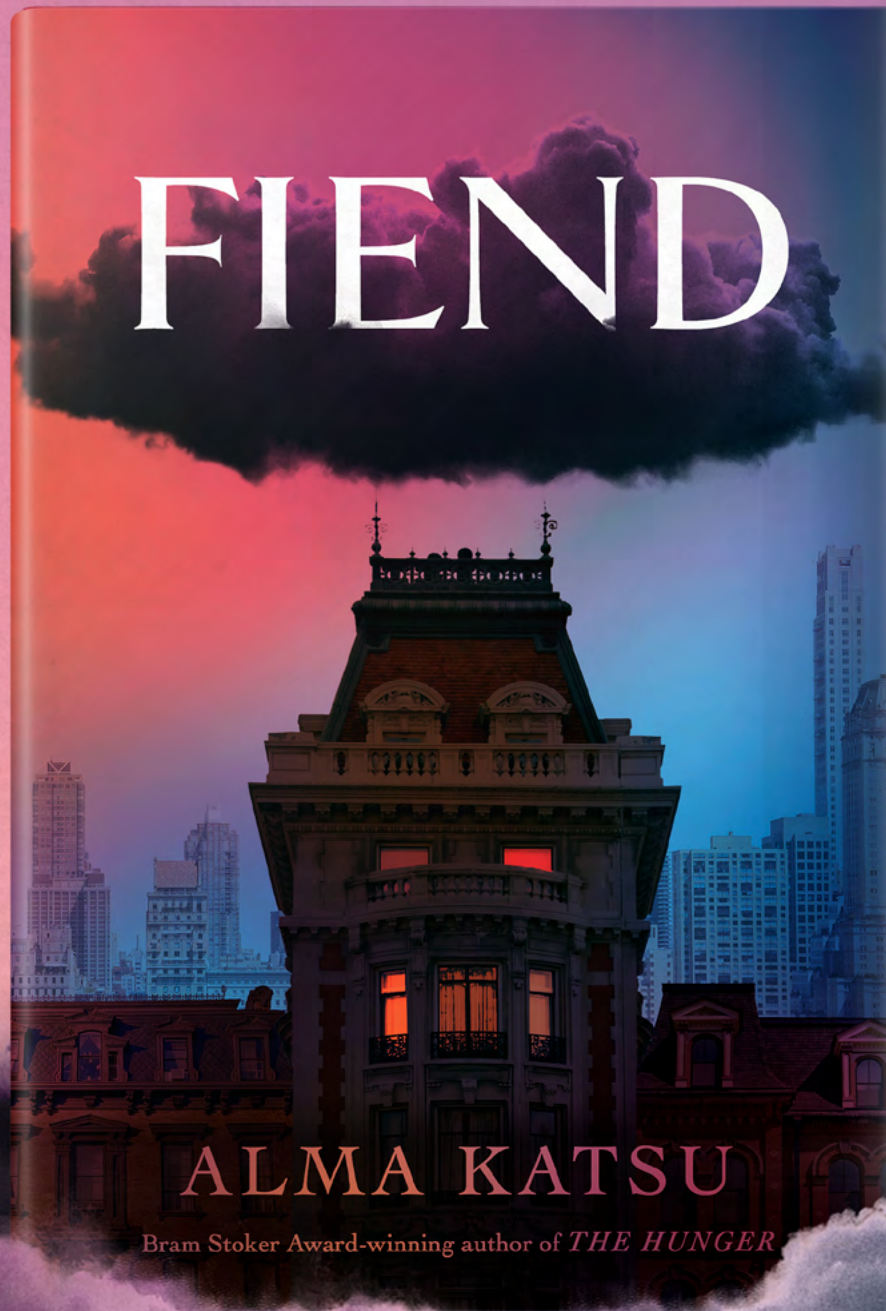


EXCLUSIVE
EXCERPT



PUTNAM

CHAPTER ONE

Then

There's something in the house," nine-year-old Maris Berisha says to her twelve-year-old brother, Dardan.

He's caught her in the servants' quarters, where they have been expressly forbidden to go, ever. Not that she would want to go there, normally: the rooms are small and plain and dark, nothing like the rooms upstairs. *The nicest penthouse in all of Manhattan*, Maris overheard a society lady say to her mother, Olga, once, and her mother practically purred with pleasure. It was not an exaggeration, Maris knows. They live in a palace in the sky, fit for a king.

Dardan has dragged her to the laundry room and closed the door and now stands, hands on hips, in imitation of Olga, clearly expecting an explanation from her. But he is as white as the stack of Belgian sheets waiting to be ironed.

"I heard a noise. It sounded like something was tapping in the walls. I followed it down here," Maris says, almost apologetically.

"It was probably a mouse. Or a rat. This is New York City. It's an old building. There're always noises." He speaks quickly. He wants to sound confident like an adult, but there's a waver in his voice.

"I've heard mice before. This is different." She frowns. "You know there's something here. You *know* it."

"You think we're haunted? Stop being such a baby."

She narrows her eyes at him because he's pretending. They talked, once, about the thing he claimed he saw. *The unexplainable thing*. Now he denies it happened.

"I've told you—only babies believe in ghosts and demons and magic. That only happens in fairy tales. When you grow up, you realize that none of that stuff exists."

"What about the church?" The old Greek Orthodox church that they attend is the most magical place Maris knows. Stepping over the threshold is like being transported to an enchanted world. Every surface is carved, inscribed, or gilded. Long-suffering saints look down from triptychs on the walls. It smells of incense. The priests wear long robes festooned with embroidery and mumble in a secret language. "The priests say there are angels all around us . . ."

And if angels exist, then so do demons.

Dardan sneers. "The church is the worst. It's just . . . superstition. You can't put too much stock in all that. Dad says those old men live in another world, a world of made-up stories and groundless beliefs. It's not real." Dardan likes to think he's all grown up, smarter than her, worldly-wise. But Maris wants to tell him, *You're just parroting Zef, you don't know anything.*

"It's not just the priests who believe in ghosts." She hesitates. She doesn't want to get anyone in trouble, but she has this bit of proof . . . and Dardan is being so smug that she cannot resist throwing it in his face.

"Angelo told me somebody died in this very apartment. The people who owned it before us." The words are spit out, triumphant. "He said one of the children shot himself. Found his father's gun and shot himself in the head."

Dardan laughs meanly. "Angelo? He's just a doorman. He doesn't know . . . He's just trying to frighten you. Telling you a scary story, like at Halloween. But he shouldn't be telling stories about kids killing themselves. That's irresponsible."

"It's not a story. It's true."

But Dardan has already closed himself up. There's no getting through to him now. "Nobody died in our apartment, Maris. Ask Mother—she'll tell you." He grabs her arm, opens the laundry room door, and marches her out. Up the servants' staircase to the pretty part of the house, where Olga is talking to the housekeeper about the menu for dinner. Maids wielding feather dusters or

carrying stacks of clean clothes give Maris the side-eye; she realizes she shouldn't have violated their private space.

Dardan can deny it all he wants, but Maris knows there's something bad in their home. Something malevolent. She feels it watching them, greedily. It's stronger when their father visits on Sundays, but it is here with them all the time nonetheless. It is a bad feeling, and it is inescapable.

Maris is in the room when the building manager comes to see Olga. She's playing, hidden from her mother's view by a pair of enormous chairs. In this family, it's better for children to be neither seen nor heard.

The building manager enters the room like a servant: he knows he doesn't belong there. He smiles apologetically at Olga, hands clasped like a supplicant. "Mrs. Berisha, thank you for agreeing to see me, especially over such a trifling matter—"

"I don't consider it trivial." Her mother's voice is icy.

"No, no, of course not. Please forgive me. I misspoke." He changes tack. "Nevertheless . . . I would like to ask you to reconsider the request regarding Angelo."

At the mention of the doorman, Maris freezes. She turns her head in their direction.

Angelo is one of the few workers in the building who will talk to residents' children. The rest, Maris has found, keep them at arm's length, refuse to engage, eye them frostily as they traipse through the lobby behind their parents on the way out to their waiting cars. But Angelo is different. He will crouch down to tell you a funny story or ask how it's going in school or, if you're wearing your soccer uniform, ask if you won the game. He is older, with kind eyes and a wistful smile, so shrunken that he swims in his burgundy doorman's livery.

Though lately, he's been acting differently. Strangely.

The building manager starts to wring his hands. "It's because of the accident. You see, Angelo lost his only grandchild last year. It was a tragedy. You know how it is . . . Something like that can change a person. He's still grieving and sometimes he says"—the man looks pained as he takes a deep breath—"inappropriate things."

“He told one of my children that someone died in our apartment.” Olga’s voice has grown louder, shriller. “Now she’s afraid. She doesn’t want to live here.”

An exaggeration. Maris frowns to herself.

The building manager shakes his head no, no, no. “Very regrettable, Mrs. Berisha. I agree completely. But—Angelo has worked in this building for over forty years. He is our longest-tenured employee. He has dedicated his life to the well-being and security of the tenants. Whatever it is he’s going through, I’m sure it will pass.”

“Can you guarantee that? If *your* job depended on it?”

The building manager looks as though he is going to cry. “Please, Mrs. Berisha. If we let Angelo go, he won’t be able to find work. No one will hire a man his age. How will he support his family? How will they survive?”

There is a long moment of silence, but Maris does not feel the air thaw one iota. Finally, her mother says crisply, “That is not my concern. The safety of my family—that *is* my concern. Now, I believe I have made my wishes known, Mr. Perrotta. Good day.”

That evening, Olga sits on the edge of Maris’s bed and explains that the previous owners of the penthouse had been a childless couple, now living in Tuscany. “So, you see, it’s not true. Nobody has ever died in our home. There are no ghosts,” Olga says as she draws the covers up to Maris’s chin.

Maris sees her chance. “I understand. I’m okay. I really am. And . . . please forgive Angelo. Don’t send him away. He didn’t mean to scare me. Dardan shouldn’t have said anything to you.” Her brother is such a suck-up. Always looking for approval.

Olga has dimmed the bedside light and is walking to the door. “Nonsense, darling. Your brother was right to bring this to my attention. That’s his duty as the only son: to protect this family. To protect *you*.” She closes the door gently, leaving Maris alone.

It feels like the room is breathing as it watches her.

Watches and waits. The tapping noise starts again. As though whatever is making it is trying to send her a message.

As for Angelo, Maris never sees him again.