

Praise for Marjory Kaptanoglu's debut novel  
**DREAMMALLOW THIEF**

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*Kirkus Reviews*

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“An epic quest takes three young people on an unforgettable adventure... this book is wonderful.”

*Desert Rose Book Reviews*



# LAST GIRL STANDING

Marjory Kaptanoglu

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To the four men at the center of my world:  
my husband Sinan  
and sons Tanner, Alan, and Derek

“Life is infinitely stranger than anything which the  
mind of man could invent.”

-Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Case of Identity*



## Chapter One

*The Los Patos Water Company is determined to poison us.* Mom's words, not mine. She'd been saying it for so long, I still hesitated to drink the tap water. Even though no one in town had ever died of it, so far as I knew.

Feeling rebellious, I bent my head, ready to slurp from the faucet, when I glimpsed Mom's narrowed eyes watching me in the mirror. I changed my mind; it wasn't worth a shouting match. Instead, I splashed the water on my face as if I'd meant to do that all along. She continued down the hall, rebellion squelched before it began.

Dashing back to my room because I was running late as usual, I kicked aside the clothes on the floor to find my school books. I shoved them into my backpack, grabbed my cell, and raced to the kitchen. There I gulped a glass of filtered river water while Mom spread her homemade organic strawberry preserves on top of a slice of her homemade organic fifty-grain bread. Okay, maybe it wasn't fifty, but I lost count after ten.

She handed the toast to me. It tasted delicious, though sometimes I longed for a shiny sugary Pop-Tart, decorated with sprinkles the color of nothing you would ever find in nature, like my friend Giselle got to eat on a daily basis.

Mom twirled in front of me, modeling her outfit as she sometimes did when it was something new. "Do you like it, Sierra?"

I hadn't noticed the knitted whatever-it-was until now, because I was used to her looking pretty strange. At first, I thought she was wearing a blanket, but on closer inspection, it was a sort of fuzzy, purple/pink cape with armholes. "Um, nice," I managed to say, despite thinking it would take an apocalypse to get me to wear anything like it.

"I'm bringing it to Jane's Originals to see if they'll carry it."

"Good luck with that." I tried not to sound sarcastic as I shoved down the last bite of my toast.

She gripped my arm as I started to move past her. "Don't forget the water."

Of course I had forgotten the water. I usually hauled up a couple of buckets at the end of the day, but Mom had let me stay out past dinner the night before, on condition that I do my water shift before school.

"I'm late," I said.

But she just gave me the look that meant *you do this now, or there'll be trouble later*. She didn't care if I missed half of calculus, my first period class. Mom did not understand the value of any math beyond basic arithmetic. If my first class had been *How to Use a Spinning Wheel*, she would've prodded me out of bed an hour ago to be certain I didn't miss a second of that essential instruction.

I've known for some time that our family's not normal. It's just Mom and me and the hens and our goat, Brisa. Mom's an organic farmer and certifiable kook who would've fit in much better in the seventeenth century, before any modern conveniences were invented. According to her, we should all just grow our own food, find our own water, make our own clothes, build our own houses, and mind our own business. Well, maybe she would be willing to barter for some of those things she couldn't do herself.

Given her way of thinking, it was understandable she didn't trust water coming out of a tap. She posted this quote from Ian E. Stephens



right next to our filter, to serve as a constant reminder of why we had to kill ourselves schlepping water from the river. The quote said, “Repeated doses of infinitesimal amounts of fluoride will in time reduce an individual’s power to resist domination by slowly poisoning and narcotizing a certain area of the brain and will thus make him submissive to the will of those who wish to govern him.” In other words, my mother believed water treated with fluoride could brainwash people.

We also had a rainwater collector behind the house, but so far we were having a dry winter and it hadn’t rained in three weeks. Which was why I flung my backpack down on the chair, grabbed the clean water bucket, and rushed out the back door headed to the river.

The leaves were slippery due to being so dry, and as I hurried down the path, I suddenly found my feet shooting out from under me. *Crap.* I landed hard on my butt. I wasn’t hurt, except for my self-esteem, but when I got up and tried to brush off the back of my pants, I realized I’d have to change them. *Great day to wear white.*

First I needed to get the water, because knowing me I was probably in for another fall before I made it back. In general, I was a klutz, and once or twice I’d even accidentally dunked myself in the river. Luckily the water didn’t flow too hard in this section, and I was a good swimmer. But I wasn’t taking any more chances today. I slowed as I reached the river bank.

The acacia tree across the water was in full display, its yellow flowers fluorescent in the dappled shade. I couldn’t help but pause for a moment longer to take in the natural beauty of where we lived. The sound of the rushing river, the scent of the acacia blooms, the reflection of leaves in the silvery water where it pooled by the opposite shore... you’d have to be made of stone not to be moved by all this.

But calculus waited for no one, not even me with the best grade in the class so far. I swung the bucket into the water.

I saw it then. Ten yards upstream, a beige cloth or bag or something, caught on a short branch sticking out from one of the trees at the edge of the water. I was tempted to ignore it, but Mom had trained me too well about keeping the river clean. Especially if it might be plastic, I needed to fish it out. I put down my bucket and found a long stick—there was no shortage of them. Then I made my way along the river's edge till I was parallel with the floating thing.

A powerful stench, like a cross between a soiled diaper and rotting meat, clogged my nostrils and made me gag. I held my breath and spat, figuring the wind must've shifted and delivered the foul odor from somewhere across the river.

It was one more reason to hurry up and get out of there. I reached my stick over and snagged it on what definitely looked like clothing now, giving it a pull. The object rolled over, helped by the flowing water.

Something white and bloated and disgusting rose to the surface. Two eyes bulged and a tongue stuck out from what I realized must be the grotesque remains of a face.

My mouth dropped open and my breath caught in my throat. I tingled all over with pinpricks of dread. Then a shrill sound pierced my ears and I realized it was me screaming.

## Chapter Two

Seconds after I screamed, Mom raced outside, letting the back door slam shut behind her. She probably pictured me being swept away by the current, or carried off by an abductor, or just plain getting myself killed somehow. Mom always imagined the worst, and this time she wasn't too far off.

Hanging onto the stick that still held the corpse, I managed to get out my cell with my left hand and call 9-1-1.

The dispatcher, a woman, picked up right away. "Nine-one-one operator. What is your emergency?"

"There's a body in the river," I shouted.

"Where are you?"

The question took me by surprise. Didn't she know? *Google knows.*

"I need your address," she reminded me.

"607 Sunset Drive." I said it fast. My right hand was starting to cramp.

"Again?"

I groaned and repeated it more slowly.

"What's your name?" she said.

"Sierra Mendez. I'm barely holding on with a stick!"

"Are you in any danger?"

"I'm fine, just afraid he'll sink if I let go."

"Help is on the way. Don't hang up."

The stick slipped in my hand, and I had to pocket my phone to get a two-handed grip. This all felt like a whole lot of responsibility laid on

my seventeen-year-old shoulders, but with luck a cop car was only minutes away.

Then Mom fell like I did on the slippery leaves and slid down the trail till she landed at my feet. “Dang!” she cried out, knocking into me, making me stumble. My right arm jerked and the corpse detached from the stick, drifting downstream.

“It’s moving!” I screamed, sounding like this was *The Walking Dead* instead of just the floating dead.

“My ankle!” Mom screamed back.

I made sure she wasn’t about to fall into the river before taking off after the body. Her ankle would have to wait for emergency services.

Unfortunately, our small section of beach was the only part open to the water. Downriver, you ran into thick bramble, the kind that pokes through your clothing and doesn’t let go.

I tried tromping down the brush and smacking it with my stick. Looking back at the water, I saw the body had caught on something again. Here was my chance to reel it back in, if I could only reach it in time.

“I think I broke my frickin’ ankle,” Mom shouted. “And what’s that horrible smell?”

“The police are on their way!” I didn’t have time to get out my phone and tell the operator to send an ambulance too. Chances were good at least one ambulance would show up anyway, or if not, there would definitely be a fire truck or two, and they always seemed to have EMTs with them. Our town was normally such a quiet place, whenever an actual emergency occurred, everyone wanted to get in on the action.

Mom would survive a sprained or broken ankle. But a dead man—or woman—adrift from family and friends, seconds from sinking before anyone could find out who they were... the thought decked me like a fierce kick to the chest. My father had also died alone.

Which made me all the more determined to reach the body. I lunged for it with my stick, but I was too late, the current had hold of it again. The corpse was sucked back toward the center of the river, where white foam gathered over it. When I could no longer see it, I dropped the piece of wood, knelt down, and hung my head.

## Chapter Three

When I finally made it to school it was midway into third period. Mrs. Flanders was at the whiteboard writing down dates and the events that corresponded with them. I never understood why she didn't just use PowerPoint so she could put things down once and have done with it, but she was about two hundred years old and definitely old-school.

I took my seat in the back next to my best friend, Giselle, who was dying to know why I was late. We started whispering while Mrs. Flanders' back was turned.

"I found a dead body floating down the river," I said.

"What?!" Giselle said. Oddly, Mrs. Flanders didn't seem to hear. She just kept writing while her lips moved like she was talking to herself. More surprisingly, our classmates didn't appear to notice Giselle's outburst either. They were dutifully copying down all that Mrs. Flanders wrote. I couldn't remember everyone doing that before. I figured maybe our teacher had threatened to check all the notebooks at the end of class and give F's to anyone with a blank page. Because usually the way we did it was, one or two of us would secretly take a picture of the board and then email it to the rest of the group.

"Who was it?" Giselle hissed at me, clearly not worried about her grade. "Was it Mr. Delmar?" she added, without waiting for my reply.

"Rachel's father? Why would you ask that?" Rachel, a shy and serious student, was seated in the front row of our classroom.

"He's been missing since the day before yesterday," Giselle said.

“I don’t know who it was. The body sunk. The cops were searching for it when I left.”

“It must’ve been him.” Giselle stared at the back of Rachel’s head. “Oh god, that’s awful. Are you sure he was—?”

The door to our classroom opened, and our principal, Mr. Meena, stepped inside. Normally he would smile at everyone, but today for some reason his eyes were glazed over and he looked bored. “Rachel, could you come to my office please?” he said. Twice he squeezed his eyes shut in a weird way.

Though Giselle and I exchanged a horrified glance, Rachel looked placid as she rose and followed the principal out. I expected her departure to be accompanied by the usual sort of *oob*, *Rachel’s in trouble* cracks, but none of the students looked at her. They just kept writing down the contents of the board.

Mrs. Flanders paused and I thought she was going to say something. Instead, acting as if a student had not just been taken from her class, she poured water from a pitcher into her cup and drank it down. When she finished, her face twitched sideways like she had some sort of nervous tic. She turned back to the board.

“Damn, I hope it’s not her father,” I whispered to Giselle. “I feel so bad for her.”

“No kidding,” Giselle said.

Another thought occurred to me. “Isn’t he the water district manager?”

Giselle shrugged.

He was, though. I remembered now. He came to our house after someone reported our pump. It’s illegal to pump water from the river without a permit, and Mom had neglected to get one, probably because she figured they wouldn’t grant her one for no reason better than *you’re poisoning us with the chemicals you put in the public water supply*.

“He gave Mom a big fine after coming to our house to remove the pump,” I said. “She was so pissed.” I was pissed too. That was when my daily trips hauling a bucket of water up from the river began.

Giselle looked at me. “I hope the cops don’t think it’s weird his body turned up at your house.”

“Are you kidding me?” I knew she read a lot of murder mysteries, but this was ridiculous. “Mom wasn’t that pissed. All she did was write him a bunch of letters.”

“Threatening letters?” Giselle said.

I stared at her. I didn’t know how threatening the letters might be; she hadn’t shown them to me. But Mom could sound pretty crazy at times, especially when someone crossed her. I hoped there weren’t any problems at home right now. The EMT had wrapped her ankle and told her it was most likely just a mild sprain. I had left her on the couch with her leg raised on a pillow, and a bag of frozen peas resting on her ankle. She had a book, snacks, and water on the table beside her. If she had any sense—which she didn’t—she would not go outside to talk to any of the cops or rescue personnel who had swarmed our river access. Anyway, by now they ought to have moved further downstream in search of the body.

The bell mercifully rang and we got up to leave. Giselle and I raced to the door as usual. Normally everyone else raced there too, and we would all get stuck trying to push our way through a clogged drain. But today for some reason, the other students formed a neat line and followed us into the hall in eerie silence. It had to be a joke. I expected one of them to laugh out loud any second.

But no one did.



## Chapter Four

**I**t was lunch period after history. I went outside long enough to wolf down the sandwich Mom had made for me: cheese provided by our goat Brisa, lettuce and tomatoes from our garden, more multigrain bread. If nuclear war happened tomorrow, our place would be the most sought-after location in town.

After eating, I went to see if I could track down my calc teacher, Mrs. Suarez, who usually had lunch in her classroom. I followed my nose, tracking the coconut scent of the Thai curry she ate almost every day, despite that she was Venezuelan. On second thought, that wasn't really so strange. I loved Greek food, despite being American and Salvadoran.

I wasn't sure why Mrs. Suarez never ate with the other teachers, but she was usually doing something on her computer. Maybe when you're surrounded by a classroom of unruly students all day long, it feels good to have some solitary time.

She told me to come in when I knocked on the door.

"Sorry I missed class," I said. "I had an excuse for being late." I didn't really want to get into the whole dead body thing with her.

She gave me a vacant look and said nothing.

"Can I get the assignment?" I knew I could ask one of my classmates, but I was hoping she would talk a little about today's lesson so I wouldn't miss anything.

She pointed at the whiteboard, where she'd written the assignment down. I sat and began copying it into my notebook. "Anything I should know from class today?" I said.

She stared blankly. "No, just do the homework." She blinked her eyes hard in that funny way I'd seen Mr. Meena do earlier, before draining half her water glass.

I wondered if she was pissed at me for missing class, and I decided I needed to tell her my excuse. "I found a dead body in the river," I said. "That's why I was late this morning."

"Oh," she said, sounding as interested as if I'd told her I'd gotten my teeth cleaned at the dentist's.

"Okay, well, I've got work to do," I said idiotically, raising my notebook. I hurried out of her classroom and nearly collided with my friend Myles in the corridor.

He grabbed my shoulders, which made my stomach flutter because we'd been hanging out for the last month and I was hoping things were finally starting to heat up between us. I think I even raised my chin a little, like my instincts were preparing for a kiss to be on the way. But then he just peered into my eyes.

"What're you doing?" I said.

"You look normal," he said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You haven't noticed?"

I realized then he was talking about our classmates being the most boring version of themselves today.

"Everyone's acting weird, even the teachers," he said. "How could you not notice?" His eyes darted down the corridor at some kid I didn't know coming out of a classroom. The kid twitched his head sideways just as Mrs. Flanders had done.

"See!" Myles said.

"Just because he has a tic—"

“Everyone’s got a tic today! Except you and me.” He looked at me again. “What’s different about us?”

“Giselle seems normal.”

“Okay, one more. What’s different about the three of us?”

“Maybe it’s act-like-a-zombie day, and we didn’t get the memo.”

He seemed to actually consider the idea. “I just got back from camping with my dads last night.”

“They took you out of school?” I was jealous.

“Hey, it was educational.” He smiled, showing the one-sided dimple on his sculpted Asian-Caucasian face.

“You’re coming to Giselle’s tonight, right?” I said. She was having a small party in honor of her parents going out of town this weekend. I had texted Myles about it the day before.

“Yeah, I think so.” His voice didn’t carry a lot of enthusiasm, but then he perked up. “Wanna get lunch at Tacos Locos tomorrow?”

“Sure.” I brightened. It might not be dinner, but it still felt like a date.

“Got some geometry I need your help with,” he added.

*Crap.* Now it wasn’t a date. Worse, it fed my fear that his interest in me was all about my math skills. It might’ve been okay if I thought the tutoring wouldn’t last long. But whenever I helped him, I ended up doing all the problems myself, with him totally not getting it.

The bell rang. “Pay attention in class,” he said. “Tell me I’m not right about everyone acting messed up.” Myles hurried off.

I turned down the corridor toward my locker. As students poured in, heading to class, I watched their faces. A chill crept up my spine as I realized just how right Myles was. Everyone had a vacant stare. No one even made eye contact with me. Quite a few showed some kind of facial tic.

*What the hell is happening?* I whipped out my phone and texted Giselle: *Is this April 20?* She'd know I was referring to National Weed Day.

Her reply came back fast. *Yeah right? WTF?*

I was about to respond when an urgent text arrived from Mom: *COME HOME RIGHT NOW!!!*

<End of Excerpt>