck pennies.

Someone was watching us.

I turned and saw a tight-skinned Gorgio woman standing behind us, regarding us with narrow, unfriendly eyes. Quickly, I rose to my feet.

“What a beautiful child,” the woman said. The words were all right, but her voice curdled as she spoke them.

“Thank you.”

Zara was still squatting by the fountain. I pulled her up to stand next to me. She had to know, even from babyhood, to be on her feet when they approached her like this. She had to know to face them.

“Is she yours?” the woman pursued.

“She’s my niece,” I said, hating that I answered the woman at all. Hating that I didn’t tell her to stick her skinny nose into a light socket and flip the switch.

The woman’s pale eyes caught mine, wishing me twice whatever I wished her.

“Funny. She doesn’t look like you.”

She knelt down beside Zara and held out something to her. It was a stick of lacquered sugar that glistened green and red and shiny as the paint on the carousel horses.

Zara hesitated a moment. Then her plump little hand reached out.

“A darling like you should have treats and pretty clothes all the time,” the woman cooed. “Poor little thing. You need someone to take care of you.”

“She *has* someone to take care of her!” I snapped.

The woman was squatting and I was standing. How easy it would have been to kick her right in the teeth! Instead, I scooped Zara up in my arms and bore her away. My little niece squawked in protest, and then, in toddler fashion, forgot about it and wrapped her arms about my neck.

They steal our children, I’d heard the Gorgio women twittering as they waited to pick up their kids at the gates of my school. *They steal our golden-haired angels and trek them out of town in their filthy Yulang caravans. You can’t be too careful.*

I led Zara to the carousel and held her on the back of a chestnut mare with a mane the color of cooked sugar. The horse rose and fell as though swimming across a calm river, and Zara crowed with glee. As the carousel revolved, I scanned the plaza for the woman who’d given her the candy.

“Serr-rena! Auntie Reena! Na Na!” Zara sang. I gave her a quick smile and kept searching.

If the woman was still around, we would have to leave. They are not unheard of, these “rescues.” The Gorgios see a child they don’t believe belongs in a Yulang family, and next thing you know, they’ve snatched her away and taken her to a Prevention of Cruelty to Children office. Then the child is gone for good, and soon some Gorgio woman who can’t have a child of her own kindly adopts the poor, underprivileged little wight. And the real family never sees their child again.

The woman seemed to be gone. But I couldn’t rest easy. It isn’t safe for Zara here, I thought. We should leave.

But why? I thought angrily. Why should we have to? It was only four

o'clock. Willow's foolish suitors (if only they were suitors!) would still be lounging about the apartment. Wasn't there somewhere else we could go?

I looked longingly across the road at Bardoff's Music Store. If I hadn't had Zara with me, I could have gone there to watch old Ren Bardoff, the master carver, shape the stem of a viola. His daughter, Lemon, might show me a tune on the violin. We'd share a cup of that odd, fragrant tea they drank.

But I couldn't go in a place like that with Zara—a place full of finely carved instruments she could break, and sheet music she could shred to confetti! Not that the Bardoffs would object to her. They were sharp businesspeople, but kind. And Lemon had a way with children. Still, I liked this family of Jersain craftsmen too much to put them to the trouble.

Why couldn't Willow take Zara out more? I fumed. Zara would be safer with her. Anyone could see Willow was her mother. Why should I have to do everything? I wasn't the one who'd had a fatherless baby! I wasn't the one up all night partying! It wasn't fair.

"Of course it isn't fair. But you're tough, Serena."

I whirled around. Beneath the hurdy-gurdy music of the carousel, it was my father's voice I heard. He was there and not there, as he had been several times before.

"So I'm tough," I grumbled (but under my breath, not wanting anyone to hear me conversing with a ghost). "So what? What about Willow? Why can't she be tough sometimes?"

My father laughed that gentle laugh of his. "Willow was well named."

Willow. Graceful tree. Weeping tree. Tree that bends in the slightest wind. Tree of the loving touch, the easy persuasion.

"And what about me, Daddy?" I shot back. "Serena, the serene and peaceful. Was I well named, too?"

For an instant, I could actually see him standing next to Zara on her chestnut mount. His much-loved, freckled Gorgio face was as clear to me as the strip of sunlight that fell across the brass pole. He threw back his head and laughed. And was gone.

The carousel slowed to a stop. We stepped down and I let Zara pull me over to the sandbox. She grabbed the nearest plastic shovel and started digging a hole, her brow furrowed in a look of serious endeavor. Her blue sweater set off her blond hair like bluebells next to buttercups.

Across the square, I watched afternoon strollers settling at the outdoor café tables like flocks of gorgeous birds. Women in skirts of sea green and sunset gold lit gracefully on wrought-iron chairs. A smell of roasted peppers and smoked fish drifted toward us from the servers' trays. Up on the bandstand, I could see a trio of Zimbali Yulang musicians setting up their instruments.

Suddenly, Zara gave a sharp cry.

I leapt off the bench, heart pounding.

It was nothing. A little girl in a lacy dress had pinched her because Zara was using her shovel. The girl's mother wagged her finger in Zara's face. "That's not yours," she scolded. And then, noticing me, "Do they teach you to steal before you're out of the cradle?"

"Don't tell me your little girl never took another kid's toy," I exclaimed indignantly.

Without waiting for her response, I took the shovel from Zara and threw it to the ground, then dragged Zara to the other side of the sandbox.

"Well, look who's here! Serena Wallace—babysitting again."

Janet Palmer stood on the little path that wound around the playground, watching us critically. She was wearing a slim black dress ornamented with white leaf patterns. Bootsy, her dachshund, barked and

wriggled at the end of a black suede leash. Mother Lillith! Had she seen that humiliating exchange?

It depressed me, in my charity-shop sweater, to see Janet in that elegant dress, with nothing to concern her but her yapping dog.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, less than politely.

Janet raised a plucked eyebrow. “Declining Romanae verbs, of course. I make a point of promenading around the plaza when I’ve got a batch of them to decline.”

“Really?” I smiled faintly, despite myself. “I declined them already. They must have come to you looking for a second chance.”

Janet was the only student from the Lyceum I ever made jokes with. We were friends of a sort, even though I knew she would never ask me to her house, and if her other friends showed up, our jokes would evaporate and I’d find myself left out once again.

“What about you, Serena? Toting mewling infants in your golden teenage years?”

“It’s better than yanking that silly beast around,” I said, pointing at her dachshund.

“I’ve got a word game,” Janet said. “What’s the collective noun for dachshunds? A herd? A kennel?”

I looked at Bootsy, who was yapping fit to snap his little vocal chords. “A dissonance?” I suggested. “Or maybe a dribble? At least Zara will grow up someday. You’ll be pulling Bootsy out to piddle until the day he dies.”

Janet eyed her dog dispassionately. “You’re right. It’s loathsome when you think about it. And your niece *is* fairly cute, when you consider the common run of humanity.” Her gray eyes rested on me with slight compassion. “Poor Serena, you get lumbered with her a lot, don’t you? What’s wrong with Willow? She’s not bedridden or anything.”

Poor Serena! No wonder Janet’s friends didn’t invite me to their