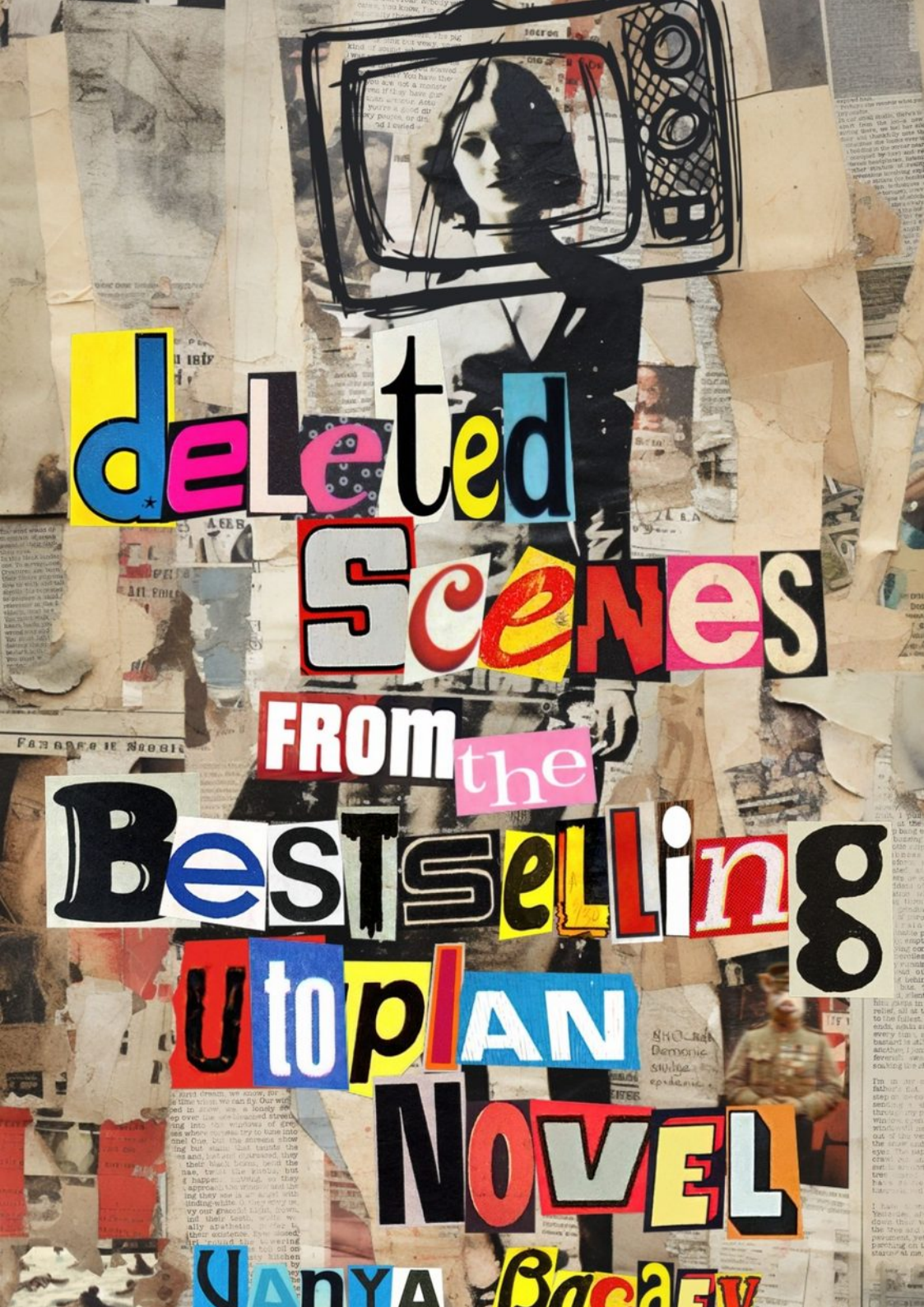

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Scenes
FROM the
Bestselling
Utopian
NOVEL
YANYA BAGLEY

№3: It's Beginning to Thaw

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A lurid dream there was of gaunt and ghoulish creatures wandering the frozen Earth in endless crowds of lonely souls through snow, ice, and silence. They went under the sky's eternal night, a thick and cloudy shroud above the snowy wasteland, through naked forest where wailed the northern winds biting the creatures' faces and howled hungry scrawny wolves biting the creatures' heels.

When someone froze, surrendered, fell behind, becoming one with Darkness, ravens would appear and start their morbid song. They would cover the body from above, circling and waiting until the wolves found it and tore it apart, eating the kidneys, liver, lungs, and finally, the juicy, still-beating heart. Then, once the creature's eyes lost their spark of life, the ravens would gouge them out, leaving behind empty, bloodied sockets.

The wind would drown out the scream, the blizzard would cover the tracks and remains, and the chain of creatures stretching into the distance would continue to march silently to the sound of their clattering teeth, groping for the traces disappearing under the snow right before their eyes.

In this bleak landscape, there is no trail in sight and never was, no path, only a wish to have one. To survive, one must follow a simple codex of rules that every creature knows from birth.

Creatures are born in caves, the walls of which are covered with white paintings depicting their future pilgrimage: silhouettes move towards the cave's entrance. Once a creature learns how to walk and talk, it starts learning the codex, from its parents, the magi, paintings and scrolls. It's repeated every day by everyone like a mantra and becomes memorised naturally to prepare a child for the journey. Nothing else is ever discussed, for no other topic holds relevance in the face of their impending journey. Some leave the cave as children, some as elderly, most as adults, but every day, their whole life, they study the codex.

You must walk focusing on the back in front. If there is no one in front, you go where your heart leads you. Your heart is your compass. Its pulsation accelerates when you turn the wrong way and sink into the wilderness and weakens when you slow down and start freezing.

You must light no fire. Darkness must be respected. There is nothing but it. You must not destroy the only thing you have. It means instant death, for the light attracts demons. It must be dark both outside around you and inside in your head, everywhere.

You must walk in complete silence. It must be respected, too. The world is silent for you to protect you, so must you be. Noise means instant death, for it attracts demons.

You must not think. The silence must be both in the mouth and in the head. There is no time to think because thinking heavy thoughts takes your precious energy and warmth from you. If you think, you slow down. Slowing down means instant death. You will freeze, frostbite your feet, hands, or worse—your spirit.

You must not count steps or seconds. How long the journey takes is unknown and you must not try to change that. Don't worry about the time. In the absence of thoughts, it passes as if it does not exist. Whether an aeon or a moment, you move through unchanging lifeless emptiness, and between the beginning of the path and its end there is nothing but Darkness.

You must love Darkness. Merge with it, become its part until it reveals to you the only thing you seek.

You must always remember about Mother. Forgetting about Her means instant death. Her warm embrace awaits you at the end of your journey. Until then, it must live in the deepest caverns of your mind, guiding your heart so it could guide you.

Somewhere beyond the permafrost lands, in the mountains desperately scraping the sky with their jagged peaks, in the middle of a beautiful gorge stands Her gigantic stone statue, body bare, arms folded across Her chest, eyes closed, a lenient smile on Her face.

She was carved over millennia from a monolith by a long-forgotten tribe who knew the secret to warm life. The monolith is smooth, polished by

the wind and snow and covered with symbols and patterns which no one knows how to read and never will—their language is sacred and shall not be read or spoken. The monolith extends deep, deep underground, where a holy spring boils and heats the stone, sending warmth up to the surface. There, upon touching Mother, the snow melts, and the tepid water surrounds Her and spreads in a knee-deep liquid layer around, forming a crust of ice at the circumference.

It's quiet in the gorge, peaceful. Sometimes you hear the wind. Sometimes the mountains hum as an avalanche descends elsewhere far off. Sometimes the cloudy water bubbles from the gases bursting to the surface through the cracks. Sometimes prey-seeking demons screech from above but, seeing nothing through the dense veil of vapour and gas surrounding Mother, fly away. The air carries the electrifying hint of ozone and the pungent odour of sulphur, an acrid scent that stings the nostrils and catches in the back of the throat as you enter the gorge.

Before approaching Mother, you must take off your clothes, close your eyes, put your right hand on your heart, stretch out your left hand, and walk towards the warmth. You will feel the temperature rising and your heart beating faster.

You must shiver, really shiver, not pretend—Mother recognises pretence and reserves Her blessings only for the devoted. The trembling should evenly pass through the whole body, spreading from bottom to top and penetrate every limb, corporeal and incorporeal.

Whilst you walk, your legs must not leave the water, even if you feel the

water slowly corroding your skin. Keep your body above it in the biting frost. You must feel both frost and burning warmth and surrender yourself wholly to that sensation. You must walk step by step, carefully, by no means running or making sharp movements, by no means falling or creating splashes. You must not disturb the peace of Mother's dwelling.

When you reach Her incandescent feet, you must first press your lips to them, feel Her velvety skin and learn what real, enveloping, all-encompassing, all-consuming warmth is.

Only then can you put your whole body against Mother and, with Her inarticulate whisper in your ears, from the sudden heat and surge of happiness, relax and die in bliss.

Read next part

№4: Training Memory

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