

Early Praise for INVADER

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The Booklife Prize

Praise for Marjory Kaptanoglu's debut novel DREAMMALLOW THIEF

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D. Donovan, Senior Reviewer, Midwest Book Review

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Kirkus Reviews

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Susan Hampson, Books from Dusk till Dawn

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The Booklife Prize

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Desert Rose Book Reviews

Also by Marjory Kaptanoglu:

DREAMMARRROW THIEF
LAST GIRL STANDING

Invader

Marjory Kaptanoglu

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For my sisters and brothers:

Kay Liscomb
Mine Günceler
Jim Benedict
Sabo Günceler
Bill Liscomb

Siblings are the people we practice on,
the people who teach us about fairness and
cooperation and kindness and caring –
quite often the hard way.

Pamela Dugdale

ROSE

Her first sensation was of a man's arms around her, lifting her out of the sea. He carried her over the sand to a dry patch of ground, where he laid her down. She turned her face, coughed, and spat out saltwater.

"You all right?" the man said.

She squinted up at him, unable to make out his features with the stark sun blazing behind his head. A feeling of foreboding gripped her and caused a shiver.

"Let me help you," he said. The man raised her into a sitting position.

She stared at her arm, wondering why it felt like she'd never seen her own hand before. Her gaze shifted to her legs, which seemed like they belonged to some other person. She felt her eyes, nose and lips, trying to remember what her face looked like. She squeezed the dampness from her long reddish hair, waiting for her memory to return.

When it didn't, she looked up, taking in the stunning blue of the cloudless sky, the glittering sand, and the jungle trees bordering the beach, continuing high into the distant hills. The beauty of her surroundings soothed her. The breeze brushed her face and she closed her eyes while she drew in a deep breath. The air smelled salty and briny and yet that also brought pleasure.

Items scattered along the shore caught her attention. Some rope, a piece of torn sail, a seat cushion, the rounded, broken

plank of a wooden hull. The remnants of a shipwreck. Had she washed up from that same boat?

The man followed her gaze. “A tropical storm came in suddenly last night,” he said.

She rubbed the goosebumps on her arms that persisted despite the heat and wondered how long she’d been in the water.

“Rose,” the man said. “Tell me what happened.” He squatted beside her.

She took in his appearance for the first time. He had short black hair, tan skin, and stubbles from not having shaved for some days. He was lean and muscular, especially his legs, like someone who ran or hiked frequently. She thought she read kindness and intelligence in his eyes, though that might’ve been her wishing it to be so.

The man had called her Rose and she supposed that must be her name, because she couldn’t remember any other. She had no clue who he was, but since he knew her and had saved her from drowning, she wondered if he might be her boyfriend or even her husband. That would explain why her skin warmed to his touch.

KAILEY

Can anyone be trusted to narrate their own life? Not me, that's for sure. My feelings influence how I remember things. My anger, fears, and disappointments cast a shadow over everything. What about the positive emotions? I don't recall a lot of those growing up.

But there's no one else to tell my tale, so here I go for what it's worth. Don't worry, I'm not going to spend a lot of time on my early years. Who really wants to hear about anyone else's childhood? Walking at one, potty-trained at two, stealing the neighbor kid's bike at three. It was downhill from there.

I'm not going to pin everything on my being fatherless, though it's tempting. I'm aware plenty of people grow up just fine with only a mom or a dad, or with two moms or two dads. Still, what a ready excuse the single parent thing could be for all my failures. Shoplifting from H&M: *no dad*. Flunking biology: *no dad*. Smoking weed: *no dad*. I could have my own theme song, like in *The Wizard of Oz*: "If I only had a brain... a heart... the nerve." *If I only had a dad.*

Whenever I tried to pin Mom down about him, she acted like it was a virgin birth. News alert, Mom: I knew how children were born by the time I was seven. Finally, after years of my begging her to tell me, she said she didn't know who he was. That gave me a brief flash of hope as I pictured a *Mamma Mia!* scenario with three cool older men, any of whom might be my dad, and in the end I could pick the one I liked best. But then I remembered this was my mother we were talking about, and it was hard to imagine one cool guy dating her, let alone three. Eventually I decided I was probably the result of a one-night stand, and Mom neglected to get the man's full name, phone number, or address to track him down later.

But I've had a lot of time to think about my mother (and everything else) since then, and I no longer believe she was that careless. She's one of the most meticulous people I know when it comes to doing anything. No way would she screw a guy without collecting all his vital information. Which meant the reason I had never met my father was that he didn't know I existed. Mom didn't tell him because she's a control freak. My dad would've wanted to have a say in my upbringing, and she had to make sure that never happened.

I'll tell you about one incident that will give you an idea what Mom was like. Every year, she brought me to the county fair. They had an indoor facility where local people showcased their collections. Along with the usual boring stuff—baseball cards, bottle caps, PEZ candy dispensers—they always had a few that were incredibly weird. One time someone brought condiment packs, you know, like ketchup, mustard, and soy sauce. Another year there was a collection of barf bags. Seriously, barf bags.

Mom's thing was dolls. Yeah, this is what I'm talking about, she was an adult fixated on dolls. I wasn't allowed to play with

them, which was fine with me, because I never liked them anyway. She filled our apartment with Barbies, American Girls, baby dolls, and even trolls. It was creepy as hell. I felt like they were staring at me all the time, and probably doing sinister things while I slept. But Mom was like a doll herself, with her perfect hair and the way she always put on her lipstick with two sharp points at the top. With her clothes that had flawless color coordination and never any wrinkles. I liked being messy, but when she still had a say in the matter, she wouldn't let me out of the house until she'd made me look like a miniature version of herself.

At the fair I wanted to go on the carnival rides... I *dreamed* of going on a carnival ride. I begged Mom to let me do it. Sometimes she said it was too dangerous; other times she said the spinning would make my little tummy ache. Really, that's the way she used to talk to me. She also called me "K-K."

When I was six, Mom and I were standing near the ride I wanted to go on more than any other—the airplanes. It so happened one of the women who judged the collections every year noticed Mom and stopped to talk with her. I saw my chance and asked in my sweetest voice if I could go on the ride. Sweetness had no effect on Mom, but I thought it might impress the judge. Sure enough, Mom was about to say no as usual, but then she stopped because she didn't want to look like a mean mother in front of this lady.

I was bouncing up and down with excitement when I got into my own little plane and the bar was closed over me. The planes started moving and soon we were flying over everyone's head. I had a wheel and I'm pretty sure I thought I was really steering the thing. It was the happiest day of my life so far, and still ranks up there with my best, as there haven't been too many of those.

I couldn't stop smiling as the plane went round and round, weaving up and down. I'd never been in a real airplane, but the idea of flying had always filled my imagination. With the wind on my face, I pictured myself soaring like a bird.

The ride began to slow down way too soon. I wanted to keep going for a few more hours. The plane eased to a stop but I still sat there, hoping no one would notice me and I could continue flying around.

"K-K, come here!" Mom shouted. Just my luck, the lady she wanted to impress had gone away.

The attendant, a skinny boy with a nose piercing, came over, raised the bar, and told me I'd have to get in line again. I made sure not to look at Mom as I walked around the other way back toward the line. It made me cringe to hear Mom scurrying up behind me.

"I called you," she said.

I actually started running, but she was faster and caught up with me right away, grasping my shoulder from behind.

I whirled around. "I want to go again!" I said.

Here's one of those places where my narration gets sketchy. The way I remember it, at this point Mom looked exactly like the Wicked Witch of the West. No broomstick or bicycle, just a long green face with eyes of flint.

"I told you one time only," Mom said. She didn't cackle, but she might as well have. *I'll get you, my pretty.*

"Please, Mommy. *Please.*" Thinking back, I'm amazed she didn't manage to terrify me into silence, but it goes to show how badly I wanted this thing.

Mom took my hand and squeezed it so hard, tears came to my eyes. "I said no. Mommy knows best. We're going inside. I think the judging started." She pulled me away. I tugged on my

hair—a habit I’ve always had when I get upset or anxious—and stared back at the planes, just starting to rise up into the air again.

If I only had a dad.

I know things could’ve been much worse. This isn’t an excuse for what happened later. It’s just the way things were, that’s all.

ROSE

When Rose was strong enough to stand, the man took her arm and led her over the crest of a low hill to a cabin that had been built on scrub grass, next to a small shed and a generator that hummed. She still wasn't ready to talk and the man respected that.

As soon as they entered the cabin, he got her a towel and showed her a box that held some women's clothing and a pair of sandals. She took the T-shirt, pair of shorts, panties, and bra closest to the top. *Do these belong to me?* she wondered. They looked like the right sizes, but she wouldn't know for certain until she tried them on.

"You can rinse off in the washroom. There's clean towels on the shelf," he said. "I'll make you a sandwich."

She felt comfortable inside his little cabin and wondered if that was because she had been living here. Not that anyone could stay in such an isolated place for very long, but maybe they had come here on some sort of holiday. It was clean and uncluttered and brightly lit by sunshine. There was a corner kitchen with a propane stove and a refrigerator. A compact table with one chair,

a recliner, a bookshelf, and a single bed occupied the rest of the space.

The single bed puzzled her. If they had come here together, wouldn't they at least have asked for a double? One of many mysteries to address in time, but certainly not the most important.

She went into the bathroom, which had only a basin, small tub, and water tank. No toilet. The shed outside must've been the outhouse. At least she hoped so, as the alternative would be squatting among the trees. She shut the door, and when she turned back, she was drawn to her reflection in the mirror over the basin. The face that stared back at her evoked no memories. She might as well have been looking at a stranger. *At least I'm a pretty stranger.* As quickly as the thought occurred, she berated herself for being shallow.

Rose—who needed to remind herself the man had said that was her name—had hazel eyes, long auburn hair, and a narrow face with clear skin except for a light mole on one of her cheeks. Probably she was in her late-twenties but it could've been plus or minus five years. Her eyebrows were brown and smooth. Her nose was straight and a bit pointed at the tip. Her lips just seemed normal, not too full or too thin. Her teeth were aligned in the perfect way that can only be achieved by braces. There was nothing particularly arresting about her face, but altogether the features formed a pleasing picture, she thought.

She drew back her hair to examine the tattoo on her neck. It was like an animation of a bird swooping up into flight. Five representations of the same bird as it went from perching to soaring with open wings. Though she wasn't certain what she thought of tattoos in general, she liked this one. She also liked that it had no color; the image was inked in shades of grey.

Rose could not recall anything about this tattoo or what had prompted her to get it. But that wasn't surprising, because she couldn't remember a single thing about herself, not her name, or where she grew up, or what she did for a living. Whether she had a husband (who might be the man, but she wasn't sure) or children, living parents or siblings, dear friends or grandparents... she had no idea. At the same time, her head teemed with information. She could recite facts about famous people, dead and alive. Facts about history, politics, science, technology, art, and culture. She could remember the titles and plots of countless films, and details about the actors who starred in them.

She slipped off her sundress and panties and looked down at herself. Her skin was pale, her body slender and attractive, she supposed. Her feet had been bare when she washed up onto the beach. She wore no polish on her finger- and toenails, and had no piercings, which somehow relieved her, she didn't really know why.

Rose stepped into the tub and turned on the faucet. The water that emerged from the hand sprayer was slightly warmer than the room temperature. She washed her hair, soaped all over, and rinsed off. It felt good to dry herself with the thick towel and to put on the clean clothes. She used his comb to remove the tangles from her hair.

When she came out of the bathroom, the man looked at her. "Lunch is ready," he said.

"Thank you." These were the first words she'd said to him, at least since she'd lost her memory. He smiled.

As she crossed the room to the table, she had the urge to touch everything. The firm wooden walls, the soft, thin curtains, the smooth window glass, the fluffy quilt on the bed. It wasn't

enough to look at these things, she had to feel them as well. She didn't know why the touch reassured her so much.

The man got out a second folding chair from the closet and set it across from the other one at the table. He'd assembled matching sandwiches with sliced turkey, cheese, lettuce, tomato, and onion on whole wheat bread. Rose wondered where he could've gotten the ingredients—was there a supermarket, *through the jungle and right at the creek?* But she was too hungry to worry about it at the moment. As soon as she sat down, she lifted her sandwich and took a huge, glorious bite. Tomato juice dripped down her chin, but she didn't care. She hadn't ever tasted anything so good before. *Or had she?* One more thing she didn't know.

His eyes shone with amusement watching her eat. She devoured her meal quickly and ravenously, and then drained her glass of water. She wiped her lips and chin, satisfied now, and wondering how she would tell her boyfriend or husband she had no idea who he was.

"I can't remember anything," she said at last, resolving to begin with the more general explanation of the problem.

He paused chewing to stare at her. "Anything?"

She waited to let that sink in.

"You mean about the shipwreck?" he said.

"Well, that... and everything else."

"At least you know who you are, right?"

"I don't." She took a deep breath. "Not even my own name. You called me Rose. Otherwise I wouldn't know."

"Wow. Okay." He thought for a moment. "Do you remember me?"

She touched his hand, and there was that electricity again. "I'm so sorry," she said. "I'm sure it has nothing to do with my feelings for you."

"Feelings?" he said.

"Yes, I mean, I'm sure my feelings are the same." If only she could remember what they were.

The man laughed. "What do you think our relationship is?"

Why is he making this so difficult? "That's what I'm trying to tell you. I don't know if we're a couple or not."

He laughed harder. Rose drew back her hand, annoyed.

"Sorry," he said. "It's just... I only met you two weeks ago. I don't even know your last name."

"What?" she said. It was all so horribly confusing.

"You were with another research group on the island. You, another woman, one man. We met briefly after I arrived. The three of you left on the sailboat yesterday."

"So you and I...?"

"Barely know each other," he said.

"Where is this place?" Rose got up. "How far are we from civilization?" She stared out the open door.

"A thousand miles to Hawaii, give or take a hundred," he said. "Whitaker Island. Pacific waters all around us."

"We're both American?" she said. "We sound American."

"I am. And I just assumed you were. Unless you're Canadian. Say the word, 'a-b-o-u-t.'"

"About?" She pronounced the second syllable with an 'ow' sound.

"Probably not Canadian," he said.

"Who else lives on this island?"

"It's just us at the moment."

She wrapped a tress of her hair around her finger and pulled on it. Things were worse than she'd thought. Much worse.

He stood and shook her free hand. "Let's try this again. My name is Thomas Blackburn. I work in environmental research. You do too. Your name is Rose. I'm pleased to meet you. I'm sorry to say I know nothing else about you."

She watched the ocean in the distance. "You said I left in a sailboat with two other people," she said. "They must know who I am."

Thomas frowned. "Yeah," he said. "But only you came back."

KAILEY

The thing about control freaks is their behavior works against the very thing they're trying to achieve. I mean, if Mom had let me have my way now and then, I might not have been so determined to break away from her. But there was no compromise in her world. Either I obeyed or I was punished. Vindictively punished too. One time she took a dress—my favorite white halter—and cut it to shreds with a pair of scissors. She didn't like to be crossed.

But her predictability made her easier to deceive. I knew she had no respect for my privacy. I knew she would search my room whenever I was out of the house. I knew she would monitor everything I did online. Knowing this... expecting it... allowed me to keep one step ahead of her.

I learned deception at an early age. I became an accomplished liar, forger, and thief. A master of concealment. I avoided confrontation, because I knew from past experience I would never win an argument with her. She was skilled at twisting everything I said, so that I always came out looking like a demon, and her, a saint.

Which was why I never told her about the scholarship. It was the best day of my life, even better than the airplane ride, when I got the email telling me I won. I never won anything else, before or after. It's not that I was a terrible student. Okay, I was terrible in science, but in everything else, my grades were average. Mom said I should just get used to it, and that no one in our family ever did well in school. Book-learning wasn't all that important, according to her. She was a hairdresser, so I guess it wasn't essential to her job. For a while I thought I'd be a hairdresser too, after I finished high school.

But when I found out about the scholarship, I knew I had to try for it, even though I expected to fail. Filling out that application was the most effort I ever put into anything. I got Sean to look it over, but he didn't change much. He told me to trust myself—that was something I never heard before. He said my passion came through and that was generally what people were looking for when it came to doling out scholarships.

And he was right. I was selected, along with three other kids my age. We all came from different high schools in the Bay Area. The day I got the notification, I had to keep reminding myself not to grin like an idiot. Nothing made Mom more suspicious than unmotivated happiness.

The day before the first class, I gave all my weed to Jenna and Sean. That's how much I cared about this. It wasn't just because I heard there might be a drug test required before I could get my license. I was about to receive professional training, and therefore I must rise to the occasion and become a professional myself. No weed, no beer, no drugs of any kind. *Safety first.*

The next morning, I rode a bus to the San Carlos airport. It was late coming, which made me wish I'd arrived sooner to catch the earlier bus, even though the longer I stayed out, the more

suspicious Mom would become about what I was doing. Luckily, my friend Jenna was great at sounding like an adult. She would pretend to be her own mother. I'd tell Mom I was going to Jenna's house, and when she called to check up on me, my friend would put on that voice and convince her I was in good hands and not to worry.

When I finally reached the airport, Mr. Cho was already there with the other scholarship kids. I spotted them on the tarmac next to a beautiful Cessna 162 Skycatcher, and hurried across the parking lot toward them.

I thought something must be wrong when Mr. Cho saw me approaching and moved away from the others to intercept me. The serious expression on his face made me start tugging at my hair. When he reached me, he spoke quietly so the others wouldn't hear. "Didn't your mother tell you?" His tone was more concerned than angry. He was a nice man, Mr. Cho.

But as soon as I heard him, my stomach twisted inside and I felt like I was going to throw up. I think I said, "what?" or "gaaa," or maybe I just gaped at him. Usually I did a better job covering, but this was something I really cared about.

"She called us," Mr. Cho said. "She told me she didn't sign the permission form."

I struggled to pull myself together and blank out my feelings the way I usually did. "She did sign it," I said. "You saw it. She forgets stuff like that."

"She told us you forged it." His tone was stiff now. He'd been willing to sympathize until I started lying.

I was probably as young as nine when I began practicing her signature. After years of her volunteering to chaperone on field trips and treating me like I was five years younger than whatever my age was, I began signing the forms myself, just so she

wouldn't find out. One time another mother told her the class had gone to the pumpkin patch, and she realized what I'd done. For punishment she locked me in my room every day after school until Christmas break. Of course, I still kept forging stuff. But I became more selective about it.

I was going to keep lying to Mr. Cho, because that was what I did, but he interrupted. "Don't," he said. "Lying just makes things worse. I'm afraid we can't award you the scholarship. You're only fifteen. She has to approve it."

"But I... I can't afford flight training without it."

"I'm sorry, Kailey. My hands are tied. Maybe if you talked to her?"

If I hadn't been so miserable, I would've laughed. This was a woman who hadn't wanted me to ride a toy airplane. She would tie me up and lock me in my room forever before she'd let me pilot a real one.

My hopes and dreams drained out of me that day and vaporized like water on the hot tarmac.

<End of Excerpt>