



THIS  
FATAL  
KISS

ALICIA JASINSKA



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PEACHTREE  
*Teen*



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## A NOTE TO THE READER

IN SLAVIC FOLKLORE, a rusalka is a female water spirit or nymph. Stories vary, but most describe these creatures as the restless spirits of young maidens who died violent and tragic deaths in or by a lake, river, or body of water. Sometimes malicious and sometimes playful, they are famous for bewitching mortals with their beauty and dragging them into the depths.

As such, while lighthearted for the most part, this story does contain brief depictions of fantasy violence and death, drowning and near drowning, abusive relationships, a history of sexual assault, physical assault, struggles with sexual identity, and suicidal ideation.

Readers who may be sensitive to these elements please take note.

# PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

## CHARACTERS

**Aleksey** – ah-LEHK-see

**Babcia** – bahp-CHAH

**Gisela** – gee-ZEH-lah

**Kazik** – KAH-zheek

**Leszek** – LEH-shehk

**Wojciech** – VOY-chyeh

## PLACES

**Leśna Woda** – LESH-nah VOHD-ah

## SPIRITS

**bannik / banniki** (bathhouse spirit) – BAHN-neek / BAHN-neek-kee

**bies / biesy** (forest demon) – BEE-es / BEE-esity

**czart / czarty** (devil) – CHART / CHART-ey

**domowik / domowiki** (house spirit) – doh-MOH-veek / doh-MOH-vee-  
kee

**latawiec / latawce** (air demon) – lah-TAH-vyets / lah-TAHV-tse

**leszy** (forest spirit) – LEH-shee

**ognik / ogniki** (fire spirits) – OG-neek / OG-nee-kee

**rusalka/ rusalki** (water nymph) – roo-SOW-ka / roo-SOW-kee

**skrzat / skrzaty** (gnome) – SKSHAT / SKSHA-tey

**utopiec / utopce** (drowner) – oo-TOH-pyets / oo-TOHP-tse

**wiła / wily** (nymph) – VEE-wah / VEE-wee

**wodnik / wodniki** (water goblin) – VOHD-neek / VOHD-nee-kee



## 1

# THE DROWNED MAIDEN

## GISELA

“YOU’RE SNEAKING OFF RATHER early today,” Wojciech called out. “It’s not even dusk yet.”

Gisela’s steps faltered. A wash of rainbow light poured through the Crystal Palace’s domed ceiling, rippling over the floor to shine a watery spotlight on the elegant figure making his way down a monumental flight of steps toward her.

For a brief disorientating second, Gisela thought she might be staring into a mirror. Wojciech’s green-black hair and hooded wine-red eyes could have been a reflection of her own. Only, his skin was darker, a warm clay brown next to her ghostly blue-green complexion. His lips were carmine, where hers were tinged violet. She usually preferred it when the water goblin took human form—his true form was honestly quite terrifying. But this new guise was just creepy.

“You’re looking awfully youthful, Grandfather. You’re not feeling self-conscious about your age again, are you? You can be honest with me. You’re only *at least* a thousand years old.”

Wojciech, who currently didn’t appear to be a day over twenty, pinned her with a flat, unimpressed look. A soft chime-like tinkling, the noise a spoon made when it tapped against a teacup, filled the air like a warning.

Gisela glanced over her shoulder at the giant pillar in the center of the palace atrium. The glittering monstrosity shot to the ceiling and was so wide around its base that even a half dozen water nymphs couldn’t have touched hands if they’d stretched their arms around it. A honeycomb of shelves cut

into its surface, and on those shelves rested thousands and thousands of seemingly innocuous teacups upturned upon their saucers.

“May I remind you, child,” Wojciech said, his voice low and melodic, “that growing old is an accomplishment. I’ve outlived civilizations, survived more than you could imagine.”

The ethereal tinkling increased in volume, the drowned souls he’d trapped inside each teacup pushing against the walls of their tiny porcelain prisons. Only the Sea Tsar himself was said to have a grander collection of human souls.

Wojciech reached the ground floor of the atrium. “If you’re going out, take Tamara with you. *Don’t* make me ask you twice.”

“What? Why?” Gisela whined.

A second figure appeared at the top of the stairs: a girl with soft chestnut-brown curls and anxious red eyes; her skin had the same ghostly pallor as Gisela’s.

The new girl.

Gisela’s gaze darted back to Wojciech, her eyebrows pinching together in a silent plea.

Wojciech’s smile was sharklike, full of unreasonably sharp teeth. Even in this handsome human form, he maintained a few monstrous traits. “This is Tamara’s first time celebrating Green Week with us. Show her where the humans leave their offerings. Get to know each other. I think the two of you might have a lot in common.”

Gisela doubted it. Saints, she didn’t want to be stuck playing nursemaid for somebody who was new to all this. Perhaps she shouldn’t have joked about Wojciech needing dentures—or maybe this was punishment for accidentally smashing one of his precious teacups and setting a soul free?

Or it was another one of his games. You never could tell.

Tamara came down the stairs and paused, shifting her weight from foot to foot, twisting her fingers in the ghost-white fabric of her flowy dress. She rubbed her hands up and down her bare arms as though she were anxious or cold. The air was always cooler down here in the depths of the river, in Wojciech’s realm, and strangely wet, as though you were constantly walking through a mist.

As a mortal child, Gisela’s favorite bedtime tales had been about the wodniki—the water goblins, the old river gods, the keepers of the drowned—who lived in grand underwater palaces carved from crystal and gold. Not that she’d ever admit as much to Wojciech.

*You’ll know the water goblin by his dripping clothes, by the sodden*

*squelching of his boots, and by the wet footprints he leaves behind, her Great-Aunt Zela had told her. If you ever visit the old country, darling, when you cross a river, you must carry breadcrumbs in your pocket and say a prayer so as to avoid meeting with him. He can drown you on dry land so long as he has even a spoonful of water.*

Gisela's skirt billowed about her knees, free from the bonds of gravity that governed the living world. It hadn't been so very long ago that she'd been the new girl here, waking in a strange and unfamiliar place, in this palace built upon the riverbed. When Wojciech told her that her mortal life was over, that she'd never turn seventeen nor grow old nor see any of the people she loved ever again, she'd almost despaired.

She'd wanted so badly to go home.

She still wanted to go home, was determined to, which was why she didn't have time for *this*.

"Can't one of the drowners do it?" she asked, already knowing the answer. "Or Yulia. Can't Yulia show her around? She's good at that. I'm busy. I have things to do." She shot Tamara an apologetic glance.

"Yulia's already on the surface," Wojciech said. "She snuck off earlier, muttering something about honey cake."

Gisela cursed. Every spring during Green Week, the local townsfolk honored the rusalki—water nymphs, like her and Yulia and Tamara. They left shiny baubles and trinkets by the riverbanks, strung gifts from the branches of the trees in the forest: garlands of bright flowers, hair ribbons dyed eye-catching colors, and necklaces of glossy beads. They'd even leave offerings of food: eggs and sweet grain puddings, honey cakes and handfuls of sugary berries. They were bribes, prizes left out to placate hungry ghosts. People hoped that if they appeased the water nymphs, they wouldn't bewitch and harm their loved ones.

Competition for such offerings was fierce. There were only so many treats to go around, and no matter how many years you spent haunting the deep, how accustomed you grew to the water goblin's feasts of catfish and eel, you never quite forgot the taste of human food, of home.

If Yulia ate all the honey cake, Gisela was going to make sure she drowned in the river.

Again.

"Oh, and Gisela?" Wojciech drew a handkerchief from a pocket of his emerald-green suit and began polishing a teacup he'd selected from one of



the pillar's little nooks. "Make sure you tell Tamara what will happen to her if she strays too far from my river. I want to avoid trouble this week. Keep an eye out for our resident exorcist. He's been overzealous in his duties lately. So overzealous, I can't help but wonder if *somebody* has been provoking him."

"Whoever could that be?" Gisela said, trying for innocence and not quite succeeding.

The teacups on the shelves rattled ominously. The sudden sharp glint in Wojciech's eyes was a reminder of just who she was dealing with.

Maybe it was better to go along with what he wanted for now.

"Fine, fine. I'll take her with me. But are you sure you don't want her to stay behind and help you with the polishing? I mean, should you really be doing all the housework at your age?"

Wojciech's lip twitched.

Gisela quickly grabbed Tamara by the wrist. "We'll see you later, then! Don't break a hip!"



## 2

# THE LAND OF THE LIVING

## GISELA

A SINKING SUN HALOED the scene as Gisela and Tamara emerged from the river, rising from the water below a deserted stone footbridge as if it were a portal to another world. Gisela helped Tamara clamber onto the bridge beside her. Lazy clouds floated overhead, tossed by a balmy breeze.

Gisela fished a compact out of the pockets of her white slip dress and started dabbing powder and rouge on her cheeks to disguise the deathly pallor of her skin. Lipstick would hide the purple of her lips. She couldn't do much about the unnatural color of her eyes, but soon it would be dark enough that most people wouldn't notice unless they looked closely.

Tamara watched curiously, wringing water from her dress. "What did the water goblin mean when he said to tell me what will happen if I stray too far from the river?"

"Have you ever seen a frog that's been trapped indoors for days?" Gisela had. She'd found a dead frog in the library at her school once. Its body had shriveled into a sad little dried-out husk. "It's like that. You'll dry out and die."

There wasn't any point in sugarcoating it. Tamara would discover the truth for herself soon enough—the same way Gisela had when she'd tried to leave, determined to find a way home to her family. She'd barely made it past the old forest shrine at the edge of town before the dryness hit her throat and her lips began to crack, her parched skin demanding she turn back.

They couldn't leave this place even if they tried.

Gisela finished painting her lips a sweet strawberry red. "We can't stray

far from where we died. And it's important to stay hydrated. Leave your hair wet," she instructed, when Tamara started to twist water out of the strands. "Don't worry. People will just think you've come from visiting one of the bathhouses." She offered the other girl her powder and lipstick. "Are you from around here? Or did you just—" Gisela slid a finger across her throat.

Tamara shook her head. "I was told I could find work as a maid here. I wanted to get out of the city. It was supposed to be a fresh start. But I—I fell in love with somebody I shouldn't have. He made me a lot of promises, and like a fool, I believed him. He wasn't a good person, and he has an awful temper. . . ."

Gisela grimaced at the unpleasant implication.

In any case, it made sense Tamara had thought she'd find work here as a maid. Leśna Woda was a famous and fashionable tourist destination. Tens of thousands of visitors came and went throughout the year. The dreamy scenery and miraculous powers of the town's blessed waters, its magical hot springs, had drawn people here for centuries: commoners and the cream of society, as well as the cultural elite—poets and artists and emperors and queens. It was one of the oldest spa towns on the mainland.

Gisela herself was not a local. Her father had taken their family on a trip abroad. He was always doing business in faraway places. Most of the time, he left Gisela and her little brother behind, but this time, this one time, he actually listened when she'd begged to accompany him. She promised they wouldn't interrupt his work nor wander off nor cause any kind of trouble, though Gisela suspected he gave in simply because she had a vague understanding of the language spoken here. She'd picked it up from Great-Aunt Zela. Her father had been keen to use her as a translator.

"I'm not from around here either. I'm from Caldella."

"The witches' island?" Tamara said, wide-eyed.

Gisela smirked. "Relax. I'm not a witch, I promise. I've been here for almost a whole year now. I know the place like the back of my hand." It occurred to her that it would be easier to simply abandon Tamara here—she must already know her way around. Gisela could simply tell her where to find the offerings the humans left out. But if Wojciech found out . . .

Gisela didn't want to deal with that.

She led Tamara across the footbridge. The streets of the town rose around them. Gisela's mood lifted. As always, the charming old-world architecture made her feel like she'd traveled back in time or stepped into the pages of a story. Leśna Woda looked like a place where a fairy tale began.

The meandering cobblestoned lanes were shaded by leafy trees, while the

grand bathhouses were ringed by lush parks and gardens filled with ornamental ponds and burbling fountains. A gust of wind blew, showering blush-pink petals across their path. Because it was Green Week, everything was adorned with greenery. A profusion of wildflowers and fragrant herbs decorated every shop front, every window, every doorway leading into a hundred-year-old guesthouse. The honeyed scent of roses laced the air with sweetness. It was as though the whole town were in bloom.

“You know Villa Lilia, right?” Gisela pointed at a distant rooftop. There were five main springs running through the town, and each bathhouse drew from a different one. Drinking or bathing in Villa Lilia’s waters would enhance your beauty and leave your skin shimmering like stardust.

“Most of the bathhouses are heavily warded so spirits can’t enter, but Villa Lilia’s owner doesn’t mind if one or two of us sneak in so long as we don’t snack on any humans. Oh, and those spires, the church over there—avoid it.”

“Because of the exorcist?” Tamara asked. “Is he really dangerous?”

“He’s more of a pest than anything. Don’t worry. He’s probably off working toward sainthood somewhere.” Gisela pulled Tamara to her side, leaving space for an elderly dark-skinned man with a walking stick to shuffle past.

The streets were growing increasingly busy as they ventured closer to the heart of town; tourists and locals alike were meandering toward the night market in the main square: Girls in airy sundresses with ribbons braided through their hair and lace trim on their socks. Boys dressed in crisp button-down shirts and suspenders. Happy couples with their heads bent close together.

The air was full of chatter in a multitude of languages. The mainland was a continent made up of countless countries and little kingdoms, so many that they all blurred together in Gisela’s head. Her gaze lingered on a family stopped outside a souvenir shop. The parents were busy picking through racks of whimsical watercolor picture postcards, while the children, a little boy and girl, whispered and giggled and pointed at something on display.

Memories hit her like a wave, threatening to sweep her under. Her heart squeezed.

“It’s not the worst place in the world to haunt,” she said after a pause.

Tamara gave a considering look. “Do you mean that? Yulia told me you’re trying to cheat death, become human again so you can go home. Is that true?”

Yulia.