



PAN BOUYOUCAS

THE TATTOO

a novel

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PREVIEW

I

IT WAS THE twenty-fourth of April. The sun was wiping the last traces of snow off the island of Montreal, the air was warmer than it had been in months, the parks and streets and sidewalk cafés were abuzz with people celebrating the end of winter with every inch of skin they could expose. Zoe was having a latte with her friends, Nadia and Eve. The three girls were exchanging gossip and making plans for the summer, when all that exposed skin and those tattooed ornaments so caught their fancy that they headed for the nearest tattoo shop as soon as they finished their coffee.

Marco, the tattoo artist, was a big man in his forties, shaven-headed and bull-necked, with massive arms sleeved with cryptic tattooing from his wrists to his broad shoulders; the kind of guy you'd trust with a chainsaw, not a needle. But he had beautiful hands, and Zoe, Nadia and Eve were big on hands, and Marco's were large and elegant, with finely shaped fingers that handled the designs he showed them gently, as if they were snapshots of his children.

Eve picked her design first. Was her choice in reaction to

the morbid tattoos that covered Marco's arms like a coat of mail? Because although moments earlier she'd imagined kinky images and slogans branded on her body, Eve chose a red rose. "Red roses stand for love," she said. "And love is the most important thing in life."

Nadia too picked a rose. Not a red one, though. Nadia wanted hers to be yellow. Because yellow roses indicate freedom, which she valued more than love. "Besides," she added, "yellow would stand out better against a tan."

This last argument at once convinced Eve that freedom was more precious than love and she urged Zoe to get a yellow rose too. "We'll be the Sisterhood of the Yellow Rose — for life," she said.

Zoe would have preferred a flower more exotic than a rose, but after weighing her friends' wishes against her own she concluded that their friendship meant more. She did object, though, when Nadia proposed to have the emblem of that friendship tattooed at the top of their cleavage. Zoe's parents believed that tattoos were for punks and junkies and girls who travelled with a rough crowd, and she was not going to hear them nag about hers every time she put on a low-cut dress just because Nadia wanted to make a display of her colours. So she told her friend that a tattoo atop her cleavage would be the sign of a vulgar spirit, not an independent one, while a rose just above her bikini bottom would convey mystery and sensuality, and more guys would lust after her around a pool or at a beach.

An hour later Nadia had a yellow rose tattooed on the bottom curve of her belly.

By the time Eve got hers, the three girls, no longer intimidated by Marco's bulk and his tattoos, had told him more than he cared to know about them. He said very little himself, raising his eyes from the rose he was working on only to dip the needles into a cup of ink or to grab a fresh sheet of paper towel to dab the excess ink off the girls' skin.

Gentle as Marco's hands were, when her turn came, Zoe discovered that the needles hurt more than she thought they would. Nadia and Eve had gone outside to catch what was left of the sunshine. To distract her mind from the needles and the chopping sounds they made as they punctured her skin, she tried to read the man who was marking her body as no man had done before. Under his T-shirt his tattoos seemed to creep down onto his back and chest. Why would anyone suffer those needles and wrap himself in a cloak of ink drawings? What did he look like naked? What did his parents think of his tattoos? His wife, his lover, his children — if he had any? She doubted she could love such a man, such a body. Even clothed, its tattoos seared her eyes like a neon sign saying, *Do not approach if you don't like pain.*

Such were the thoughts running through Zoe's mind when Nadia and Eve came back and suggested that since none of them had planned anything for the evening, they should celebrate the founding of the Sisterhood of the Yellow Rose with a lobster and wine dinner.

On their way to the restaurant the three girls were so fired up by their tattoos that they spoke of them as though they were the mark of some prodigious transformation, a promise of better days ahead. The tattoo artist was mentioned only

once, as they ate and drank and rattled on in the peculiar language of three childhood friends. *Did Marco have tattoos on his penis too?* they wondered. *Would he have done those himself? And what about foreskin, can you tattoo that too?* One thought led to another and they decided that evening to do one more thing they had never done before, and an hour later, after checking their teeth for bits of trapped food and applying a fresh coat of gloss on their lips, they were sitting in a strip club trying to guess which male dancer had tattoos on his dick. But when they worked up the nerve to call one to their table and Zoe stuffed a ten-dollar bill inside his leopard jock, she kept her eyes on the dancer's and said with a blush, "You smell nice."

That was about all that happened the day Zoe Lalis got her rose tattoo. There was no premonitory dream, no angel with a message from some god with designs on her, not the slightest hint, sign or omen of the things to come out of that one rose, not even a mention in her horoscope about anything new or eccentric that weekend. Every other girl and boy in Montreal had a tattoo, and on that fateful Saturday, Zoe and Nadia and Eve had decided to get one too, that's all.