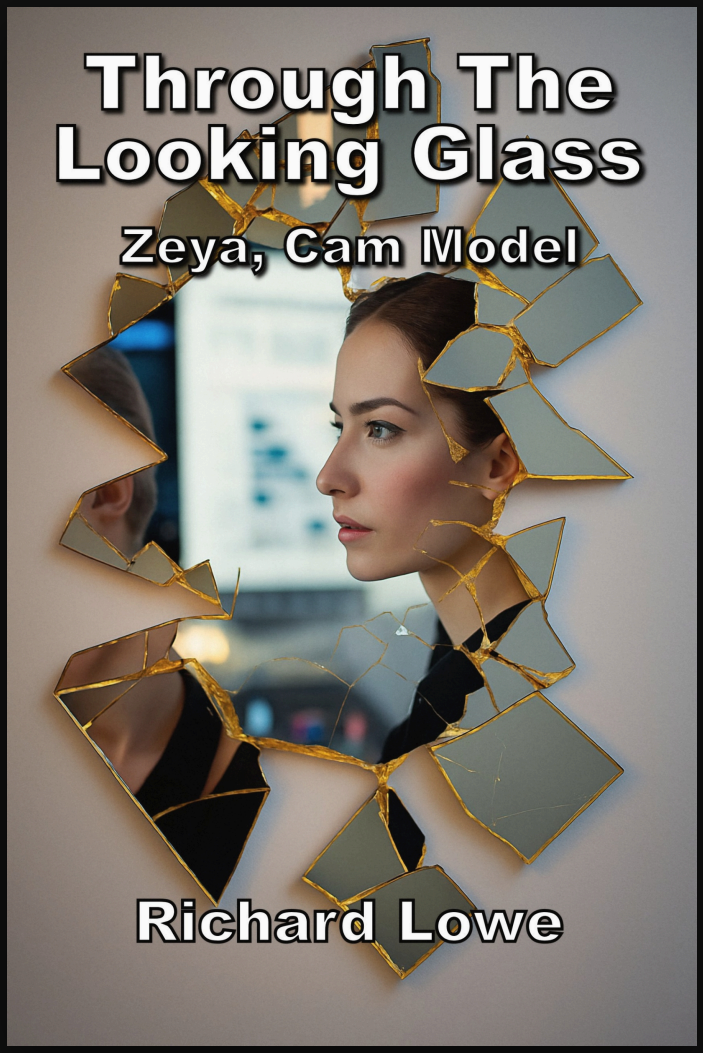
A FREE COMPANION TO THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

Stray

Five weeks into the job, Zeya finds out what she is really good at.



RICHARD LOWE

Stray

The dog came out from between two parked cars at a trot, nose down. Street dogs in Bucharest always move that way, like they have an appointment across town and they're running late.

I was on the balcony with Annabelle, finishing the last cigarette of my shift. I had my jeans back on, my bag on my shoulder, and twenty minutes to catch the bus to school. Five weeks in the studio, and the last cigarette of a shift was still the best one of the day.

"Look at that one," Annabelle said. "She's skinnier than you."

The dog was brown with a white chest and one ear that stood up and one that didn't. She crossed the street with her head low. Halfway over, she stopped to sniff at a paper bag somebody had dropped in the gutter.

A black car came around the corner much too fast for a street that narrow. I heard the thump before I understood it. The dog screamed, a high sound like a child or a rusty hinge, and spun across the pavement.

The black car never slowed down. It was gone before the scream ended.

"Oh, fuck," Annabelle said.

The dog got up. That was the worst part. She got up on three legs with the fourth dragging, and she went in a crooked line toward the doorway across the street, where a man slept on a flattened cardboard box.

I dropped my cigarette over the rail. I don't remember deciding to run.

* * *

Daciana looked up from the front desk as I went through the lobby. She had a pen in her mouth and the phone pinned against her shoulder.

"Zeya, your bus…"

"A dog got hit," I said, and shoved the door open with both hands.

Outside, the heat came up off the street like the inside of an oven. The air smelled of exhaust and hot garbage and the bakery two streets over. The man in the doorway had sat up on his cardboard to yell at the dog.

The dog had pressed herself into the corner of the doorway as far as she could go. She was panting hard, her lips pulled back from her teeth.

"She's yours?" the man shouted at me. He had no shoes and a beard full of crumbs.

"No."

"Then get it away. It bites."

I crouched down three meters from her and stopped. Every professor I'd had since the first year drilled the same lesson into us. A dog in pain does not know you are trying to help, only that she hurts and you are big.

"Hello, girl," I said in my softest voice. "Hello, beautiful."

She growled. It was a thin growl with nothing behind it.

"You're having a terrible day," I told her. "Me too, most days."

The leg was the left back one. Below the knee it bent where no leg bends. A white end of bone had come through the skin, and the fur around it was dark and wet.

Blood ran in a slow line across the step and into a crack in the concrete. My stomach turned over once and then went quiet. It always does that.

I cry at television commercials. I can't sit through a movie where the dog dies. Put a hurt animal in front of me, though, and my body gets out of my way.

“Girl.” Annabelle was behind me, breathing hard. “What you need?”

She had a jacket on over her robe, and she was barefoot on that hot pavement. She hopped from foot to foot like the street was a frying pan.

“Something to wrap her in,” I said. “Something clean.”

Annabelle turned and ran back across the street without asking another question. I loved her for that.

I slid a little closer on my heels. The dog watched me with the whites of her eyes showing. Her teats hung loose and pink against her belly, and I knew what that meant before I let myself think it.

She had puppies somewhere. She had been feeding them not long ago.

“Hey,” I said to the man on the cardboard. “Do you know this dog?”

“They are all the same dog.” He lay back down and put his arm over his eyes. “She comes for the bread.”

“Does she have babies?”

“Sometimes, under the cars or in the cellars.” He waved one dirty hand at the whole street. “Who knows where.”

I untied my left sneaker and pulled the lace out. My hands were steady. I made a loop in the middle of it the way they taught us in first year, practicing on a stuffed dog in a cold lab while all of us laughed at how stupid it seemed.

It didn't seem stupid now.

“I'm going to do something you won't like,” I told her. “Then I'm going to make it better, and that's the deal.”

She snapped at the lace when it came near her face. I waited. She snapped again, weaker.

Then she put her head down on the step and shut her eyes. I slipped the loop over her nose and pulled it snug. I crossed the ends under her jaw and tied them behind her ears.

Now she couldn't bite. Now she could only shake.

I lifted her lip with one finger. Her gums were pink, paler than I wanted. I pressed one with my thumb, and the white spot went pink again in about two seconds, maybe a little more.

It wasn't good, but she wasn't dying either.

Annabelle came back at a run with a folded bed cover in her arms. It was one of the white ones from the laundry room, the clean ones we put on at the start of every shift. It was still warm from the dryer.

“Vera's going to kill you,” I said.

“Vera is in a meeting and will never know.” She shook it open. “What now?”

“Now we slide it under her. Slow. Keep your hands away from her head.”

We worked the cover under her an inch at a time. Twice she screamed through the lace, and the man on the cardboard swore at us and rolled over. I kept talking the whole time.

I told her she was the bravest girl in Bucharest. I told her the man in the black car would get a flat tire every morning for the rest of his life. Annabelle laughed so hard she had to stop pushing.

When we lifted her, she weighed nothing. I could feel every rib through the cotton. The white cover was red in three places before we reached the curb.

* * *

The first taxi stopped, looked at us, and drove away. The second one didn't stop at all. I stood on the curb with a bleeding dog in my arms and my left shoe flopping open.

On the far side of the intersection, my bus went past. For once in its life it was right on time.

“Fuck,” I said.

“Fuck,” Annabelle agreed.

Behind us, the studio door opened. Daciana came down the steps with her purse on her shoulder and her car keys in her hand. She stopped a good two meters away and looked at the dog the way some people look at a spider in the bathtub.

“Where does it need to go?” she asked.

“The university. The clinic. It's across the city.”

“My car is behind the building.” She didn't come any closer. “It will not sit in the front.”

“It won't,” I promised.

“And if it bites you, I am not stopping.”

Annabelle kissed her on the cheek. Daciana pushed her away with one hand and wiped her face with the other. That was the first time I ever saw her not smile.

* * *

Daciana's car was small and blue and clean enough to eat from. A little cardboard tree hung from the mirror, and the whole car smelled of vanilla. It was the same vanilla as the lobby.

“I buy them for the studio,” she said, catching me looking. “Forty at a time. I take one for myself.”

“I won't tell Vera.”

“Vera knows.” She started the engine. “Vera knows everything.”

I sat in the back with the dog across my lap. Annabelle stayed on the steps, waving, her bare feet black from the street. She was due back in her room in ten minutes, and she couldn't miss it.

She shouted after us to call her. I didn't have her number. Five weeks, and I didn't know the phone number of the woman who had just run barefoot across a street for me.

The traffic was the usual traffic. Daciana drove the way she ran the front desk, politely and without mercy. She leaned on the horn at a bus and cut in front of a truck full of watermelons, smiling beautifully at the driver as she did it.

Her teeth were perfect. I'd noticed it on my first day. In this country, where half the people I knew had a tooth missing or a tooth gone gray, Daciana's smile looked like she had bought it somewhere else.

“You're kind to do this,” I said.

“I am not kind.” She looked at me in the mirror. “I am leaving early, and this is my excuse.”

The dog had stopped shaking. That scared me more than the shaking had. I kept two fingers inside the cover against her chest and felt her heart going fast and light, like a bird's.

“You don't like dogs,” I said.

Daciana held up her right hand without taking her eyes off the road. A white scar ran across the base of her thumb, shiny and old, shaped like a crooked letter C.

“I was seven,” she said. “My grandmother's dog, a big yellow thing. I put my hand in his food bowl while he was eating.”

“Oh no.”

“He was right, and I was wrong.” She put her hand back on the wheel. “I have been afraid of every dog since.”

At a red light, a boy on the corner was selling sunflower seeds in paper cones, and Daciana rolled down her window and bought one. She put it on the seat beside her without eating any.

"For my mother," she said. "She likes them. She has nothing to do all day except crack seeds and argue."

"Argue with who?"

"The radio. Since my father died she lives alone, and she argues with the man who reads the news."

The light changed, and Daciana pulled away hard enough to press me back into the seat.

"She loved dogs," she said. "We had three when I was small."

"And now?"

"After my father died she said no more dogs. She is old, she says, and when she dies the dog will be alone."

"So now she has the radio."

"And the radio wins every time." She smiled at me in the mirror. "What is your class tonight?"

I had to think. "Pharmacology."

"And you will miss it."

"Yes."

"Vera will not be happy. She tells all the new girls to stay in school."

"She told me in my first week." I looked out the window. "She doesn't need to know about tonight."

Daciana laughed. It was a big laugh for such a small, neat woman, and it filled the whole car.

"Dear," she said, "Vera knew you were hungry the day you walked in, before you opened your mouth. You think she won't know you missed one class?"

I didn't know what to say to that. I looked down at the dog. Her eyes were half open, and her tongue had slid out past the lace, gray at the tip.

I wet my fingers and touched it. She licked them once.

"Drive faster," I said.

Daciana drove faster.

My bag sat against my hip, and through the canvas I could feel the corner of the little leather pouch Vera had given me with my first rent money in it. I'd kept it. Every week since, I'd put money back into it, a little at a time.

One day I would set it on her desk, full, and say thank you and mean it. I'd planned to give her the first half on Friday. I didn't open the pouch to look, because I knew to the last leu what was inside.

* * *

The clinic was at the back of the veterinary building, down a ramp past the dumpsters. It smelled the way it always smelled, of bleach and wet fur and the burned coffee in the pot that nobody ever washed. A fluorescent tube over the door buzzed and flickered like it was thinking about dying.

Daciana pulled right up onto the ramp, which you aren't supposed to do, and put on her flashers.

"Go," she said. "I will find parking. I will not come in."

I carried the dog through the swinging doors with the cover trailing behind me. A first-year girl I didn't know sat at the desk with a textbook open in front of her. She took one look, picked up the phone, and said, "Professor, you need to come down."

Only one professor worked the clinic on Tuesday evenings. I had been hoping all the way across the city that it wouldn't be him tonight.

Professor Radu came down the back stairs wiping his hands on a paper towel. He was sixty, maybe more, a heavy man with gray hair growing out of his ears. His white coat had been washed so many times it had gone the color of old teeth.

He taught surgery to the third years. On the first day of term he told us that a late student was the same as an absent student. He meant it.

"Ah," he said when he saw me. "Miss Zeya, I thought perhaps you had died."

"I'm sorry, Professor."

"You were not in my lecture on Thursday, or the Monday before." He was already looking at the dog. "What is this?"

"A car hit her an hour ago," I said. "Left hind, open fracture below the stifle, a lot of dirt in the wound."

"Gums?"

"Pale, refill about two seconds. She's been nursing, and I muzzled her."

He leaned over and looked at the shoelace. He grunted.

"That is your shoe?"

"Yes."

"Good knot." He turned to the first-year. "Table two, and the lights."

The girl was already moving. He called after her to get the technician back from his dinner and tell him that his dinner was over.

* * *

They let me stay. I don't think anyone decided it. I scrubbed my hands and arms at the big steel sink until my skin went red, ten strokes on every side of every finger, the way he'd taught us.

When I came back, he handed me a cap and a mask. He didn't say anything. I took that as permission.

The X-ray was worse than the leg looked. The bone was broken in four places, in splinters, like a cracker somebody had stepped on.

Professor Radu stood in front of the light box with his arms folded over his belly and didn't say anything.

"You see?" he said.

"Yes."

"Tell me."

"It's comminuted," I said. "The wound is contaminated."

"Go on."

"Even if you could plate it, she'd need weeks in a cage with somebody to change the bandages. She has nobody, so you'll take the leg."

"I will take the leg." He looked at me over his glasses. "Unless you want to tell me that you will be the somebody."

I opened my mouth. Then I shut it.

"No," he said, not unkindly. "This is the answer most of the time, Miss Zeya, and you will hear me say it again. Dogs do very well on three legs."

"People do worse with the bill for four," I said.

He raised his eyebrows. "You were listening, once."

The bill. I'd been trying not to think about it since the curb.

“The clinic doesn't treat strays for free,” I said.

“The clinic treats strays for the cost of the drugs, because the dean likes to tell journalists we are compassionate.” He pulled a pad out of his coat pocket. “Somebody still pays the cost of the drugs.”

He wrote a few numbers on it. He tore off the page and held it out to me. “The somebody is you, I think.”

I looked at the number. It was close to the number in the leather pouch. Not equal, but close.

I took the pouch out of my bag and counted the bills onto the counter while he watched. The first-year at the desk watched too. Nobody asked where a third-year student who skipped lectures got that much cash, folded neat, in a leather pouch far nicer than anything else I owned.

Professor Radu sniffed the air near me. He has a famous nose. He can smell an infected ear from the hallway.

“Cigarettes,” he said. “And vanilla.”

“I work in an office.”

“An office.” He gathered the money into a stack and tapped the edges straight on the counter. “I knew a girl once who worked in an office, when I was young, and she smelled of vanilla too.”

“What happened to her?”

“Now she is a doctor in Cluj. She has three children and a husband who is afraid of her.”

I didn't know if he meant what I thought he meant. He gave the stack to the first-year to write a receipt and turned back to the table.

“Come,” he said. “You will hold the leg up while I scrub it.”

“Yes, Professor.”

“And you will watch her breathe, and you will count. If the number changes, you tell me before I have to ask.”

* * *

I counted for two hours.

That's what I remember most. I don't remember the cutting so much. He did the cutting, slow and steady, talking the whole time about blood vessels and nerves as if I were a full lecture hall and not one tired girl in a paper cap.

I held the leg when he told me and passed what he asked for. When the leg came away in my hands, heavy and loose and still warm, I put it in the steel pan the technician held out. I didn't drop it.

Mostly I watched her chest. Up and down. Up and down.

The tube in her throat hissed. The machine beside her head ticked. I counted her breaths for a minute, wrote the number on the white board with a marker, and counted again.

Eighteen. Sixteen. Sixteen. Fourteen.

“Fourteen,” I said.

“I heard you.” He reached over and turned a dial a little. “Count again.”

Sixteen.

At the studio, I count too. I count minutes all shift long, and every one of them is money. Every one goes into a little pouch in my head that I'm going to set on somebody's desk someday.

In five weeks, I never once thought about anything else while I counted. Here I didn't think about money at all. I didn't think about my rent or the bus or Vera.

I didn't think about the black car. I didn't think about the puppies under some other car somewhere, waiting for a mother who wasn't coming back tonight.

Sixteen. Eighteen. Eighteen.

My feet hurt from standing. My back hurt from bending. The mask was wet against my mouth, and the paper cap itched where it pressed my hair flat.

The iodine got into my nose until I couldn't smell anything else. I wouldn't have traded places with anyone in Romania.

* * *

He closed the skin himself, with small, neat stitches in a row like the seam on a pair of jeans. The stump looked like a stump. It was ugly and clean and finished.

"So," he said, pulling off his gloves with two snaps. "She will wake up in an hour, and she will be angry. Then she will be hungry."

"And then?"

"In two days she will try to walk and fall down, and in a week she will run faster than you." He threw the gloves in the bin. "Strays can stay ten days, and after that they go to the public shelter unless somebody claims them."

"I know."

"You know what the public shelter is?"

"Yes."

"Then you know." He looked at the clock on the wall, already past ten. "Your hands were good tonight, and you did not panic."

I stood there in my paper cap with my face burning under the mask. Nobody had told me I was good at anything in five weeks except the job.

He went to the door and stopped with his hand on it. "Thursday is the lecture on fracture repair," he said. "Since you are so interested in fractures."

"I'll be there."

"You said that about the last one." He went out. Through the little window in the door I watched him climb the stairs one at a time, holding the rail.

I sat down on the floor next to the recovery cage and leaned my back against the wall.

The dog lay on a folded towel with an IV taped to her front leg and a plastic cone around her neck. The shoelace was gone. Somebody had cut it off and thrown it away, and I had one shoe that wouldn't stay on my foot.

I didn't care. She was breathing on her own, slow and deep. Every few breaths her lip twitched, like she was dreaming she was chasing something, or being chased.

I wanted to call somebody. I wanted to tell somebody about her, about the X-ray and the stitches and the counting. I took out my phone, found Natasha's name, and looked at it for a long time.

Natasha would ask where I got that kind of money. She would ask what job pays a student like that after five weeks, and what I did there.

She has known me since we were six years old. She would hear a lie in my voice before I finished the first sentence. I put the phone back in my bag.

* * *

Daciana was asleep in a plastic chair in the hallway.

Her purse sat on her lap with both hands folded over it. Her head had tipped back against the wall, and her mouth hung open. Her lipstick was still perfect, and she snored like a truck driver.

I sat down in the chair next to her. She woke up instantly, the way mothers wake up, already talking.

“Is it dead?”

“She's alive. They took the leg.”

“Good, the leg was ugly.” She looked at her watch and clicked her tongue. “My mother will have called me nine times, and she will think I am in a ditch.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Don't be sorry, be hungry.” She stood and smoothed down her skirt. “Come, I will drive you home.”

“I live ten minutes from here. I can walk.”

“With one shoe, in this neighborhood?” She took my arm. “Come.”

She didn't ask a single thing about the dog on the drive. She asked about my apartment and my landlady. She asked whether I ate breakfast.

When I said usually not, she told me that was why I was so skinny. She opened her glove box without looking and handed me a packet of biscuits. I ate all of them before we reached my street.

When she let me out in front of my building, she reached back between the seats and picked the bed cover up off the floor. It was stiff now. The red had gone brown.

“You'll want this,” she said. “I will tell Vera the laundry ate one.”

* * *

Annabelle found me on the balcony the next morning before my shift. She had a coffee in each hand and gave me one without asking if I wanted it.

“So?” she said.

“Three legs.”

“Fuck.” She drank some coffee. “Is that bad?”

“No. It's good. She'll live.”

“Then why you look like that?”

I told her about the puppies. Annabelle looked down at the street, at the row of parked cars along the curb, at the doorway where the man still lay on his cardboard.

“We find them,” she said.

“We have a shift.”

“After the shift, then.” She lit a cigarette and blew the smoke out over the rail. “You and me, girl, we find them, and I keep one and name him after my first boyfriend.”

“Why?”

“Because he also peed on everything.” She grinned at me through the smoke. “I am joking, mostly.”

* * *

I went back to the clinic every night that week before class.

She was awake the second night and furious about the cone. She had worked out how to back into the corner of the cage so the cone wouldn't knock against the bars. She lay there and looked at me with her one standing ear and her one folded ear.

When I opened the door, she growled.

On the third night, she let me put my hand on her head. On the fourth, she ate chicken out of my fingers. Then she tried to eat the fingers.

The first-year at the desk told me Professor Radu had been down to look at her twice a day. “He doesn't do that,” she said. “He doesn't look at anything twice.”

On Thursday I went to the lecture on fracture repair and sat in the front row. He didn't look at me once for the whole two hours. At the end, without turning around from the board, he said, “Miss Zeya will now tell us what comminuted means.”

I told them. He said, “Correct,” and went on to the next slide.

Nobody at the clinic named her. That's a rule there. You don't name the strays, because if you name them you take them home, and none of us had homes that could hold a dog.

My apartment was one room. My landlady already looked at me like I was a crime nobody had reported yet. I named the dog anyway, in my head, and I never once said it out loud.

* * *

Every day that week I looked for the puppies.

I got to the studio forty minutes early each morning and walked that street from one end to the other. I got down on my knees on the pavement and looked under every parked car. I looked behind the dumpsters and in the gaps where the walls of two buildings didn't quite meet.

Annabelle came with me twice, after our shifts, in her jeans and her big sunglasses. She knocked on doors and asked old women in housecoats if they had seen a brown dog with one ear up. The old women looked at her sunglasses and closed their doors.

Halfway down the block there was a cellar grate set into the sidewalk. I lay on my stomach with my face against the bars and listened. A woman with a shopping bag stopped and asked if I had lost my keys.

“Puppies,” I said.

She looked down at me in my jeans, with my makeup bag on the concrete beside me. She shook her head and walked on.

The man on the cardboard watched us the whole week. On the fifth day he said, “You are wasting your time. They are gone.”

“How do you know?”

He shrugged and rolled over. “I don't. Nobody knows anything.”

We never found them. I never heard so much as a whimper. When I go out on the balcony now to smoke, I still look down at the cars along that curb, and I still count them.

* * *

On Friday I put the leather pouch on Vera's desk.

She was on the phone. She held up one finger, finished her call, and wrote a few words on a pad. Then she looked at the pouch, and only after that at me.

It was flat. You could see from across the room that it was flat.

“This is the first payment?” she asked.

“It was supposed to be half.” I kept my hands still in my lap. “There's a lot less than I said, but I'll have the rest of the half by the end of the month, I promise.”

Vera opened the pouch, looked inside, and closed it again.

“Daciana tells me the laundry ate a bed cover,” she said.

I said nothing at all.

“Daciana also tells me she drove a dog across the city on Tuesday.” Vera leaned back in her chair. “Daciana, who crosses the street when she sees a poodle.”

She had a cigarette tucked behind her ear that she wasn't allowed to smoke in the office. She touched it the way my grandmother used to touch the little cross she wore.

“So,” she said. “You spent my money on a dog.”

“Yes.”

“A street dog.”

“Yes.”

“Is it alive?”

“She's alive,” I said. “She has three legs now.”

Vera didn't say anything for a while. Outside her window, the city was gray with heat. Down the block a car alarm went on and on, and nobody came to turn it off.

“Did you go to class on Tuesday?” she asked.

“No.” Then I thought about it. “I was at the clinic all night with the surgery professor, and it's the same building.”

Vera laughed out loud. It surprised both of us.

“That counts,” she said, and pushed the pouch back across the desk to me with one finger. “Keep it, and fill it when you can.”

“Vera…”

“When it's full, you can give it to me with a big speech, and I will cry, and we will both feel very good about ourselves.” She picked the phone back up. “And next time the laundry eats something, ask me first.”

* * *

On the tenth day, Daciana came to the clinic.

I was sitting on the floor of the recovery room with the dog half in my lap. She'd learned to stand on three legs by then. She got up from her towel all at once, with a lurch and a stagger, like a drunk climbing out of a taxi.

She stood there swaying and pleased with herself. Then she lay down on my feet.

The cone was off. The stitches were out. In the morning a man from the public shelter would come with his van.

I'd been sitting there an hour, trying to think of somebody. Annabelle shared two rooms with her sister and her sister's new baby. Natasha's father was allergic to anything with fur.

My parents were drowning in debt, and I would sooner have cut off my own leg than ask them to feed one more mouth. My grandparents were too old and too far. I thought about them anyway, and about the dogs in their village that slept in the road at noon while the cars waited for them to move.

The door opened. Daciana stood there in her good coat with her purse on her shoulder. She held a new red leash in her hand, still with the cardboard tag on it.

“Don't,” she said, before I could open my mouth. “It is for my mother.”

“Daciana…”

“My mother has nobody to argue with, and the man on the radio always wins.” She held the leash out at arm's length, as far from her body as it would reach. “You put it on, because I am not touching it.”

I put it on. The dog let me.

Then she stood up and limped right past me to Daciana, and pushed her nose into Daciana's scarred hand.

Daciana went white. She stood like a statue in a park, her fingers spread and a dog's wet nose in her palm. Her mouth opened and closed with no sound coming out.

“She likes you,” I said.

“She is wrong,” Daciana whispered. “Make her stop.”

She didn't pull her hand away.

I carried the dog out to the little blue car. Daciana had already spread a towel across the back seat, with another towel on top of that and a plastic sheet under both. The cardboard tree swung from the mirror, and the car smelled of vanilla and, now, a little of dog.

Professor Radu stood at the top of the ramp with his coffee and watched us go. When the car pulled away, he lifted his cup an inch. Then he went back inside.

* * *

That night I came home from class and pulled the bed cover out from under my sink. It had been there since Tuesday, folded small so I wouldn't have to look at it.

I filled the sink with cold water and dish soap and scrubbed until my knuckles were raw. The water went pink, then brown, then pink again. I changed it four times.

When I wrung it out and held it up to the light, the stain was still there. Three faded shapes showed through the cotton, the color of weak tea.

I was supposed to take it back to the laundry room and put it in the washer with the others. Alina taught me that on my first day. Strip the bed at the end of your shift, and always start clean.

Instead I hung it over the chair by the window to dry. In the morning I put it on my own bed, stains and all, and that night I slept under it.

The World of Through the Looking Glass

Who's Who

The people in Zeya's life during her first months at the studio.

NAME	WHO THEY ARE
Zeya	Twenty-two, a veterinary student in Bucharest, and the narrator. Broke and behind on rent, she takes a job at a webcam studio and turns out to be very good at it.
Natasha	Zeya's best friend since childhood. Small, blonde, green-eyed, and the one person Zeya calls when everything goes wrong.
Zeya's mother	Lived through the dictatorship and wanted her daughter educated above all. She chose music school, then architecture, before Zeya finally chose for herself.
Zeya's father	Her best friend when she was small, quieter and more distant as she grew up.
Vera	The studio manager. A former top model, only twenty-six, with gray already in her hair. Runs about a hundred models and ten support staff, and tells every girl to stay in school.
Daciana	The receptionist. About forty, jet-black hair with a gray streak, and the most perfect teeth in Bucharest.
Alina	Zeya's first trainer, who walks her through the rules on day one.
Annabelle	A blonde model with five tattoos, including a violin down her spine. Zeya's smoke-break friend and the first to tell her the truth about the job.
Desdemona	The loudest model in the building. You can hear her from down the block.
Raquel	A brunette who goes after Zeya from the day they meet.
Ada	An evening-shift model studying to be a chef. Her mother is Italian.
Camelia and Miruna	Two of the first models Zeya meets in the break room, a redhead and a woman who hates tattoos.
Vernon	The photographer who shoots the models' pictures at a villa north of the city. Every girl in the studio has a crush on him.
Dănut	The owner of the studio, almost never seen.

Professor Radu, Daciana's mother and the three-legged dog appear only in this story.

Timeline

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENS
A few years after the revolution	Zeya is born. Her parents work dawn to dusk in Bucharest, and she spends weeks at a time with her grandparents in the country.
Kindergarten	The family moves to Bucharest. Her mother fills every free hour with study.
Ages 10 to 14	Music school: violin and piano, four years of it, with no talent and no say.
Age 14	Zeya asks to quit music. Her mother moves her to architecture and design.
Age 16	A week of sneaking out the window to meet her friends, and the night her mother is waiting in the dark.
End of high school	Zeya asks her mother to let her choose her own life, and her mother says yes. She graduates with honors.
After graduation	She fails the medical exam, passes the veterinary one, and moves to a one-room apartment near the university.
Age 22	An offer of modeling work turns out to be something else entirely.
Two months later, summer	Rent overdue and no food, Zeya interviews at the studio. Vera hires her on the spot and lends her the rent money.
First week	Her first shift, and a photo shoot with Vernon at the villa.
One month in	For the first time, the job pays all her bills with a little left over.
About five weeks in	**The events of *Stray*.**
Two to three months in	Alina puts her on several cam sites at once. Zeya is in her third year of veterinary school, with two to go.
Four to five months in	She meets Ada in the common room on a cold fall day.
Later that fall	Zeya becomes the studio's top earner, buys a new car, and brings Natasha to the studio. When Alina leaves, Zeya becomes the trainer.
Six months in	Zeya and Natasha move into an apartment together.
Seven months in	Christmas Day, the busiest day of the year.

What happens after Christmas is in the novel.

The Language of the Studio

WORD	WHAT IT MEANS
Cam	The webcam. Each room has one on a tripod, aimed at the bed, with a remote for turning and zooming.
Member	A viewer with an account. Only members can pay.
Guest	A viewer without an account. Guests can talk but can't spend, and the girls are taught to ignore them.
Free chat	The open room, where a model talks and dances to draw members in. It pays nothing, and the rule is to show nothing.
Private	A paid one-on-one session, billed by the minute. A chime tells the model one has started.
Cam to cam	When the member turns on his own camera so the model can see him.
Operator	The staff in the operations room who watch the rooms on their monitors, fetch whatever a model needs, and step in when there's trouble.
Ban	Locking a rude member out of a model's room for a day or longer.
The rate	New girls start around $1.99 a minute. After the site and the studio take their cut, the model keeps roughly a third.
The rules	No contact outside the site, ever. No phone numbers, no addresses, no meeting members. “You are a cam model, not a whore.”
The sheets	Every shift starts by making the bed fresh and ends by stripping it and carrying everything to the laundry room.
Flowers	Members can order flowers through a Bucharest shop that serves the studios. No card, no name, no message.
Lei	Romanian money. Rent is paid in lei.

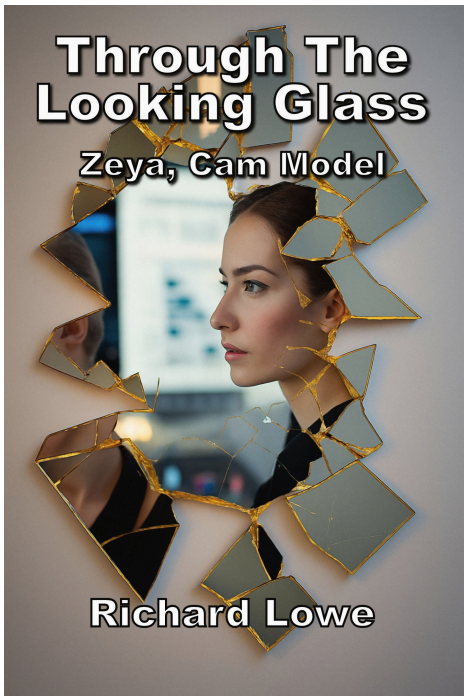
Places

PLACE	WHAT IT'S LIKE
Bucharest	Romania's capital, where there are more people than jobs, especially for women.
The studio	A garish two-story building of bright yellow brick with a white arch over the door and a red flag on the roof. Twenty-four rooms, spotless halls, and a lobby that smells of vanilla air freshener and cigarette smoke.

The break room and common room	Coffee, donuts, leftover pizza, couches full of pillows and a big-screen TV. Most of the gossip happens here.
The balconies	The only places with no camera. Zeya smokes out here and looks over the city.
The street outside	Not a good part of town: graffiti, people sleeping in doorways, and a smell nobody talks about.
The university	Where Zeya studies veterinary medicine, three hours every weeknight and a class on the weekend. Almost an hour from the studio by bus.
Zeya's apartment	One room near the university: a tiny kitchen, a bed, a couple of chairs and a dresser, and a landlady who holds the money up to the light.
The villa	A towered mansion north of the city, with more than thirty rooms, where Vernon shoots the models' photos.

Read the Novel

Zeya is twenty-two, a veterinary student in Bucharest, and one bad month from losing her apartment when she takes a job at a webcam studio. Through the Looking Glass is the story of that job, the women who teach her, and the lie it runs on. Read it to find out what the work gives her, and what it costs.



Through the Looking Glass:
Zeya, Cam Model

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