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A Trashy Romance

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

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University of California, Riverside

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Chapter One

The clatter of stilettos kicking open the thick glass doors shattered the chirping of the birds and paused in mid-tag the group of schoolchildren on the green in front of the Museum. The figure that launched itself through the doors and down the steps would have elicited more sympathy from the children, judging by the box in her arms she had just been sacked, if not for the waves of righteous anger that could almost be seen radiating from her body. A body that was too thin for the tailored black suit that hung upon it and whose feet struck the concrete with such force that once down the curb and halfway across the football field sized asphalt parking lot, a thin heel snapped.

The Informational Technology department, all two of them, stood watching from the raised loading bay on the east side of the building. Theirs was a perfect view of the parking lot and the girl crossing it. The man was jangling a large bunch of keys against his thigh. The woman had the black silky hair of an Asian, cut with bangs into a long pageboy, but her skin was pale and freckled. They never took their eyes off the figure below as they discussed her.

“It’s been a long time coming,” Pei-Hua said as she took a drag off her cigarette, “but try telling *her* that.”

“Annabel only saw her performance review yesterday.” John spoke defensively and in response Pei-Hua blew smoke out of her nostrils like a dragon.

“Those girls have been talking about getting rid of her for weeks and she lives with them,” she said scornfully. “How could she not have seen this coming? Narcissist.”

“No, she’s not,” John said, hitting the keys harder against his leg. His pale skin was beginning to sweat. Neither of them was accustomed to standing this long in the sun. “She’d never do this to anyone. You women are vicious.”

Pei-Hua laughed. “She’s a woman too, you know. But of course you do. And look! Now is your chance. She won’t be driving that car for a while. Even I think that was going too far. That was a nice car, she had no right...”

“She? You know who did it?”

“I know all,” she grinned. “You know ‘hell hath no fury?’ Well, hell hath no fury like a Navy chick who finds her fiancé in bed with Annabel.”

“How do you find these things out?” He raised his eyebrows. Not looking impressed, but incredulous.

She shrugged. “It’s a gift.”

“Oh dear,” he said as they watched the girl’s shoe break below them. He jangled his keys at his companion as a gesture of farewell before he jumped off the platform. His car was parked nearby in an assigned spot. “Cover for me this afternoon, okay?”

Pei-Hua waved her cigarette at him. It was not a nice gesture.

###

Down below on the crumbling asphalt of the parking lot the figure had dropped gracefully onto one knee, spilling the contents of her box. With this new indignity all anger disappeared. Before she stood the formerly formidable figure, now reduced to a dark blonde girl in her late twenties, pulled off both shoes, added them to her box of

collected items and continued on her walk. Barefoot and lacking her energetic stride, the children averted their eyes in fellowship, and went back to their rowdy game.

Annabel had been late that morning and had to fight the tourists for parking. Only people considered 'critical' to the operation were given assigned parking spots, but no one knew exactly what the criteria for 'critical' was or who did the assigning. Not even heads of Departments, those over-educated pompous asses, could be assured of a place to park on beautiful summer mornings when the tourists arrived out for parking blood. The parking lottery was just another method of control at the Museum, another way of keeping their employees at each other's throats, just another high school-like popularity contest. Annabel wasn't going to kiss ass for a lousy place to park- and now she didn't need to worry about it again.

It was a long walk past the carousel and towards the zoo. She trod carefully to avoid stepping barefoot in broken glass. She kept her gaze down and didn't notice the car that had begun to trace her path.

The car came to a halt just as the girl reached her vehicle, an ancient heap that would have been referred to as a junker if once upon a time it hadn't been an elegant Nash Metropolitan. The girl didn't see the car stopped behind her because she was engaged in examining the four slashed tires of her beloved car. Something had been written in lipstick on the front windshield but she didn't bother to read it; she had already heard the accusations aloud that afternoon. But then the misspelling caught her attention. If you're going to call someone a whore and a cunt, you should at least spell them correctly.

Finally, she heard the car idling behind her. She turned, physically bracing herself for what new hell was waiting. She blinked at him and her scowl became a weaker frown of confusion.

“It looks like you need a ride,” said the man behind the wheel.

He worked in the Information Technology department. He had forgettable looks, one of those colorless men that Mother Nature seemed to leave half-finished; he was already turning pink. She had never seen him in sunlight before. He also had an easily remembered name, which at the moment was fortunate for her and the state of her mind. Still, she wasn't in a very trusting mood.

“John Smith, right?” She asked while stepping back so she could see him without bending over.

“It’s actually John Smith Nash, kind of ironic huh?” He gestured toward her debased car, pausing for a moment as he read her windshield. “That must have been What’s-his-Name’s girlfriend. The Museum wouldn’t hire anyone who couldn’t spell ‘whore.’ Anyways, Smith is my middle name. That whole witness-protection story is what passes for humor in this place.”

“Right,” she agreed, still backing up. “Well, goodbye.”

“Seriously, you need a ride home. I’m leaving for the day and I’d like to help.”

“Why?” she retorted, opening her car door. “You should follow the party line. I’m not a team player. I cause dissent in the ranks. I sleep around. Everyone knows I am *persona non grata*.”

He got out of his car, took her box and put it in his trunk. “Dude, I am the IT department, remember? I know the truth behind the gossip. If they really believe you’re nuts, I’m paraphrasing here, they can get in big trouble for firing you. You could sue them. Have you thought of that?”

“Well,” she paused, before sighing in resignation. She appreciated his directness. It took a certain amount of chutzpah to look her in the eye, admit that everyone thought she was nuts and tell her he’d snooping through her file. Besides that, what other choice did she have? No one else was coming to her rescue. They were alone aside from a Norwegian family trying to wrestle a screaming toddler into a car seat. The baby’s pacifier was next to the van’s tire on the filthy asphalt, forgotten except by the boy. She walked around and opened her trunk, handing various items to him. “The problem is most of it is true.”

Together they slammed the trunk lid and got into his car. “I’m not in a celebratory mood when all there is to celebrate is rich sphincter’s honoring their own fabulousness. People keep talking about ‘lack of enthusiasm’ being a problem in a party planner; haven’t I been faking it pretty successfully so far? And team building? Please, I’m not a team player when the rest of the team is a bunch of lazy, backstabbing sluts.”

John was smiling, but then she went on. “And I did sleep with the boss’ son, but in my defense I didn’t know who he was at the time. He was just another guy at another party around here. And I didn’t know the bastard was engaged.”

“It’s the kind of thing some guys keep to themselves.” John said. He had lost his smile.

###

As they pulled in front of the small rented house she shared with three other girls from the Museum they noticed the piles of furniture and rollaway racks of clothing on the front lawn. It was a rather nice neighborhood and people out for a Friday evening stroll had gathered to watch the proceedings. Her roommates had begun the process of distancing themselves from her.

“Wow, your enemies don’t waste any time.” John was impressed- these girls weren’t known for their efficiency at work.

“Which is especially amazing since they were my friends this morning.” She sighed and sank down in the car seat, sitting on her spine. John copied her posture.

“You called them lazy, back-stabbing sluts.”

“I calls ‘em as I sees ‘em.”

She wasn’t in any hurry to get out of the car. She wasn’t in a hurry to do anything having no idea of what to do. At least her companion wasn’t rushing her into action (God! What action?). He seemed soothing to be around-- so far. They sat in silence and watched the dissolution of her home and life for a while. Presently one of the removers noticed the car and its occupants. She didn’t come any closer, but pointed them out to her helpers.

“Annabel,” another, blonder girl called. “You would do the same thing in our place.”

“No, I wouldn’t,” muttered Annabel, but so only John could hear. “I actually understand the concept of loyalty.”

“And you shouldn’t go around screwing other girl’s fiancés,” shrilled another blond, this one with red, puffy eyelids.

Annabel huffed. “It’s not like he was her fiancé. She was just another bit on the side.”

John then studied the other girl so intently Annabel had to question him. “What are you doing?”

“Which one is that?” John asked, still studying.

“You mean Brittney?”

“Yeah, Brittney,” he said. “Even Pei-Hua doesn’t know about her and your...whatever. It will be nice to break a story for once.”

Annabel huffed again. “My whatever? *My* nothing.”

“Oh, Pei-Hua,” Annabel abruptly recollected. “I forgot she works for you. That girl is a smoky little pit of despair.”

“She’s my second best friend,” John remonstrated, but cheerily, and Annabel was reminded of high school again. She looked back out of the window.

The trio turned and went into the house. John pulled some gum from his jacket pocket and they chewed together. She had no idea of where to go from here, but damned if she’d show that to the happy puppy sitting next to her. Her skinned knee hurt and her

expensive Italian shoes were now broken junk. She concentrated on these indignities to avoid thinking about being unemployed and now homeless.

A locksmith's van pulled into the short driveway. A curtain swung closed in the window of her former residence and the blondest girl came out, consulted with the locksmith, pointedly ignored the couple in the car, and went back inside.

Annabel released a deep sigh and prepared to get out of the car. "Would you mind giving me and my stuff a lift to a motel?"

"Are you kidding? This is the most excitement I've had in a month of Sundays."

"You talk like Grandpa Joe did, but he actually lived in 1930 so he had an excuse." Annabel gathered a carton of shoes. She recollected her manners and apologized. "And thank you for doing this."

John smiled as he loaded clothing into the backseat. The clothing racks wouldn't fit, nor would the larger items of furniture so they left them where they stood. As they pulled away from the house, John saw the locksmith shoving some of them into the back of his van. He didn't mention this to Annabel.

###

"Hello?" She said tentatively into the phone.

"Annabel, its John."

She didn't answer, but in the background he heard cellophane rustling and the theme song from The Sopranos.

"John from yesterday. Annabel, are you there?"

She cleared her throat. “Yeah, hi. Sorry, I wasn’t expecting any calls on the motel phone. What’s up?”

“Are you busy? Can you talk?”

She snorted. “I’m eating *chicharones* and watching HBO at two in the afternoon. I have all the time in the world for my personal moving man.”

“Oh, good.” He was relieved she was merely bitter and not comatose or manic. “Hey, I had your car towed to my friend’s neighbor’s garage. I hope you don’t mind, but the Museum was threatening to have it hauled away to a junkyard. Or, well, certain parties who shall remain nameless were making plans to haul it away. Pei-Hua called to tell me.”

“Well, thanks. But it’s just a car.”

“Everyone knows you love that car,” he told her.

“Do they?”

Then she was quiet and it made him chatty. He heard her bite into something crunchy and he rushed into speech again.

“My friend’s neighbor has a garage in San Ysidro or it might be in Mexico, I’m not really sure, but he said he’d take care of it. He said he’d replace the tires and clean up the windshield and he’d like to meet you. Apparently he is impressed you inspired so much rage.”

He heard a muffled giggle and she began coughing as she inhaled a bit of her *chicharones*.

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah, sorry, again. My life is just...” Her voice trailed off as more coughing overtook her. When she was able to catch her breath, she went on, “Let me get a drink.”

In the pause while she glugged he questioned her. “I thought you were one of the Museum’s vegan health nuts. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“John there isn’t a lot of tofu and mineral water in this flea-bag. There is free HBO, though. And I had forgotten how good *chicharones* taste with root beer.”

“I’m coming over there,” John said abruptly. “No one should eat fried pigskin; you must be having a breakdown.”

There was no response aside from more snorting laughter as Annabel gently hung up on him.

###

After John had left her at the crappy motel- she paid in cash, for the weekend- Annabel had collapsed on the bed. She’d gotten up again immediately and stripped off the bedspread. She threw it into the corner remembering a travel magazine article with an accompanying photo of a similar bedspread shown under a black light. Annabel felt dirty enough.

The black garbage bags and stained cardboard boxes sat where John had left them. The bags were full of Annabel’s clothes and shoes and she felt a tinge of regret for the shabby treatment they were getting. The boxes were leftover from her mother’s apartment; to the best of Annabel’s recollection, they had been packed over a decade ago and never opened since. A different girl, a better person, would have unpacked those

boxes long ago. Inside the flimsy packaging was her inheritance, her birthright. Her mother had packed whatever-the-hell was in there for her only child, her Annabel. Annabel got as far as kneeling next to one box, the smallest, most reasonably sized one, and putting one hand on its top. But that's as far as she got. The day had been bad enough, why make it worse? Annabel crept back to the bed and curled up, pulling the bleach smelling sheet over her eyes.

In the twilight created by her sheet half-veil, Annabel tried to reflect. She tried to understand the day she'd just had. When that didn't work- it hadn't in the past, why would it now?- Annabel just fumed over the details. Living through the humiliating day was bad; let's do it all over again! Being told that you sucked like it was self-evident was bad enough, collecting your pathetic work belongings while no one even pretended not to stare; walking out like Shit-Canned Barbie and then *falling down*? Holy Moses! She had been too busy to notice that her 'friends' weren't around the office. Seeing them waiting outside the house was a message she'd received like a slap in the face; they'd known about the firing before she had. Why would anyone want to reflect on any of that?

"Right," she told herself. "Move on."

She pulled harder on the sheet and thin, shabby blanket in order to burrow further down. You can't do everything possible to sabotage your life, she told herself, and then be surprised when it explodes in your face. Or maybe you can, but you feel stupid and either way, your life just exploded. You have to summon the energy to clean up the mess.

Annabel couldn't summon the energy. Not just yet. Soon she'd get up, dig through the bags to find her nightgown and her flip-flops for the shower. She'd wash this

day off her and watch television in bed. She had paid for a weekend in this pleasure palace. She'd enjoy a flimsy roof over her head, scratchy sheets on the spongy bed, and the mildewed tub while it all lasted. She'd worry about the future when it arrived. And when it arrived in the form of John's phone call, she could have wept in relief- if she did things like that that is- wept.

###

When he arrived at the motel she was watching for him and the door was open for fresh air. The professional, well-coifed Annabel was missing, but he was relieved to see she hadn't completely let herself go. She had on jeans and was barefoot, but her hair was styled, her makeup was perfectly not noticeable, and she was wearing a light blue sweater set. A greasy bag with nasty looking contents dangled from her left hand.

"I was eating those," she protested as he took them from her on his way into the room. He deposited them in the trash and surveyed her living area.

"Have you seen that documentary about Jackie Kennedy's aunts?" He asked. Clothing, shoes, and odd bits of furniture like hat racks and an antique washing stand complete with bowl and pitcher were strewn about the room. It hadn't been this much of a mess when he had helped her move in yesterday. He worried that his crush was one of those secret slobbers one occasionally found in normal looking girls.

"I don't even like cats." Annabel responded. "I am usually a very good housekeeper, thanks. I am taking a day off, okay?"

She went back to her nest on the bed as if to resume her Sopranos marathon. There was no place for him to sit amongst the squalor, even if he'd felt like it.

"Let's find a vegetarian restaurant, Annabel." He urged. "We can discuss the situation. You need to eat some healthy food. Damn, this place is depressing."

Annabel merely gave him an annoyed glance and grabbed her can of root beer. It was empty. Annabel sat for a moment and studied him. The perusal started at his head, he'd spent extra time messing up his hair before coming over, and traveled down to his black and white checkerboard Vans- and then back up to his eyes. Even looking directly at him, eye to eye, it felt impersonal. It reminded him of when he took his lunch hour next to the big cat enclosure at the zoo.

He was starting to feel uncomfortable when she finally looked away and got up. She turned off the television, pulled on a pair of shoes, slicked on some lipstick and gestured him out the door. Breathing a sigh of satisfaction, (due to her agreeing to go out with him or ending the scrutiny he couldn't say) he followed her.

She directed him to an Indian restaurant a few blocks away and didn't speak to him again until they were settled into a booth with hot tea and naan in front of them. She ordered what seemed an enormous amount of food before raising her eyebrows at him in invitation.

"What do you know about mortuaries?" John asked.

"They're like libraries without books, but with more dead people, and they smell worse." She sat up straighter and, despite her flippancy, seemed newly interested. It was

one of her traits that he had originally found attractive; she found almost everything interesting. Or she was very good at pretending; he wasn't sure which.

“Have you ever thought about working in a mortuary?”

She chewed bread a moment before answering. “No. My experience with dead people is less than professional. Plus, I don't really want to increase it.”

“Technically though, aren't funerals just really somber events?” he coaxed.

“I see where you are going with this, and yes, funerals are events. Events with dead bodies involved and lots of sad, angry people.” The food arrived and she dished some onto his plate before serving herself and digging in. “I know I've been blacklisted, I did call around to the other museums in the park this morning, but so what? I can always go back to doing low level hotel work for a while.”

John took a large bite of something she had ordered and nearly passed out when he swallowed it. Once moistened, its heat increased exponentially. His eyes blurred with the pain and his fingers spasmodically searched for his glass of water. She pushed a glass of goat's milk into his hand with one extended finger. Sipping it seemed to help and he was able to form words once more.

“A friend of mine has a funeral home and he needs an event planner...” He trailed off as her glare met his eyes.

“I don't take well to relative strangers arranging my life for me,” she snapped.

“And I really don't need more men discussing the chaos that is my life behind my back.”

For a moment they were both speechless. John wasn't sure how to proceed with the enraged object of his affection; and the object herself was viciously masticating her

food. She worked at it with such a grimace of dissatisfaction that John was convinced she was fighting an impulse to spit the food out, possibly throw it at him, and leave the restaurant. He ignored her rage and took a helping off a dish slightly less spicy smelling than his first attempt. Annabel finally swallowed, took a sip of water, and stared over his shoulder. She held this pose for so long he was tempted to turn around and look as well, but God help him, he didn't want to put his back to her.

“Again, I must apologize,” she said. “I keep attacking you and you keep taking it, but I wish you wouldn't.”

He flinched when she finally met his gaze. She chuckled. “I know you're trying to help. I don't know why...wait, wait.” She held up a naan-filled hand when he would have interrupted her with explanations. “I appreciate it, no matter what your motives and I wish you'd tell me to shut up or calm down or control my temper or something when I go off on you.”

He took a deep breath. “My motives are pure; well, mostly. Ever since you came to the Museum I've thought you were pretty and smart and interesting and I've been waiting around for you to notice me.”

He paused while she finished coughing out laughter. She was blushing, he thought. “I want to help you 'cause I hate injustices like what happened and I know what it is like to be without a family that supports you. Also, if you let me help you then I could hang around with you until you're ready to date again.” Her head jerked back in some indecipherable question that he chose to ignore.

“And finally, I’ll try to remember to call you on your anger outbursts, but I’ve always thought they were kind of sexy... granted, I’ve never been on the receiving end until now.” He sat back and waited for her reaction.

She exhaled slowly and sipped her tea. “You’re a bigger weirdo than I imagined.” She smiled a sweet, relaxed smile; the first she’d ever bestowed on him. She was rather sparing with her smiles at work and now he realized that the ones he’d seen were not real. This was obviously her true smile, he thought, and she was giving it to him. It was approaching a grin, but softer and her shoulders went down as her lips curved up.

“But I appreciate your directness,” she added in a professional manner. He relaxed in return and they ate the painful meal in peace for a while.

“So, you’re friends with a mortician?” She asked as she wiped her plate clean with the last bit of naan.

He was inspired by the non-judgmental way she asked this. She didn’t seem to think less of him for his wussy response to the spicy food either; none of which affected her at all adversely. She handed him a tissue from her purse to blot his running eyes and nose and then waited until he collected himself.

“Um, yeah. It’s a family business he inherited. We grew up together, living near the beach, surfing, that sort of thing.”

“Ah,” she nodded. “La Jolla?”

“No,” he laughed. “Imperial Beach. My family wasn’t wealthy, the opposite in fact, but Tim’s family was comfortable because of the business.”

“Hm.” She went back to eating, confident now that he wasn’t a trust fund baby. There had been cruel jokes at the Museum about the intense dislike she had for the rich and the fact that she wasn’t always successful in hiding it from her wealthy patrons. Some called it sour grapes, but Pei-Hua, who spent her days taking coffee breaks and collecting prime gossip, had a theory that Annabel’s dislike went deeper than envy and bordered on the pathological. John looked forward to finding out.

The waiter, who was needlessly handsome in John’s view, brought her a fresh pot of tea and she smiled at him. It was not noticeably different from the smile she had given John and he scooted closer in his seat to gain her undivided attention. She must have discerned his motivation, for her smile deepened into an actual grin with a distinct mocking edge to it. John didn’t even care.

“How long are you planning to stay in that dive?”

“I think your terminology is wrong,” she commented. “I think my motel would be referred to as a flophouse, not a dive.”

“Yeah, okay.” John brushed aside a plate of hot yellow potatoes to put his elbows on the table. “What are your plans? Do you have any? Do you need to borrow some money?”

She paused mid-sip and John froze too, afraid he once more provoked her ire. “Relax,” she blew gently on the contents of the cup. “It’s hot.”

John did relax and she smiled again. “I have some savings and a clear credit card so I’m okay for money, thanks. As for plans, I was going to finish *The Sopranos* marathon and then do some serious thinking, but you blew that out of the water.”

“Sorry.”

“Not a problem.”

John was too intimidated by the meal to finish it, but when the waiter brought them pink ice cream, he gulped it, expecting strawberry. It wasn't.

Annabel chuckled in delight over the confusion on his face. “It's rose- flavored. After green tea and mango it's my favorite flavor.”

“Flower-flavored ice cream is your third favorite?” John sniffed the ice cream.

“Yeah,” she paused with the spoon at her lips. “Is that a deal breaker?”

“Don't be stupid.” John was pleased at the apparent 'deal' status. “I am just taking mental notes.”

Annabel placed the spoon between her lips and closed her eyes as she slowly swirled the ice cream in her mouth. Just as languidly, she finally swallowed. John felt a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach and hoped it wouldn't hurt too much when she broke his heart.

“I have a futon going unused,” he mentioned casually. “You are welcome to it, with absolutely no strings attached.”

“Hm,” she kept her eyes closed as she took another spoonful of ice cream into her mouth. “You've found me a job and you want me to move in with you. You're either the nicest man I've ever met, or you have a diabolical agenda to make yourself indispensable in every aspect of my life.”

“Well,” John hedged. “I wouldn't call it diabolical.”

She pressed her lips together for a moment before she began to nod her head. “Hell, why not? Under my own recognizance I’ve balled up my life in a very short time. And actually it’s been a while since anyone helped me or tried to run my life, whatever you’re doing. You can’t muck it up any worse than I have.”

John felt his anxious face forming under the pleased one. “I don’t know about that. I don’t want you to hand yourself over to me. Well...no! I don’t. It’s not a healthy mental attitude, Annabel. I just want to help you get back on your feet.”

Annabel’s stare reminded him of the big cats again. Maybe it was the strange golden hazel of their color?

“Plus, the job is not a done deal or anything. You can interview with Tim and maybe you won’t hate each other.”

She reached over and snagged his bowl of melty pink liquid. “But I can have the futon, right? ‘Cause to tell you the truth that fleabag motel makes me want to sleep on the beach.”

A sympathetic look shone in John’s eyes. “You’re welcome to stay as long as you like.”

“Okeydokey.” She nodded while spooning some rose flavored milk into her mouth to avoid further conversation.

####

“You’re being very quiet,” John commented.

“Um,” Annabel replied. She had insisted on returning to the motel to change clothing; there was no way she was being interviewed in jeans, she’d told him. She had

pushed John gently outside the door when he would have followed her in, but used the safety latch to prop it open so they could ‘talk.’ John talked and Annabel listened. All she’d had to say was: ‘Tell me about Tim’ and he’d been off.

Tim and John were best friends since boyhood, although Tim had a twin, a built-in best friend. But Toby, well, he was always a little dick (“Pardon the language,” John said. “I’ve heard worse,” called out Annabel) and Tim preferred palling around with John. John practically lived next door at the twin’s house and their mother was the best lady ever. Tim’s dad worked non-stop, as hard as Tim worked now, but he still made time to take the boy’s camping, fishing, taught them to surf. He didn’t treat John any differently than his own sons. Well, maybe differently than Toby, who had bad asthma and was such...

“A dick,” Annabel supplied, opening the door.

When she emerged in a patterned cotton dress and a blazer, John complimented her extravagantly. She appreciated the praise and let him take her arm for the walk to the car. The drive took a while in the Saturday traffic heading towards the beach and she sat silently until he mentioned the quiet.

“There is no need to be nervous,” he said.

She laughed a little. “I’m not. I don’t really do that.”

He had heard this. She was known for this trait at the Museum. It was why she was so good at coordinating the big money events for high profile clients; they didn’t make her nervous. Pei-Hua, no big fan of Annabel, claimed it showed a major flaw in her character. She didn’t get nervous because she just didn’t care.

According to Pei-Hua, ‘lack of caring’ meant that Annabel was a sociopath. Pei-Hua was forever yawning in front of Annabel because people who didn’t ‘catch’ a yawn were sociopaths. Annabel cared, John knew, just not about the Museum, not about the job. John was dying to know just what exactly Annabel *did* care about. He was willing to do just about anything to find out, but he had a feeling that Annabel was willing to do anything to hide it.

Pei-Hua’s sociopath theory took a serious hit the day they watched Annabel pull off her shoes and walk through the filthy fountain water to collect a doll lost by one of the wild children tearing around in the square between the Museum and The Space Center. Annabel had merely handed the dripping thing to its crying owner before walking away, barefoot. No pat on the head for the toddler, no ‘there-there,’ but she had done it. John had claimed it as proof of Annabel’s empathy. Pei-Hua replied Annabel’s feet probably hurt in those shoes and the cool water felt good. John felt maybe Pei-Hua was just jealous, but would never dare say this out loud. Some things, like getting involved in a girl fight, made *him* nervous.

“You really are very nice,” Annabel told him suddenly. She sounded puzzled and perhaps a wee bit suspicious.

###

She was suspicious. She couldn’t help it. In this world men didn’t just show up and help her for no reason. She kept waiting for John’s *quid pro quo*- hopefully it wouldn’t be too kinky. There were some things she wouldn’t do for a job and a roof over her head. Granted, she hadn’t hit that particular ceiling so far, but surely it was there?

“Your friend, Tim? He doesn’t mind coming in on a Saturday?” Annabel asked as they left the freeway.

“Nah,” John shook his head. “He doesn’t really have an off switch when it comes to the business and I didn’t want to wait until Monday.”

“Why not?”

“Well, I have to work Monday.” John smiled in apology. She huffed a short laugh and turned away, satisfied.

It was true, he did have to work; but he also had a feeling like he had to pin her down now, take a chance quickly so she’d not disappear from the fleabag motel and he’d never see her again. For such an outwardly calm girl, Annabel produced a lot of anxiety in him. Excitement, he corrected himself. She excited him.

They turned onto a street shaded by trees large with age. The houses were back from the curb and those facing north were up on a slight hill. Annabel took her sunglasses off. “It’s so peaceful here,” she said.

###

John warned Annabel he wasn’t sure she would get along with Tim. He was the antithesis of the goofy sun-bleached stereotype of a surfer boy that John was sure Annabel was expecting and told her not to. He took everything seriously. The way John said this, Annabel understood that John found Tim’s seriousness endearing.

The mortuary sat on the corner of an almost completely residential street shaded by old jacaranda trees. It was converted from a two-story house that must have been considered a mansion when it was built before World War II. It was meticulously

maintained, windows shining in the sun, yellow paint gleaming and the sloping lawn practically burned Annabel's eyes, it was so green. She put up a hand for shade and looked for a smaller house nearby. John's childhood home was supposed to be next door, but the tastefully clipped shrubbery hid any homes of more modest means.

A man walked down the driveway toward them, appearing from behind a large camellia growing at the back corner of the building. He was tall, especially compared to John and he gave the impression of lankiness without being awkward in his movement. His hair was an indeterminate dark between brown and black. His expression was stern, dignified, even in repose; but there was something about his eyes...Annabel stopped walking. He was not smiling as he studied her. Annabel tensed and moved away. John noticed none of this, but brightened at the sight of him and walked up the sloping drive.

"What's the rumpus?" John held out his hand. Tim slapped it front and back, refusing to answer such a question. John handed over the bag of leftover Indian food. "Annabel insisted on bringing this. I told her you like curry."

Tim nodded thanks at Annabel and told her, "It's nice to meet you."

Annabel looked doubtful, but replied politely enough. "And you. Thanks for this opportunity." She didn't wait for his answer, but turned to John. "-What's the rumpus? What does that even mean? I think you're making these things up."

John smiled at Annabel in appreciation for the scolding and then at Tim, to encourage him to join in. Tim frowned and John smiled wider. Annabel looked around the neighborhood again, anything to avoid the pair of eyes.

"Where is the house John told me about?"

“It isn’t here. It was across town,” said Tim. “My family didn’t live in the mortuary and our old neighborhood was torn down for the new freeway.”

John was doing the happy puppy bit again, waves of joy slapping against them. They turned away, his open happiness making them uncomfortable, and met each other’s eyes. Tim studied Annabel as dispassionately as she returned his stare. Annabel knew that this wasn’t going to end well.

The standoff was broken as they were forced to move for a vintage hearse pulling into the driveway. It did nothing as vulgar as honk, but the driver raised his index finger in greeting at John’s robust wave before slipping around the back of the building. John started to follow it, mesmerized by the elaborate machinery.

“We can go in the front while he visits with Jesus,” Tim told her while pointing the way up the walk.

Annabel heard the undertone of irritation that was in Tim’s voice and wondered if John did as well, for he stopped and re-joined them. Perhaps that tone was always in Tim’s voice, however, for John didn’t look upset. If this was so, she could see why Tim would need someone as the public face for his business. She wasn’t grieving and his tone grated on her. Sad people would find Tim’s attitude like sand in their bathing suits.

“It’s okay,” John said. “I’ll come with you.”

They all trooped together into the house, John casting glances at the other two that he thought were subtle.

###

John's insistence on being present for the interview bothered no one but him. Tim ignored him and Annabel, aside from the odd smile, took her lead from the interviewer. They reminded John of cats meeting for the first time in a dark alley with a half-eaten can of tuna between them. John realized he would be the can of old fish and stopped the analogy dead in its tracks. Still, they eyed each other strangely and he practically could feel their hair bristle. Tim held Annabel's resume in his hand, but never looked at it again after reading it once.

"Your former position was 'fundraising event coordinator.' Which means what?"

"I dressed up and gave parties where I induced people to give the Museum money...I know what you're thinking." Annabel smiled, but John didn't like the look of it.

"Which is?"

"It's like being a prostitute without putting out."

"That actually is what I was thinking, yeah," Tim said.

"That's an extreme simplification of..." John hastened to intervene, not liking the direction this was going. They turned to look at him, appearing to have forgotten his presence. Annabel smiled her fake work smile.

"Yes, of course. I planned, budgeted, and executed events designed to display to best advantage the Museum and its clients."

"Huh," Tim deadpanned. "Wouldn't funerals be a step down from fancy parties for rich people?"

“One step closer to the grave?” She raised an eyebrow; both men wondered if the other caught the mocking angle of it. “More honest employment, I’d call it.”

John watched their silent face-off anxiously, but Tim was openly pleased by her last statement. Tim told John from the beginning, privately of course, that he was going to give John’s new obsession a chance; even if he was only keeping her close to keep an eye on her. John could see that they were making Tim nervous. John bounced on the balls of his feet and smacked Tim on the back in thanks. Tim stopped looking at Annabel.

###

After they left Tim, Annabel asked for one more favor. She noticed Tim scrutinizing her hair- the tousled blond curls did give the impression that she’s just gotten out of bed- and wondered if John had the time to take her to the salon? John would be glad to. The more people that saw them together, couple like, the more people she introduced him to, the less able she’d be to kick him to the curb when she was done with him. Annabel wasn’t a girl who liked to explain herself or her actions. Her last performance review (as the IT guy, John had access to *everything*) had mentioned her problems dealing with ‘authority.’ John found this charming and read it aloud. Pei-Hua called him an idiot.

Annabel emerged from the salon with a chocolate brown pixie cut. It was razored over her ears and neck; she kept reaching up to feel all the naked skin revealed. John’s fingers twitched to join hers and she gave him a sharp look: no.

“Is that your true color?” He asked.

“I guess so,” she said, angling his rear view mirror to see. “It’s been a while since I’ve seen it.”

“You look completely different,” John confessed. “I didn’t recognize you at first.”

Annabel smiled, but it was a grim little smile. She kept running her hand over the short hair and her neck, but didn’t speak again until they pulled into the parking lot of the motel.

“What’s he doing here?” Annabel asked. Tim was standing next to a small truck. He looked natural leaning there, like he should have a rope over his shoulder and a cigarette hanging off his lip. Annabel sighed.

“He’s going to help move your piles of stuff. I called him while I waited for you.”

“Oh.” She bobbed her head at Tim from inside the car. “Nice of him.”

“Yeah.” John leaped from the car and shook hands. “Thanks. Thanks for coming.”

Annabel waited through John’s exuberance and gave a nod to Tim, who jerked his head in response. “I like the hair,” he said. “That’s what you really look like.” *He* immediately looked like he regretted saying this.

Annabel pulled down the hand that had gone up to cover her neck, almost smiled, but didn’t quite, and hurried to open the door. She kept her face down and her back to the men as she packed. She didn’t want either of them to see her blush.

With Tim helping, packing up the piles of clothing and boxes covered in duct tape and removing them to John’s apartment in Golden Hill took no time at all. The washing stand and hat rack fit safely in the pick-up; yesterday they had protruded from John’s compact car’s windows like strange weapons. John had no idea where they were going to

put all of Annabel's things- she had three cartons of shoes and four giant trash bags of clothes- but he'd jam it all in somehow.

John was relieved when Annabel said she wasn't comfortable driving his car so he couldn't ride with Tim, as Tim suggested. He saw Tim was just dying to give him a lecture and declined to give him a chance to do so. Tim was too polite to do it in front of Annabel. John ruthlessly used Tim's own manners against him.

Annabel kept slewing around in her seat to make sure Tim was behind them and her stuff still in the back of the truck. "You don't have to worry," John told her. "He is the world's most dependable person."

"I don't know why I bothered with the washing stand. I used it as a plant holder and my so-called friends kept the plants."

"Do you want Tim and me to storm the building and get them back?"

"That would be great." She chuckled. "And my clothing racks. I need those."

"Okay." John practically bounced in the seat, he was having so much fun.

Turning around again, Annabel saw Tim looking solemn. Wait until he heard John was taking him on a liberating mission. She gave an evil chuckle this time. John grinned widely, but didn't take his eyes off the road.

Chapter 2

In the apartment, Annabel wrote a note while the men carried in her belongings. They dumped them unceremoniously in the front room, took the note Annabel gave them (it was addressed to ‘Turncoat Bitches’), and left again. Despite the cool exterior they presented, they were excited to go plundering. Annabel knew all men are pirates at heart.

She explored in their absence. The lack of closet space practically brought her to tears. There were no kitchen towels or hot pads. The bathroom lacked rugs and decent lighting and a steady leak under the sink made for damp, moldy wood. Annabel made a list before starting to unpack.

When the conquering heroes returned she had moved the bags of clothing into the bedroom, the washing stand was at the kitchen window and the hat rack was in the moist bathroom doing duty as a towel bar. She directed them where to place her plants and clothing racks (two were missing, she saw) with cool efficiency, and offered beer, found in the fridge, as suitable reward. Tim held up the to-do list left on the table and read it silently before handing it to John.

“So it begins.” He raised his beer bottle at Annabel in tribute and left.

“Thank you very much,” she called after him, but whether for his help or for leaving, she couldn’t say.

###

“You know this is going to end badly, don’t you?” Tim asked the moment the truck door closed. “You are going into this with your eyes open?”

“Stop harshing my mellow,” John couldn’t get upset, happy with the thought that Annabel was waiting at his apartment, opening cupboards and the closet with that look of horror on her pretty face.

“She’s right about one thing, you need to stop with the weird slang,” Tim muttered. “That one isn’t even from the right decade.”

“Yeah,” John nodded. “Isn’t she great? Didn’t I tell you? She’s so great.”

“She smiles too much when she thinks you’re looking and doesn’t smile at all when she thinks no one is,” Tim responded.

John turned to look at him as he correctly watched the road and the traffic upon it. “Just be nice, okay? You made her nervous, being all stiff and proper- that undertaker thing you do. Just relax, dude. She’s great, you’re great. We’re all going to be friends.”

Tim sighed in resignation and tried to make it seem in relief that traffic was finally moving when he realized John was still watching and waiting for his reaction. Or was it for his approval? That, he wasn’t going to get. Tim couldn’t approve. John had no business messing with that girl, attempting to fix her. She was so far out of John’s level of experience- Tim couldn’t even begin to explain. He’d hurt John’s feelings and then John wouldn’t tell him anything. Tim would stick to his original plan, give the girl a job, keep an eye on her, and watch out for John. Crazy, trusting John; damn it all to hell.

“Do you think these chicks will attack us?” John asked as they pulled into the driveway.

Tim had to laugh. *These* three John was afraid of, it was too funny.

###

Annabel spent Sunday unpacking and trying to convince herself that she wasn't making a huge mistake doing so. She tried to send John shopping for the items deemed absolute essentials (there were no kitchen towels. None!), but he refused to go without her. The shopping trip turned out to be fun, as he left the choosing to her and paid for everything. Which was the *only* way they could have been paid for, Annabel reminded herself. But Annabel always enjoyed playing house.

They went to Target for things like a shower curtain and bath mats and kitchen towels and hot pads. At the apartment, Annabel had gone through the cupboards and drawers and the one, sad closet and finally asked John; "Why are men content to live as barbarians?"

He shrugged happily, content that she was willing to civilize him. He hadn't reckoned on the amount of stuff, two carts full; that went into being civilized, but encouraged her. He raced Annabel up the household section of the store, each pushing a cart.

"Not everything has to match," Annabel informed him, throwing washcloths into his cart and then picking out hand towels a few shades darker pink, "but things should exist in the same realm of color."

John was pretty sure she was full of shit and knew it, but she looked happy. Her eyes were shining and her smile got bigger and he felt she was digging herself deeper into his life and apartment with every item thrown into the cart. He held up a large towel, brown with a beige pattern, just to see her gasp in shock at his utter color blindness. He laughed as she snatched it away, back to the shelf.

"I'm sorry about your friends," John said later, during her comparison of dehumidifiers.

Annabel looked up, confused. "My friends?"

"Yeah, the blondes." He was serious. "I'd be super hurt if Tim kicked me out."

“Oh, them.” Annabel straightened from her crouch. “Wading pools are deeper than those girls. No loss, really.”

John felt pole-axed, *she lived with them for two years*. Annabel looked sorry for him as she put the boxed dehumidifier back on the shelf.

“The most real conversation we ever had was whether the weekend projectionist was gay or not. Heather concluded that only a straight guy could smell that stale, like unwashed bed sheets, because a gay man would have more self-respect.”

John followed as she exited the aisle. “You mean Dave? He isn’t gay. I’ve seen his porn; the idiot doesn’t realize the Museum is on a terminal system.”

Annabel actually laughed. John had made her laugh and, in order to prove that he had self-respect, he tried not to blush with pride and pleasure. “Are you hungry?” He asked her to cover his fluster. “We could pick something up on the way home.”

Annabel looked agreeable, whether over the food or the fact that the ‘friend’ discussion was over, he couldn’t judge. Annabel really disliked questions, answering or asking them; they appeared to make her skin itch.

###

Annabel was pleased John stopped asking her about Heather, Brittney and Jennifer. Those girls had never been her friends; she’d always felt like a stray cat they’d taken in during a moment of weakness only to realize they were really dog people. Aside from when they wanted to borrow an item of clothing (the fact that she had never, not even once, said yes had not stopped them from asking) they skirted around her, barely acknowledging her existence.

Annabel had witnessed the trio drawing straws to choose who had to room with her. Once, when Jennifer owed Brittney money she switched rooms and shared with Annabel for a few months until her grandfather died, leaving her a small legacy, and Jennifer could afford to pay the loan off and reclaim her original room. They hadn't bothered to hide this arrangement from Annabel and she hadn't minded, truly. If they thought it was hard to share a room with her, they should try being her.

Annabel wondered if John was a light sleeper and whether he was as tolerant as he seemed. He was friends with strange Pei-Hua. That girl was just plain freaky, yet John was obviously fond of her.

Annabel had learned not to indulge in optimism. 'Hope for the best, but plan for the worst' had been the motto her mother had imparted, and in Annabel's experience the worst had always arrived. She wasn't going to pin any hope on John. It was surely going to end badly with him, but she could use a break from doom and destiny. Was a little rest too much to ask? Annabel sighed.

"Hey, none of that." John nudged her elbow with his as they waited in line. "You're just hungry. A good meal will cheer you up."

He looked so earnest Annabel tried. She tried to cheer up for his sake. She offered up a weak smile, and for a moment, a brief, restful moment, she almost succeeded.

###

John's futon was as comfortable as sleeping on a sack of wadded up socks and smelled about the same. Around three in the morning on Monday, after not sleeping at all the night before despite her emotional weariness and physical tiredness, Annabel decided to take the futon outside

and burn it. It was heavier than it looked, probably from the cotton stuffing turning to rocks, and she couldn't find any lighter fluid, so she kicked it a few times and then got in bed with John.

She recognized she was making a mistake moving in to the apartment, let alone his bed. She foresaw difficulties with John. He openly wanted things she did not, things she frankly knew herself incapable of giving. Things like intimacy and exclusivity and domestic harmony. But she had lied to him earlier. She had zero savings and her credit card was not clear, it was maxed to the point of overdraft fees. Another woman would have taken one look at Annabel's shoe collection and the tags on her clothing, now hanging neatly on the rollaway racks lining John's bedroom walls, and known there was no possible way Annabel could be solvent. But John, a man clothed in Dockers and Van sneakers, was oblivious.

She needed the job John helped her obtain and she needed his roof over her head. She just didn't know what he would need from her in return- although she had a pretty good idea- and the uncertainty was exhausting. She wanted to sleep, but she also wanted the suspense to end. She decided to end it herself, one way or another.

His bed was only a full sized mattress and he slept sprawled out the way overly trusting people do, so she had to wake him in order to make room. He was glad to see her despite the hour, a bit too glad, and she had to set him straight about the situation. She was helped in this by her extreme exhaustion.

"I just need to sleep," she grumbled, her voice sleep-deprived rough. "Got it?"

"Me too, me too," he cajoled as his hand crept into an unsleepable spot. "Let's go to sleep."

“I’m so tired, John,” she nearly cried, but couldn’t reveal that weakness now, she realized or he’d have her for sure.

“I know, honey,” he tried to cuddle her closer. “Come to papa.”

“Eewww,” she wailed in disgust. It was so ridiculous, she laughed, punch drunk, and her body softened in reflex. “That’s just gross.”

“Sorry, sorry.” He was able to reach her naked neck and kiss it.

Unfortunately, that had always been her favorite spot to be kissed. If she closed her eyes and ignored his scent of hot electronics she could almost imagine she was somewhere else and he was someone else. The leaves on the sycamore trees outside the open window rustled in the breeze and if she strained, it could sound like the slushing of the sea hitting the shore. She relaxed a little further. John tried to kiss her on the mouth and it ended.

“We should talk about this, I’m sorry,” Annabel forced the words out. “I just couldn’t sleep on that damn thing and I’m so tired.”

John kissed her under the chin. “You moved in with me.”

She shoved him. “So this is payment?”

He froze, lips retracted. “That didn’t come out right.”

“Really?” She shoved him again and gained about an inch of space.

“I didn’t mean it like that. I mean, I had a plan and I thought that after we lived together for a while and you got used to me I’d wear you down and eventually…”

“You’d wear me down?” Despite the situation she did find that amusing. In a sick, not really funny at all, way. “So romantic.”

“I can do romantic, just not at four in the morning. I’m sleepy. I was having a good dream and then I thought it was about to get better.” He was sounding cranky and she liked him the better for it. “I know it’s like you just met me, but I’ve been watching you for months.”

“That is so creepy.” The hair stood up on the back of her neck.

“Creepy, hell. Everyone knows I like you except you. They make fun of me, but I don’t care. I was waiting for you, I told you that. Pardon me if I got my hopes up at this hour when my half-naked dream girl gets in my bed.” He turned over to give her his back. “You’re right. Let’s just go to sleep.”

Annabel lay very still in the dark next to him. The breeze was stirring the curtains, cooling her hot face. His bed, while too small, was much more comfortable than the futon. He truly seemed to want her. He even cared enough to scold her. He was too short, too pale, he had that weird computer smell; but he was right here.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“What?” He rolled onto his back.

“I’m sorry for calling it payment,” she continued to whisper.

“Okay.” They waited, breathing in time with the rustle of the leaves in the wind.

Annabel gave up and turned over, her back to him. “Could you kiss me on the back of the neck this time? That’s actually my favorite.”

John didn’t even hesitate. Within one heartbeat he was up against her and she closed her eyes and willed herself to melt. He stopped and raised his head. “This does mean…”

“What, John?” There was a measured amount of annoyance in her voice.

“That you’re my girlfriend, right? I can call you that?”

“Oh my god!” She was creeped out again. “Stop pushing! Can’t you just enjoy the moment?”

“Okay, right. Sorry.” And he bent back to the task at hand.

In spite of her irritation he soon had her forgetting her ire once more. John turned out to be a surprisingly good lover. If he wasn’t sure about a location, he wasn’t afraid to stop and ask for directions. There was something to be said for obsessives, after all.

###

Annabel was too exhausted to dream their first night together, but the next night she, and John, were not so lucky.

“What the hell was that?” John asked, dazed, when she’d stopped shaking and opened her eyes. “Do you have epilepsy?”

“Bad dream,” she said, forcing the words through swollen lips. “Sorry.”

She wiped her eyes on the sheet while he examined the forming bruises on his arm. There were four perfect fingermarks, with little half-moon cuts from her nails, on one side and a deeper, darker, thumb bruise on the underneath of his arm.

“Wow,” John stared back up at her, almost impressed at the level of violence.

She appeared to be preparing to go back to sleep. No discussion, no explanation, no rationalization that maybe this was a one-off event and she was as shocked as he. Was he supposed to pretend that this was normal? She clutched the edge of his pillow, as if afraid he’d rebuff her attempts to touch *him*, and that was his only clue as to how she truly felt about what

he'd just witnessed. John slid his arm under her neck, gingerly. She looked relieved and moved closer.

"Thanks," she murmured into his neck, burrowing-like. It was weird, but John liked it.

"Sorry," she said again, but it was rote and John thought maybe she was already asleep. Sleeping Annabel was just as confusing, but more endearing, than Awake Annabel. He'd have to learn to dodge the clutching hands. She was stronger than she looked.

###

After work on Tuesday, they went shopping for a new, bigger bed. For such a small woman Annabel took up a lot of room. There was an antique store not too far from John's apartment and he took Annabel there, feeling very adult, he told her.

"Oh boy," Annabel sighed in sympathy or pity, he wasn't sure which, before slipping away into a curtained off section of the store. "Vintage clothes! And shoes!"

"I never knew this was here," John said. His tone implied he would have avoided it had he known. "Shouldn't we look at the bed frame?"

"Yeah, sure." Annabel was sliding hangers up and down the racks. She turned around as if to join him and spied a shelf against the wall. "Look at these! Black suede, Cuban heels- Lord have mercy! They are only a half size too small."

"That's too bad. Let's go look at the bed. The brass one I like is around the corner, or it used to be." Annabel didn't hear him or chose to ignore him if she did. "There's also a padded leather headboard around here, somewhere. I saw it like a month ago. Very James Bond."

That briefly got Annabel's attention. "No James Bond," she said, trying on a black bolero jacket. "The brass sounds nice."

She found a matching evening bag and her mind wandered back to the beauties of 1950's fashion. She started a pile on a ratty settee and the pile had gotten rather large when John returned. She hadn't realized he'd left.

"For Pete's sake!" That wasn't John, it was his pesky sidekick.

"Oh, hello Pei-Hua," Annabel was dressed in a black and white checked, almost pristine skirt and jacket set. It went perfectly with the only slightly too-small Cuban-heeled shoes. "To what do we owe the pleasure?"

"Pei-Hua has a van." John was dusty and disheveled. His face was flushed. "Our new bed is in it."

"That was quick," Annabel started.

"Not really," Pei-Hua cut her off. "We loaded it without you. Let's go."

"We still have to get a mattress." John was apologetic.

Pei-Hua was grinding her teeth. Annabel shrugged and began removing the outfit she wore. Pei-Hua turned red and tried to leave, bumping into John who was collecting the things Annabel had chosen. They were stuck in the ramshackle doorway of the vendor's booth when Annabel finally took pity on them.

"Relax," she said. "I'm ready."

And she was, they only had to wait a little longer as she haggled with the vendor of the booth. John was about to pay full price, but Annabel wouldn't hear of it. She did a masterful job

and John was prepared to be impressed, but Pei-Hua was practically apoplectic by the time they left with a thirty percent discount across the board.

“Why are you paying for her crap anyway?” Pei-Hua didn’t bother to lower her voice as they walked to her van.

“She’s my girlfriend,” John said, looking worriedly over his shoulder at Annabel picking her way carefully through the crumbling asphalt of the parking lot. She still wore the too small shoes. “It’s a gift for her new job.” Annabel looked up and winked at him.

In retaliation for her ‘crap’ comment, the choosing of the mattress was akin to Annabel torturing Pei-Hua. She insisted that John lay next to her on every mattress suggested by the unctuous salesman. After bouncing around to check the ‘give,’ she asked gangly Pei-Hua and the middle-aged, fat salesman to lay down together so she could get an idea of how she and John would look to outsiders. John hurriedly paid for the third most expensive mattress to get them out of there.

Tim was waiting in front of the apartment (Annabel wondered just how much time she had lost amongst the vintage clothing) with two men he introduced as Jesus and Moses. Only Annabel seemed to find the prophet moving men amusing, so she donned her best manners, thanked them nicely, and offered refreshment before they began.

“I told them we’d treat them to dinner at that place around the corner afterwards,” John threw in.

He eyed Pei-Hua and Annabel nervously. Jesus and Moses were testing the heft of the bed frame, ignoring everyone. Pei-Hua had turned bright pink the moment she spied Tim and

looked like she was about to flee or wet her pants. Wet her pants and then flee. Annabel almost laughed. *And people thought she had issues?*

“All right,” Annabel said. “Come on Pei-Hua, let’s go open the doors.”

Pei-Hua gave her a look of pure dislike, but complied. During the dinner hour, Annabel occupied herself with charming Jesus and Moses. John was left to make conversation with a tongue-tied Pei-Hua and an increasingly irritated Tim.

In the midst of her conversation with Jesus and Moses, in the chaos of the crowded café, Annabel had one of her moments. As a very small child Annabel was subject to tantrums, as small children often are. Her mother would tell her to ‘take a moment’ and then walk away from screaming, flailing Annabel, usually to lock herself into the bathroom. Mila, bless her heart, would sit and wait for Annabel to scream herself out, and then Annabel would crawl into her lap and be comforted. Giving herself entirely to her rage, losing herself in frustration was scary. Mila knew this. Mother could only advise, ‘take a moment,’ and then take one herself.

Annabel’s adult moments weren’t tantrums, she didn’t scream or flail, but she wasn’t sure what they were. They weren’t panic attacks. She went out for a time with an Army medic and had a few in his presence and he found them professionally interesting. She stopped seeing him after that. She didn’t appreciate his interest or being treated like a subject. So occasionally her mind stepped out for a moment? Big deal. Nothing happened really, she didn’t even know it *was* happening until it was over and she came back to find she’d been staring in one spot, unblinking and immobile. It bothered others much more than it did her. She found these moments restful.

The two men, Jesus and Moses, merely waited until a passing waitress joggled her elbow while squeezing between tables and brought Annabel back to attention. Having been staring at the

buttonhole in Jesus' lapel for a solid minute, she raised her eyes to meet his. He didn't look puzzled or faintly interested. The only way she knew that they knew that she'd just had a moment was that they weren't talking to each other, either. They were drinking their drinks and eating small pieces of pita smeared with liver paste and olives, waiting for her. Annabel had an urge to climb onto the nearest lap and be comforted. This urge had gotten her into trouble in the past.

"Sorry," she murmured, just in case.

Moses shrugged and responded, "*Somos Catolicos.*"

Annabel wasn't sure what being Catholic had to do with it, but maybe men named for prophets had a higher tolerance for weirdness. Maybe they thought she was praying with her eyes wide open? Annabel shrugged back at them and they finished off the tapas together; Annabel surreptitiously studying the awkward Pei-Hua/ Tim situation at the next table.

Making up the new bed that night, Annabel couldn't stop thinking about dinner and finally told John, "Your sidekick makes me feel better about my problems." She laughed, briefly.

John smiled at her laughter, she didn't do much laughing generally, but he also passed along some information. "At least you got Pei-Hua and Tim talking. He asked what she thought of my new girlfriend and she said, 'I think she is the devil.'"

Annabel laughed so hard she face planted into the new mattress.

###

Annabel lied about being a good housekeeper, John discovered within days. She wasn't a bad housekeeper, exactly. She was a schizoid housekeeper. She didn't seem to see the mess that was accumulating until it reached epic proportions and/or fell on her head. Then she would go on

a berserker cleaning rampage that left the apartment with the pungent odor of bleach, surfaces gleaming, and every item in its place and she would collapse in satisfied hausfrau exhaustion.

For a few days they'd maintain the cleanliness until she lost the impetus and then gradually the mess would build unnoticed by Annabel until the whole cycle started over again. John tried to do a daily clean-up, but Annabel found it annoying or a criticism and in the early days, John was afraid of crossing her boundaries. Annabel was all about the boundaries.

Aside from the high-heeled shoes that would hit him in the face when he opened the closet or else tripped over when Annabel kicked them off upon entry and then left abandoned (the interior hallway was windowless and extremely dark once the front door closed), John wasn't bothered much. So he said, anyway. He built a shelving system for her shoes that she found so charming, height and color coordinated so that she knew he put a lot of thought into it, that for a whole month her shoes lived neatly in orderly rows. Then the newness wore off and she started leaving her heels at the door again.

John heard Mr. Presbytery scolding Annabel for her slothful ways and would have been irritated by his presumption if he hadn't found Annabel's apologetic attitude so intriguing. Theirs was a friendship John studied intently. Mr. Presbytery loved Annabel; that was obvious. He was engaging in the longest, slowest, most complicated bathroom rehab that John had ever witnessed and the whole thing began when Mr. Presbytery met Annabel, the new tenant, and she pointed out a leaky pipe under the sink.

Before Annabel moved in Mr. Presbytery crept around the building in the periphery of his tenant's lives, the pocket of his cardigan sweater bulging with tape measure and tack hammer and bristling with small, sharp nails. Speculating about Mr. Presbytery was the only thing the tenants had in common. They mostly met up in the mildewed porch attached at the back that held

the 'laundry room.' Its machines were only used in emergencies, being old and prone to flood or fire, so the meetings were infrequent.

Otherwise, the woman who lived next door to John was only glimpsed when Mr. Presbytery sidled in her partially opened door to repair the aged plumbing. This lady's decrepit dog took himself for a walk twice daily, but John didn't find either of them friendly. Once Annabel moved in she got the lady to talk by hand delivering her mail, usually after Mr. Presbytery had left, and openly questioning her. Apartment problems? The plumbing again? Anything Annabel should worry about? The woman was brusque to the point of hostile, but it didn't faze Annabel and eventually the door opened wider than a crack and she actually thanked Annabel for the mail.

The downstairs tenants consisted of a rotating group of stewardesses in the right hand apartment who had gamely flirted with John in the pre-Annabel days and 1A was left empty due to renovations. 1A was used as Mr. Presbytery's hideout from his wife and John and Annabel doubted the apartment would ever be rented out.

After the arrival of Annabel, Mr. Presbytery left the shadows of the gloomy old apartment house and the rattling of his pocket's contents got even louder. He seemed as hen-pecked as usual by Mrs. Presbytery, never seen but constantly quoted as the supreme housing authority, and he wasn't any quicker in his jobs, but he was heard to whistle as he went about them.

Annabel's bathroom was given a full copper re-pipe. Mr. Presbytery was doing all the work himself, which saved thousands of dollars, no doubt, but also gave him unlimited hours in their home and a good deal of Annabel face time. She cooked him meals, she made high tea whenever home and sat in the hallway outside the bathroom on a comfy ottoman while Mr. P

retiled the floor. It was Victorian appropriate black and white checkerboard and Annabel and Mr. P selected it during their trip to the hardware store- a trip that included lunch at a restaurant with white tablecloths and lasted three hours. She kept him company while he worked. John would have been jealous if Mr. Presbytery hadn't been old enough to be her father...no, he was just jealous.

“I like him, okay?” Annabel would respond when John teased her about her other boyfriend. “We are friends. He reminds me of my Grandpa Joe.”

A grandfather, it turned out, who wasn't actually related to Annabel. A grandpa who was an elderly neighbor that Annabel and her nanny had checked on every day and had over on the major holidays.

“Wait. A nanny? I thought you grew up poor, like me,” John hastened to add the qualifier, never knowing what would fray her thin temper and cause it to snap.

Annabel paused. John saw, literally saw, some internal struggle reflected in the expression on her face before she answered. “We weren't poor; I don't think so, anyway. My mother had a good career as a pharmaceutical rep, but I imagine it was tough for her. Single moms were more...rare, then and yes, I had a nanny. I had Mila.”

She stopped talking and again John saw something happen inside her. He saw her shut down. She flashed him a bright, patently false, smile when she realized he watched her. She asked him to hand her the cutting board. John did so, patted her gently on the arm before stepping back to his vacated chair to resume studying the contents of a file folder on the table. He had a meeting with the CFO the next day and Annabel was making beef stew to ‘buck him up.’ She got it to the simmering stage and went into the bedroom.

Checking later, John found her curled into the fetal position, hugging his pillow, deep asleep on the bed. He made a mental note not to bring up the nanny in the future.

###

John, a product of an untraditional family himself, didn't wonder about Annabel's lack of family or a 'grandpa' who was in reality the guy in the apartment next door, but Mr. Presbytery grated on his nerves just a bit. Annabel let Mr. Presbytery criticize her. And then she tried to improve.

She worked on noticing her mess and appreciated the new shoe system by actually using it. She made dinner for John or cleaned up after he made it. Her dirty clothes went into the wicker laundry basket on the newly tiled floor in the bathroom and the vintage fixtures and re-enameled claw foot tub were kept sparkling. John didn't expect her to be the happy homemaker, they both worked and they both did household chores, but it was nice not to have to step around her piles of laundry, kicked off shoes and weird collections of dog-eared travel magazines. Mr. Presbytery was a civilizing influence on John's savage and, aside from his on-going jealousy of Mr. Presbytery's obvious adoration, John appreciated it.

As the retrofit went on in the bathroom Annabel began casually mentioning that the hallway wood could do with a professional cleaning. And Mr. P began dropping by with bags of produce from his garden, so John figured it was only a matter of time (years- really, Mr. Presbytery worked so slowly) before Annabel had the entire apartment redone.

"Everyone needs a hobby. The old guy is Annabel's," Tim told John when he mentioned the *ménage a trois* happening on his home turf. Tim avoided all dinner invitations back to John's place to check it out in person. Tim liked to try new restaurants, John told Annabel, who hadn't asked. That's why they always went out.

Pei-Hua offered the opinion that Annabel was just strange, so of course she'd have strange friends. He didn't argue, but he didn't agree, either, and if everyone needed a hobby, studying Annabel, was John's.

Chapter Three

To Tim's surprise the clients loved Annabel and having her around definitely took the onus off dealing with them. Annabel seemed to thrive. Tim's business increased as word of mouth spread and people begin to refer to it as their 'family mortuary.' Tim found that people *liked* dealing with Annabel. She was the least judgmental person Tim had ever met.

If the deceased had been a huge Elvis fan and left last instructions to the effect he wanted an Elvis themed memorial; Annabel found a jumpsuit for him to be buried in, a hairstylist who wasn't too creeped out, and many paper stand-ins, and turned the blue room into a mini-Graceland. In private with John and Tim, she called it the tackiest thing she had ever done, but the family was appreciative.

An elderly spinster, a crazy cat lady Tim surmised, wanted her twenty cats at her service as well as her extended family. Annabel wrangled the felines in and onto special cat chairs that she personally rubbed with catnip. Although afterwards Tim said never again, and the room had to be fumigated because the cat lady hadn't believed in flea dip and a couple of the cats escaped and turned feral in Tim's garden, her family said how special it all was. They paid a huge bonus, plus steered quite a bit of business Tim's way as their elderly eccentrics died off.

It turned out that working at a mortuary was the perfect job for Annabel. She was not required to be cheerful at all times. Actually, a sunny disposition would be a detriment to a funeral director. Neither was Annabel lugubrious. She was serene, matter-of-fact, and grieving people found this attitude a comfort.

At the intake interview with the newly bereaved, Annabel knew intuitively which person needed distance and she sat in an armchair diagonally from them, so as not to catch their swollen

eyes. She knew which person needed to be touched with a cool hand laid on their forearm or a squeeze of the hand as she passed them a tissue or a pen for signing the contract. The touchy-feely clients had always discomfited Tim; it was a business to him, this death ritual, and he liked to keep it that way.

Annabel sat next to the touchy-feely ones on the brocade sofa and offered her nearness should they need it. She gave no spiel, she sold nothing; she was merely there. She listened, she accepted, and offered no judgment whatsoever. Annabel didn't cry with the families nor offer any sort of platitudes or even condolences. Honestly, Tim wasn't sure what she said to the clients at all. It wasn't a secret, she didn't whisper, she used a low soothing tone when she spoke; but apparently she didn't really need to speak.

Jesus, the world's most cheerful Charon, as Annabel was calling him by the end of her first week, called her in turn the 'grief-whisperer,' and frequently brought her *empanadas* his wife made. They'd eat lunch together under the jacaranda trees next to the garage out back, and once Tim swore he saw them playing mumblety-peg. When Tim reported this back to John, John looked astonished, and tried to change the subject to computer systems for the mortuary. But John couldn't help returning to the subject of Annabel. John couldn't help warning him away, Tim thought.

"Listen, man," he said. "Annabel has her boundaries that she doesn't want crossed. You should respect them like I do. Well, mostly." John paused and thought creased his forehead. "Mostly, I do."

Tim merely stared at John. He had nothing to say to that.

###

The faux mumblety-peg incident was a slip up, Annabel recognized this when John asked about it. She didn't know Tim was keeping such close watch and wasn't sure how she felt about it now that she knew. If he watched her because he didn't quite trust her, well, that was understandable. It almost gave her comfort, knowing she was watched over, but she didn't stop to examine why. Nothing good came from asking 'why.'

When Jesus commented on the way she peeled her apple, carefully not cutting the lengthening spiral, she reacted without thinking. She flipped his borrowed knife to impale a large beetle lumbering through the grass. Showing off, really. Jesus, impressed, tried it. He failed and they laughed about it, returning to work shortly after.

Annabel knew that men were big gossips. Her mother had frequently imparted this wisdom; it had made her mother angry. Annabel wasn't angry, she accepted it as part of the nature of men. Being angry wouldn't change the nature of men.

###

The bereaved that loved Annabel the most, and coincidentally, the ones who had always made Tim the most uncomfortable, were the angry ones. These were the people who could not accept that their loved ones were gone or the manner of their leaving. Sometimes these people had lost their loves through violence or early illness or unhappy accident (Tim referred to them as Act-of-God clients until he realized it bothered Annabel). Sometimes the angry ones had lost the departed in the most banal way possible, old age, but it was their nature to rail against their loss. They were angry people and something within Annabel called to them. She answered their rage.

She answered the bereaved with her mere presence. She really was a grief-whisperer, Tim decided, Jesus was right. He couldn't calm them by a word or a tissue or a hand on the shoulder blade, softly resting or white tipped pressure dependent on the amount of emotion

expressed; but she could. She had a bond with their clients that he did not. He had lost his parents too, so he didn't understand what, exactly, the bond entailed. He wasn't about to question her. John frequently gave the frustrated opinion that questioning Annabel was about as fun as doing a budget report and less productive: 'a whole lotta work for a whole lotta nothing.'

Talking to Annabel wasn't something Tim wanted to do. It never ended well. They were suspicious (on Tim's side) and resentful (he guessed) on Annabel's side and he didn't care how her methods worked once he found how lucratively they did. As long as they kept John between them and work compartmentalized and they didn't have to converse alone, everything seemed to be grand.

The only clue Tim ever got to the root of her abilities was a conversation he overheard between Annabel and Jesus. She was helping him clean out the limo after the ride to the cemetery for the family of a young man killed in an inexplicable fall on a camping trip. The vehicle floor was awash in a sea of tissues and they both wore gloves as they threw the moist crumples in trash bags.

"You really like this job, yes?" Jesus asked her. "That's why the loved ones love you."

Annabel nodded, but hurriedly hid her face. She dove over the back of the car seat to gain some cover.

"It's not really me," she said, her fanny in the air, her voice muffled. "I guess it's my vibe or demeanor. I don't know. I think it's because being with them makes me calm. I don't have to pretend to be happy when everyone around me is sad."

She backed out of the car as Jesus said, "Hey Patron," jokingly, and threw Tim a full trash bag.

Tim acted as if he hadn't heard her and walked the bags out to the Dumpster. That was one of the insights into Annabel he was careful never to share with John.

Chapter Four

After a year, Annabel married John. But this makes it sound much simpler than either of them found the process. To outsiders it appeared the couple just eloped one weekend to a bed and breakfast up North on the coast and made their vows. But getting Annabel to the altar, even a civil one, was no small feat. It was a calculated series of attacks on John's side that finally broke her.

To John, the emotional blackmail and entailed manipulation was perfectly justified by the end result. After all, he loved more than Annabel did. It was only fair that he played dirty. He didn't even feel guilty about it later, as he fully expected. Guilt was one of those emotions that Annabel damped down to the point of non-existence and although this scared John at first, after a year of co-habiting, John came to see that living without guilt had its appeal.

Since the first night Annabel had joined him in bed and then argued over her reasons for being there, John had been plotting marriage. "Why?" Both Annabel and Tim asked, but separately. "What's the big deal?" Only Annabel had asked subsequently for Tim already understood.

"Getting married as a way to secure the other person's affection is the stupidest stunt, ever, believe me. I know." Tim said over beers at the bar down the street from John's apartment. They'd met there after John's latest proposal to Annabel had ended with them both walking out, but in separate directions.

"Just because it ended badly for you...well, not even you, you never seemed to care. It ended badly for Lisa. But we're different," John leaned in to Tim's space on the other side of the table. "Annabel really loves me, she just doesn't know how much."

“Yes, she does,” Tim stood up. “And not marrying you is the only honorable thing she’s done to you so far. Come on, I’ll walk you home so she doesn’t drop something on your head.”

John stood up as well, rubbing his red eyes. “No, thanks. I’ll be fine. You really don’t like her, do you? I thought working together...never mind. I’m tired.”

“Don’t be stupid. I don’t dislike her.” Tim walked beside John, ignoring his wish to ignore Tim’s presence.

Halfway home they saw Annabel walking towards them. She saw them as well and stopped, waiting. She didn’t look angry, she looked small and, even with the distance, a little frightened. She didn’t like the dark.

“See?” John said, as if Annabel appearing should prove something to Tim.

“I see her,” Tim said.

“She loves me. She’s looking for me and eventually I’ll wear her down and she’ll marry me.”

“How romantic.” Tim was ignored, again.

“And then she’ll realize she’s loved me desperately all along and we’ll have four kids and...”

“Okay, enough,” Tim interrupted. “I’m nauseated.”

“Have you been reading Pei-Hua’s romance novels again?” Annabel asked as they reached her. They never remembered how acute her hearing was.

“She reads them out loud at lunch.” John was smiling. “It’s pretty funny.”

“Dear god,” Tim said and Annabel laughed.

“Did you know Tim was married?” John told Annabel, her laughter sparking a desire for revenge.

Everyone stopped walking. The moonless night was rendered even darker by the sycamores covering the streetlights. They couldn’t see each other’s faces. As John continued speaking Tim cut across the street to his car, got in, and drove away.

“Tim was married to Lisa, but he never talked to her and avoided her company as much as possible so eventually she left.” With Tim gone, Annabel tucked her arm through John’s as they walked homewards.

“You know Tim,” John said, happy again. “He doesn’t have hobbies or outside interests and doesn’t understand people who do. Poor Lisa never stood a chance.”

“Why did he marry her? How did it even happen?” She sounded fascinated by the existence of the missing Lisa. “It’s not like you can talk Tim into anything.”

“His mom was alive then. She really liked Lisa.”

“Ah, yes. Family interests,” Annabel nodded. “That would do it.”

They were almost to their building when she spoke again. “Is he going to be mad you told me?”

“Nah, he doesn’t care. He couldn’t sustain interest long enough to hear the story all over again.”

Then Annabel realized that John saw everyone he loved as he wanted to see them, as he needed to believe in them. It wasn’t just her he constantly misjudged; she wasn’t that special. It

wasn't about her, it was about John. For a moment, Annabel tried to step outside herself, her own view. She tried to see the world as maybe John did- but the night was so dark, the pavement uneven. She had so little experience at altruistic thinking that she felt the ground shift beneath her, and she stopped the attempt. She calmed herself by calculating tomorrow's outfit, would her gray suede pumps match her violet suit best or the eggplant leather?

John was talking about Pei-Hua's crush on Tim as they finished their walk home. Annabel tried not to listen. She mentally moved on to hosiery.

###

Annabel remained uneasy, the timing of that story didn't feel coincidental to her, but the next day at work proved John correct. Tim acted as if he hadn't seen her for days, let alone walked in the dark with them. She was glad to be negated. She'd had an uneasy night. The nightmare was bad enough, but John used it to persuade her to at least think about marrying him. Waking in the night all alone after that nightmare would be more than she could bear, John pointed out to her. But first, as always, he'd been very kind to her.

After the nightmare, Annabel was unable to stay in bed, much less go back to sleep. She went to the kitchen, made a cup of tea, and became angry as one only can at three in the morning when she discovered the gingersnap cookies were gone. *Why put the box back in the cupboard when it is empty?* She threw away the empty box and went to the bathroom to start filling the tub. The sound of the water brought John to the bathroom as well.

"I have to pee," he said from the doorway.

"So go," Annabel replied as she stepped into the tub and sank down. She pulled a wet washcloth over her face. Her voice continued, muffled. "I won't look."

John peed, feeling comfortable with her blind presence. After one of her nightmares she was like a different person. Her usual reserve didn't leave her, but she was softer, quieter. Sometimes John wasn't sure she even recognized him. With her face covered, so her eyes couldn't scare him with their blankness, it was better.

“Can I get you anything?” He hesitated at the doorway.

She shook her head, the washcloth slipping, but then asked, in a whisper, if he could pass her the tea cup.

He did and then paused next to the tub. “I ate all the cookies. Do you want some cinnamon toast?”

She slid the cloth off her face. “Oh would you?” She asked, blinking the water out of her eyes. “Would you make me some?” And suddenly embarrassed, she pulled the covering back over her dripping face, but left the rest of her naked.

John, pleased by her pleasure, hurried to the kitchen. He found it odd she sought consolation and comfort in the bathtub because one of the few intelligible things she ever said aloud, only half awake or maybe fully asleep, after the violence of the nightmare ended was, ‘all the goddamn water.’ And she said it in a tone of such despair or desperation or hopelessness, John wasn't sure which exactly or maybe all three, he felt like weeping himself.

He placed the completed toast, saturated with butter, light on sugar, next to the tub on the pearl pink bathmat she'd picked out and left her in peace. John, as usual, slipped back into an easy slumber like sliding into a pool of blood warm water.

###

The way Tim acted like he didn't know her bothered Annabel. She wasn't going to ask herself why. But she wanted to ask him questions. She wanted to ask him questions that would shake him up, if anything would ever shake Tim up. Annabel was tempted to ask Tim about his stunted marriage. What had his marriage of convenience been like and how long had it taken him to freeze out poor Lisa? She did not dare ask. She could imagine the look this question would elicit and Tim's disapproval bothered her a lot more than John's disappointment did. There was likely a lesson to be learned there, but Annabel chose to ignore it. As Tim was ignoring her.

The fact that Tim seemed to ignore her hurt feelings was another issue Annabel was not going to explore. It was all for the best that John's girlfriend and best friend stayed on neutral terms. Their work relationship was cordial, respectful- and that's all that matters, Annabel explained to her suede shoes as she buffed a scuff off the toe.

Hearing Tim's step in the back hallway, she put her shoes on, and pasted a professional smile on her face. In Annabel's experience, pretending didn't make reality so, but she intended to try. So far she hadn't been able to force herself into love. She'd just have to try harder.

Annabel finally agreed to a quiet wedding, as casual as possible. For someone that made a big fuss for others, Annabel didn't like any made on her behalf. She saw nothing ironic about an event planner eloping to a city hall wedding and John had trouble with irony- like his assertion to Tim that Annabel had terrible taste in men.

He meant before she had met him and Tim knew this and Annabel knew this, but it still sounded funny. John wasn't stupid; he just saw the world differently than others. Annabel found this endearing, at first. She knew John took people and situations at face value despite his constant emotional manipulation of her, but she knew this instinctively. Tim knew it from

surviving childhood next to John and being the instrument of John's protection. Both men had let slip enough clues for her to understand.

###

"We are not inviting anyone, dude, so don't get your feelings hurt," John patted an astounded looking Tim on the arm as they sat at an outdoor café on the Embarcadero.

Annabel wiped fish taco sauce from her chin to hide her face. She doubted very much Tim's astonishment was over his lack of an invite; more likely the thought that he'd want to go. But perhaps she was projecting?

"What about your family?" Tim asked and Annabel looked up in fascination at the extremely neutral tone of voice he used. She inadvertently caught his eye and they both looked away.

"No, no," said John, not noticing anything but the collapse of his fish burger. "Just Annabel and me running away together. We'll have a party later on, when the apartment is more..." he trailed off as Annabel looked over at him. "Uh, party ready."

Annabel went back to her tacos as the men changed the subject to the powerful speedboat that was tying up at the restaurant's dock. No good could come of discussing family, every person sitting at the table would silently agree. Better to talk of boats and the sea and segue to more casual talk of days passed without bringing family into it.

But John couldn't leave well enough alone, and as they continued the meal, Annabel eating off John's plate as she emptied hers, he and Tim reminisced. Despite John's inclination to color events rosy and Tim's tendency to let him, Annabel learned more than they realized that day. One of her talents was finding the truth hidden behind people's desire to hide it.

###

Imperial Beach wasn't exactly Hicksville when the boys were growing up, but it wasn't like the rest of San Diego either. As laid-back beach communities went, it was extremely laid back. Many of the inhabitants were chemically induced laid-back. John's parent's had no visible means of support and, despite many visitors, never left the house themselves. Although they meant well, John assured Annabel, growing up he spent most of his time next door at Tim's. John's father died when the boys were at college, and his mom moved back to Utah to be closer to her folks, and she remarried soon after. She and John exchanged emails and Tim rolled his eyes. The set of his jaw let Annabel know he, at least, saw John's mother without the pinkish glow of filial love. But she doubted Tim would ever tell her the true story of John's upbringing.

John saw people as potential new friends until they proved otherwise, and the world a big playground where everyone should do their best to get along. The one thing Annabel and Tim had in common from the beginning was an unspoken agreement to protect John on this playground of his from discovering how reality differed from his perception. They both also found his positive attitude and innate friendliness just the tiniest bit irritating, but they would never risk letting him know. Their protection of John extended to each other and themselves. If Tim resented Annabel usurping a role that he had assigned himself at age eight, the day they buried John's overdosed kitten, he hid it very well. And Tim wasn't a person Annabel would ever accuse of hiding his feelings; at least, not the negative ones.

###

Once he had an agreement to marriage, John kept pushing for an actual 'wedding.' He wanted the church, the white dress for Annabel, the dinner, and the dance. Annabel wanted none of it.

“It’s nothing but an ostentatious waste of money,” she grumbled as she watered her plants one morning before work. “A white dress? We live together! I am no virgin. People only come for the free meal, and booze, and to gawk and judge, and see how much money was spent. It’s a disgusting charade.”

“But you’re an event planner!” John was caught between crushing disappointment and amusement.

“Exactly.” Annabel thumped down the wine bottle she used as a watering can. “I know what I’m talking about.”

She wiped her damp hands on her nightgown and stole his half-eaten toast. “Besides, the food that is wasted at those ridiculous dinners is a travesty. I can’t be party to it.” John did not look convinced. “I like the idea of eloping, don’t you? It’s so romantic.”

John knew Annabel’s idea of ‘romantic’ cut no cash with his idea of romance, but being as she had brought ‘food’ and ‘waste’ into the argument he realized he had no chance of persuading her to change her mind. Once one of her obsessions was quoted he might as well beat his head against the pavement as against her convictions.

###

Annabel had a weird relationship with food. And it was a relationship, not an attitude; it was borderline disturbing. She appeared to forget to eat, if food wasn’t readily available or right in front of her. Her stomach would be growling, she’d be pale and cranky, and it wouldn’t occur to her to have a meal.

If others expressed hunger or an interest in eating she’d act immediately. At home the fridge was sketchily feast or famine, and a trip to the grocery store was an adventure to Annabel

and John her Sherpa. Annabel could cook and did, but she only did so if John was home or Mr. Presbytery dropped by. She didn't cook for herself and John packed the lunches she brought to work.

If invited out to eat, Annabel invariably accepted with enthusiasm and ordered a great deal of food and, here is the part that amazed John, ate every bit of it. The one time she'd joined John and Pei-Hua for lunch, they'd walked to the Japanese place in Balboa Park, and Annabel had upset Pei-Hua by finishing her soba noodle salad for her. Pei-Hua hated leftovers and after that, John was afraid, hated Annabel too. It seemed to be mutual; Annabel found the waste of food 'morally wrong.'

"There are people in this world going hungry," Annabel informed Pei-Hua as they walked back to the Museum, John carefully staying between them. "There are people starving."

"Where?" Pei-Hua asked, her scratchy voice loud. "Give me an address and I'll be glad to send them my noodles."

"It is very easy to be flippant..."

"I don't see how me being uncomfortably full is going to help hungry people elsewhere."

"It is easy to be flippant," Annabel continued as if uninterrupted, "when you haven't seen starving people."

"Oh, and you have?" Pei-Hua asked.

Annabel stopped walking. They'd reached the corner of the Prado where the Museum grounds started. Annabel kissed John full on the mouth, in a manner guaranteed to make the other girl uncomfortable, and walked down the sidewalk skirting the fountain. She knew John and Pei-Hua would use the employee's entrance on the left side.

“Good. Bye.” Annabel called over her shoulder as she departed.

But Pei-Hua wouldn't let her win, not this time. “Don't you want to come say hello to the ghost?” She called to Annabel's departing back, “he misses you.”

Annabel swung back around, quickly, tripping slightly on a rough area of the sidewalk. “Don't say that. Don't ever say that.” Her voice quavered and John moved between the two women although there was a good ten feet of space between them as well.

Pei-Hua seemed startled by the level of emotion she had wrangled out of Annabel and Annabel, well... If she'd taken off her shoe and stabbed Pei-Hua in the eye with the heel, John would not have been surprised.

“Hey, now,” John said, just to be saying something.

Annabel's glare switched to him. “Really?” She asked, “‘Hey now?’ That's all you've got?” She sort of laughed or at least, blew out air, and then she relaxed and hugged him. Behind his back she flipped off Pei-Hua, who responded in kind.

Annabel smacked John on the cheek with her lips before walking away. John stood staring after her.

It was Annabel's response to the ghost that had been the death knell in her career at the Museum, but John didn't know if she ever knew that. John read the memo that circulated the day after Annabel saw the ghost, fainted, and upon awakening refused to play ball with the Public Relations Department Head. That lady scared the crap out of John, but Annabel had merely shaken her head in response to her attempts to coax or demand that Annabel write or, at least, tell what she had seen.

During World War II the Museum was a hospital, and injured soldiers had recovered or died there. Ever since, in the oldest part of the building, never the new addition paid for by a wealthy family who owned a mega box store (that was another time Annabel had a mark placed against her- refusing to make tea for a visiting member of the family, ‘I’m an event planner, not the maid.’), soldiers were still seen.

What’s odd was that the ghost, or ghosts- who knew?- were in uniform, not pajamas or hospital gowns. Also, Annabel was the only person to ever see him in the day. Granted, it was a dark, overcast, June gloom day. The light filtering through the new atrium’s glass ceiling was so murky it was like living underwater. The exhibit in the old section adjacent to the new atrium was of black and white photographs of Old California and the lighting was dim to offset the dark velvet panels displaying the highlighted sepia colored photographs.

Annabel was leading a group of visitors, people thinking of staging a charity fashion show at the Museum, from the stairs at the new section over to the old section. If she had been alone no doubt no one ever would have known about the sighting, but the three people with her had witnessed her stop short while looking into the encompassing dark of the exhibit, turn white, say “What’s he doing here?” and then drop to a human heap on the floor.

The PR Lady had immediately been summoned. She arrived, short legs churning, by the time Annabel was sitting up against the hallway wall. Annabel looked like she hunted for an escape route. There wasn’t one. The PR Lady did some spinning and the charity group thought a haunted Museum was the perfect venue for their fashion show. The PR Lady turned her focus to Annabel as one of the PR minions led the group away.

There was a file kept on record detailing every sighting or hearing or event in the Museum that couldn’t be explained. Annabel was the first person to ever faint over a glimpse of

the ghost and the PR Lady smelled blood. But she got nothing out of Annabel. Sitting curled up on the floor, blond curls sticking to her clammy forehead, Annabel didn't say one word. She shook her head weakly and wouldn't look in the direction of the dark exhibit in the old section. As the questioning continued, the PR Lady actually stamped her little foot in its spike-heeled shoe, Annabel covered her mouth with her hand and her shoulders shook with dry heaves.

The interview over, Annabel was helped to her feet by Michael, the Nigerian security guard and then to the Ladies' Room door. There the closed circuit cameras didn't go and John lost access to the situation. Even Pei-Hua felt forced to point out that his spying on Annabel was 'pretty freaking creepy' and that the security guys wouldn't like it if they ever found out John had hacked into their feed. They never had, but neither had John ever known for certain who it was that Annabel had thought she'd seen.

"I can't believe you and that one..." Pei-Hua trailed off, defeated, as they watched Annabel walk away through the throngs around the fountain.

"I know," John said. "Isn't it wonderful?"

"No, not really," Pei-Hua replied as they walked to the employee's door.

Annabel's nightmare was particularly bad that night. She cried and cried until John was able to fully wake her. Awake, her tears stopped and her fright turned to something else.

###

There were questions John wanted to ask Annabel, but he knew better than to voice out loud. Questions like: why does going to the beach make you sad? Why does buying shoes make you euphoric when you don't actually like wearing them? Why don't you have any family or

seem interested in mine? What do you dream about that makes you wake up screaming and hang on me like someone drowning?

Finally, he did demand an answer to that last question as it wasn't the type of thing he could ignore, loss of sleep made him inefficient at work, and the recluse next door had complained to Mr. Presbytery's wife about the noise and the possibility that 2B was beating his girlfriend. Mr. Presbytery appeared that morning full of concern, visibly relieved to find Annabel at the door, bruise free.

She invited him in for breakfast, still in her bathrobe, John dressing for work. They had been awake since 4 am, John's questioning being expertly sidestepped by Annabel. She had clung to him in the dark, then pulled his pajama pants off, ripping the neckline of her nightgown as she yanked it over her head. For the first time, John hesitated. He had a suspicion it didn't matter who was in the bed. He thought maybe she wasn't even awake enough to recognize him. For one moment he remembered Pei-Hua saying Annabel always had a boyfriend because she wasn't complete without one, but then banished the thought as disloyal and cruel. He could taste the tears on her cheeks and feel her hands clutching him. He held her in return. Annabel needed him.

Annabel needed him and no one else and he comforted her until the sun dawned and he was able to sleep a little longer. He awoke thirsty and sore, Annabel had been rough in her frightened desperation. He felt a few scratches and his shoulder throbbed with a bite-shaped bruise. He needed a shower and several cups of coffee, but all that could wait. He wanted to talk and couldn't help but begrudge Annabel's cheerful welcome of Mr. Presbytery to their breakfast table.

Annabel moved from table to stove to plant stand by the window; not appearing to care that the sunlight made her robe translucent and she'd never put her nightgown back on. Mr.

Presbytery averted his eyes and finally asked about the ‘disturbance’ and the neighbor’s complaint. Annabel poured him another cup of tea and buttered his toast for him. John felt this was going too far.

“Annabel has nightmares,” he said as he ate his scrambled eggs. “Sometimes they’re pretty bad, I guess.”

Both men looked at her, she turned away to pluck some dead leaves off her tomato plant. The sun gleamed through the apricot silk of her robe. They looked away to accidentally meet each other’s eyes. Both of them were red with embarrassment.

“Sometimes the dreams are pretty bad.” John repeated.

“2A said she was screaming.” Mr. Presbytery couldn’t meet his eyes anymore, but continued on doggedly. “The wife just wanted me to check.”

“I’m sorry about the noise,” Annabel said, still pruning her plant before thrusting a finger into the soil. “Hopefully, it won’t happen again.”

“I try to wake her when they start, the nightmares,” John said, feeling ashamed. “Last night’s must have been a doozy, and I guess I was sleeping too deep...”

Annabel walked out of the kitchen and the men looked at her departing back, then at each other, startled. She walked back in. “I thought I heard the phone, but it was the alarm clock.”

“She has acute hearing.” John beamed at Mr. Presbytery, proud of his girl, and Mr. Presbytery smiled bemusedly.

“Enjoy your breakfast! I’ve got to shower.” Annabel stepped into the bathroom. Her face was calm and slightly stony. They heard the lock click, and avoiding eye contact, finished the meal.

Annabel didn’t come out until Mr. Presbytery was gone and John was doing the pee-pee dance, threatening to go in the kitchen sink. Later, when he would have questioned her again at the door or asked for assurances that they would talk that evening, she stonewalled him in her most effective manner. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. It wasn’t a goodbye kiss. It was her most studiedly seductive kiss. She dashed out the door waving goodbye as he waited in the dark hallway for his body to calm down. There was no need to upset 2A further.

###

The Nash was acting up again and Annabel was forced to concentrate in order to coax it into the proper gear. It was a stupid car, but it was her mother’s car. Annabel hated the thing, but she couldn’t abandon it, that wouldn’t be right. Sitting in line to get on the freeway, Annabel indulged in a little fantasy of simply getting out of the car and walking away. She had seen it done in that movie where Michael Douglas wore the dad-like glasses, but that was the only part of the film she liked. Once he’d got hold of the bag of guns she’d turned off the television.

Leaving her car was a daydream. Marrying John was a reality. He hadn’t been joking about ‘wearing her down’ and while creepy slash disturbing, it turned out that that sort of persistence was strangely seductive. He was a borderline stalker, obsessive freak, but he was her freak. Annabel’s mother used to sing a frightening ditty about a little blue man who followed a girl around saying he ‘loved her to bits’ until she finally pushed him off a building. Then the little guy showed up at her door only to tell her, ‘I don’t love you anymore.’

The only thing that frightened Annabel more than John loving her so very much was the thought of him not loving her anymore. He had saved her and yeah, she resented the manner of his saving, but she also knew what life was like living without him. Would she rather be smothered by the love of her personal little blue man or utterly alone?

Annabel understood loss, her life was predicated on it, but she couldn't explain this to John. She couldn't explain it to herself. She knew eventually she'd lose everything, everyone. She always had, she figured she always would. How could she be faulted if she wanted to hang on to John for as long as she could? If it had to be on his terms, well, when wasn't it on the man's terms?

Was he her dream man? Was he who she thought about in her private moments? No, but she seemed to be *his* dream and that treatment was so, so persuasive. Maybe if she just tried a little bit harder, closed her eyes, and shoved her past further into the closet, she could turn the little blue man into something like her dream man. Maybe no woman's husband was her dream man. Maybe Annabel was deluding herself. It ultimately didn't matter. What she was doing was protecting herself and she was never going to apologize for that.

"I am a selfish, shallow, cowardly girl," Annabel said as she forced the Nash into motion once more, "but I am all I've got."

###

When John and Annabel returned from their weekend wedding, Tim took them out for a celebratory meal. He made reservations at a brewery John wanted to try. If Annabel had any restaurant preferences she'd never shared them with Tim. Again, he and John reminisced most of the evening. Annabel smiled and made agreeable noises when called upon and it took Tim a while to realize she was only pretending to be drunk.

“I’m still not sure it’s legal,” John was finishing the story of their small courthouse wedding. “Well, yeah, the guy was a judge so it’s legal. I mean valid in the eyes’ of God.”

Tim would have argued or laughed at John’s tipsy wording, but Annabel slammed down the empty beer stein and beat him to it. When both men turned to look at her snorting giggles, she wiped the back of her hand over her foamy mustache and pretended to stifle a burp.

“You better hope it was legal,” she said. “I’m not going through that again.”

John, avoiding Tim’s eyes, put his beer stein down. The champagne Tim had preordered arrived, way too late in his estimation, and he pondered on subtle ways of sending it back. Annabel was already reaching for it, and John looked misty with pleasure; newly-married people were supposed to drink champagne. John would likely drink it from Annabel’s shoe were she to let him. Tim sighed and offered up a toast.

John raised his flute after they finished the first sip. “And next year- a baby!”

Annabel swallowed her champagne and immediately looked bilious. John giggled and reached to pat her on the back. She hunched forward as if to hiccup, so his hand missed, and landed on the back of her chair instead. Tim handed her a napkin and she covered her nose and mouth, her eyes lowered. The tension coming off her was angry, he thought. Her body wasn’t loose enough to be drunk.

“It’s okay, Annabel,” John drank another glass of champagne in one toss. “Now that we are legal our babies won’t be bastards.”

Annabel sat her glass on the table, placing it carefully upon a soggy napkin, her movements slow, and centered it with both hands before rising from the table. John was pouring

more wine and did not see the look on her face, but Tim did. He wondered if she planned on returning from wherever she was headed.

Tim watched as she veered off to the left. He knew the bathrooms were to the right. She walked out the attached bar's door to the sidewalk. She didn't pass the window so Tim figured she turned the opposite corner. She could use the fresh air. She was green-faced.

"Don't forget to call your mother about the happy event," Tim said to distract John. John seemed pleased.

###

On the street Annabel lingered in front of a vintage clothing boutique. She patronized this store and a discreet sign announced new consignments, but it was closed. It was undoubtedly a good thing too, because the mood she was in could easily cause her to max out her card in escapism joy. A new outfit brought such relief, she could use a new wardrobe right now. Most girls supposedly looked forward to their wedding day. The happiest day of their lives and all that crap, right? She had felt slightly nauseated ever since 'tying the knot.' The knot felt like it was jammed down her throat at this moment.

For the first time Annabel regretted the loss of all her girlfriends in her purge from the Museum. None of them were married, all of them hated her, but they were girls she could talk to about things like love and marriage. She didn't have one married girlfriend she could confide in or ask 'is this normal'? Was it normal to feel slightly sick and panicky- my god, what have I done?- the day after the happiest day of her life? And babies! If John mentioned babies one more time she'd ruin his new loafers.

Annabel missed her mother so badly she leaned against the filthy window ledge of Cinderella's Reckless Daughter with her hands on her knees, bent over, gasping. It was a like a punch to the heart, she swore it skipped a beat. She wanted her mother. Her mother had never been married at all. Annabel was one of those bastards John joked about and her mother's only advice about men had been to avoid the 'worthless sponges' as much as possible. But still, Annabel wanted her mother.

On the heels of wanting her mother, as usual, Annabel wanted her nanny. Annabel had two mommies back before they wrote kid's books about such things, but as far as she knew they weren't lesbians. Mother and Mila hadn't seemed to even like each other much. Mila disapproving of Mother's man-hating in front of Annabel and her traveling sales job and her back- turning on her family, and Mother resenting Mila's disapproval and Annabel's deep love of Mila.

Mila would have known what to say about marriage and ambivalent feelings about it. Mila would have pointed out what a good man John was. John was the nicest man Annabel had ever met. It wasn't his fault that Annabel had never been attracted to nice men. John loved her despite her messiness, her moodiness, and her lack of family, not to mention her complete inability to express normal emotions. John would never cheat on her or hurt her or just disappear. John would never, ever leave her alone and yet here she was on a dark, dirty street corner, peering into a closed boutique on her wedding dinner night while her husband sat alone with his best friend. *She* had left *him* and again she felt sick to her stomach before she straightened abruptly from her crouch and hurried back the way she'd come.

As Annabel walked away from Cinderella's Reckless Daughter she couldn't even bring herself to care that the window ledge undoubtedly left a line of dirt across the back of her mint

green linen Capri pants. Being married was already making her slovenly, lowering her standards. She slapped ineffectually at the seat of her pants as she walked.

John was not at the table, but Tim glanced up from signing the bill to say: “He’s in the bathroom, but not looking for you. I told him you’d gone to put money in the meter so we’d have time to get ice cream.”

Annabel didn’t have to answer for John returned and wrapped his arms around her before they all three turned and left together. Tim never mentioned that night again. At least, not to her.

###

“Mona is feeding those feral cats in the garden.” Annabel stood half in the office doorway, looking over her shoulder towards the back of the mortuary. It was her first day at work after her honeymoon.

“What?” Tim was doing the accounts, only half hearing her. He wasn’t used to her being there yet, not used to her being married to John. It was so much more permanent. Why was she talking about cats?

She was still looking over her shoulder. “Those feral cats? Mona has been feeding them. No wonder it smells like cat piss by the garage.”

Mona was the head of the cleaning crew and a religious zealot. She learned to avoid Annabel after a minor skirmish when she left some proselytizing pamphlets on Annabel’s desk, only to later find them stuck under her car’s windshield wiper blades. There was a message written in bold black lettering advising Mona to keep her ‘pathetic nonsense’ to herself. Tim knew Annabel and Mona were enemies, but he couldn’t have an army of feral cats stinking up the grounds.

“Should I call Animal Control?” Tim wasn’t really asking her, just thinking out loud.

“Moses and Jesus have pellet guns. If they shot ‘em a few times and you told Mona to stop feeding the damn cats, I think they’d go away.”

Tim looked her in the eye. She looked back, no longer half in the doorway. She’d turned to fully face him. He couldn’t tell if she was serious. He was a little intrigued by that.

“Or we could poison the food.”

Now she was definitely joking, right? He wasn’t intrigued as much as appalled. But he wanted to explore the topic further. “You think cat piss smells bad, imagine what a yard full of dead cats would smell like.”

Annabel didn’t flinch. She didn’t smile either. She raised one shoulder in a shrug as she said, “I didn’t say whose food I’d poison.” She slipped out of the room.

Tim called John, not Animal Control, and that Friday night they set a few traps. Most of the snarling felines they dropped off at the animal shelter the next morning, but one delicate little tabby John decided to take home. Tim thought about remonstrating, but she wasn’t his wife. Surely John knew of Annabel’s dislike of cats? Maybe it was one more area where John was planning to wear her down.

###

The cat never made it into the house. John wrapped the surviving kitty in an old flannel shirt he found in the trunk of his car, but the worn fabric wasn’t enough to prevent its claws and teeth from marking any area of skin it could reach. John was afraid to hold it any tighter, the cat was mostly fragile bones covered by rough fur, but to clasp her securely to his chest left his throat and encircling arm bleeding.

Plus, the cat stank. It smelled of moist garage where old hearses were stored and dank soil that didn't get any sun and the undeniable stench of cat gone feral, uncared for, unloved. The cat twisted in his arms as he made his way up the broken sidewalk, he grabbed it midair, and pulled it in tighter. The claws sank deep in John's chest- because it had felt escape possible? Or in an effort to avoid being dropped? John didn't know. He doubted the tabby did either.

Annabel was kneeling in the sad flower beds around the concrete steps leading to the front door. For once Mr. Presbytery wasn't hovering around her, directing how he wanted the beds planted. His old knees wouldn't allow for kneeling, but he liked to supervise. Annabel was wearing her one pair of ragged jeans; they weren't fashionably holey, but worn through use, and a flannel shirt of John's, oddly similar to the one covering the cat. Hers was blue, the one being shredded was orange and red plaid. John wouldn't miss it.

He loved seeing Annabel in his shirt. It was too large for her and, although she had tied the back into a knot at her waist, the front slipped open off one shoulder, announcing that she wasn't wearing a bra. Annabel put down her shovel, leaning it against the wrought iron handrail, and brushed the hair off her forehead with the back of her grimy hand. She didn't say anything, just stared at the thrashing, yowling, flannel wrapped bundle in his arms. John loosened his hold, meaning to show her the little creature contained within, but it popped free. He was left holding an empty shirt.

Screaming, twisting its spine in mid-air to land on its feet, the cat never paused. It plunged headlong into a run straight to the street at John's back, right under the tire of a Ford F-150 truck so loaded with gardening equipment the driver never felt the thump of the slim feline body wrapping around the wheel well to be thrown out the back and land in the gutter, almost at John's feet.

John hadn't yet moved when he realized the cat wasn't dead. He clutched the still warm flannel harder when the broken thing tried to get up. Its mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out. John couldn't look around for Annabel. He didn't need to. She reached the cat, shovel in hand, while he stood paralyzed. She didn't look at him, either, as she made one quick motion snapping the tabby's spine.

She tugged the flannel from his hands, wrapped the corpse in it, and carried the now still, now stained bundle to one of the holes she had dug for the half-gallon pots of azaleas Mr. Presbytery had waiting.

"Go inside John," Annabel said without removing her gaze from her task. "I've got a bit more work to do."

John did as she said.

Chapter Five

“Why won’t you come over anymore?” John finally asked when it was no longer possible to pretend the friendship hadn’t changed.

Tim was sitting in his beautifully manicured backyard next to a pristine barbeque grill, drinking bottled beer, when John showed up. He’d unfolded beach chair in the sun and wore his oldest Bermuda shorts. John remembered when Tim bought those raggedy things on Spring Break in Rosarito Beach their freshman year of college. John wished Annabel was present so he could tell her the provenance of Tim’s practically vintage shorts. Tim stood up, smiling at the sight of him, and then John was happy his wife wasn’t with him. Tim wouldn’t be smiling if she was. John gathered his nerve and addressed the issue, all the while realizing he was making a mistake. Tim seemed so happy to see him and even happier that he was alone.

Nothing good could come from questioning either of them, his wife or his best friend. What was he thinking, he asked himself, even as he proceeded. Tim declared himself eager to look over the Nash’s innards, no doubt hoping John would change the subject to the less weighty topic of auto repair. John was sorry to disappoint them both.

“Are you afraid of Annabel?” John asked as they explored under the hood.

“No. That’s ridiculous,” Tim didn’t look at him, but kept busy with the insides of the car. “You should get rid of this piece of junk.”

“I can’t. Annabel loves this car.”

“It’s the only thing,” Tim muttered. “If that’s even true.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” John, unusually, was not backing down. “You still don’t think she loves me? She married me, didn’t she?”

“It’s only polite, not to visit newlyweds right away. Everyone knows that.” Tim pulled a hose out of the car. They looked at it closely. It had large cracks in it and Tim threw it away over his shoulder.

“I never heard of that.”

“Well, you were raised by wolves.” Tim started to rip the Nash’s wiring apart.

“Are you jealous? Is that it?”

“Yeah, John.” Tim’s voice was tiredly sarcastic and hollow under the hood. “That’s it. I am jealous of your beautiful, emotionless, automaton. Absolutely.”

“Don’t be an ass,” John forced a thin laugh. “You know she’s not a robot. You’ve seen her with clients.”

“I’ve seen her with you, too,” again Tim muttered without removing his head from the car’s interior.

“If she doesn’t love me why’d she go to the doctor to see about getting pregnant, huh? Why would she do that?”

Tim stopped destroying the car as he went totally still. He looked at John. “I don’t know. That’s what I mean. I don’t know why she does anything. Her motives are...well, I don’t know.”

“She thinks you don’t like her.”

“I doubt she cares.”

“Just come for dinner!” John pointed to the mess that remained of the Nash. “If you don’t come I’ll show her what you did to this car and you’ll find out how ‘emotionless’ she is.”

“Jesus can fix it tomorrow or have his friend haul this piece of crap away. I don’t want it in my driveway.” Tim stepped back, literally wiping his hands.

“Then you’ll come?”

“Yes! Fine. Just leave me alone, all right?”

“Be there at six.”

Tim stayed behind as John walked to seek public transportation. Later, Tim called Jesus to ask about removing Annabel’s junker. John would never man up and admit the car was done for. Tim would present him with the completed task- no more Nash- and let him explain it to his wife; these lessons were good for John. The more he let her walk over him the more she’d do it. Jealous! John must be out of his mind.

###

John walked down Tim’s driveway feeling...what? He asked himself, what am I feeling? He wanted to hit something. He wanted to kick the dog that was barking behind the low stone wall as he passed. He wanted to yell at Tim, “Stop being a dick!” He wanted to go home and not trip over Annabel’s shoes in his not messy house. He did not want to have to tell her what Tim had done to her car. He wanted...he wanted things to not be so hard, so frustrating.

John realized he was angry. He was angry at Tim. He was angry at Tim because it was easier to be angry at him than at Annabel. But mostly he was just angry at Tim. He couldn’t remember ever being angry at Tim before- John didn’t like it. It felt ungrateful, but John had to admit, Tim had it coming. Didn’t he? Calling Annabel a robot, that was unfair. Calling John’s parents wolves, that was...actually, that was pretty accurate.

By this point in his ruminating, John reached a bus stop on the nearest busy intersection away from Tim's tree lined, residential street. He sat on the concrete bench next to a man who looked, and smelled, a wee bit insane.

"Hi," John said and the man turned his threadbare, plaid-coated shoulder to him.

John shrugged off the slight. It was barely sweatshirt weather but no doubt sleeping on the street got cold. John went back to thinking about Tim and Tim's accusations and Tim's weird attitude towards John's wife. John liked thinking of Annabel as his *wife*. John was very careful to avoid thinking of what his wife was going to say when she found out Tim had killed her car. Her mother's car. John knew about mothers, even ones that were, well, like his.

Mothers were difficult. Mothers were like a spam email bomb. One thought, one emotion led to another and then another, then another- boom! in your face and there you were, struggling to knock them down, click out, make the bomb stop. Mothers...and the bus arrived. John got on, the stinky- coated man did not.

Now John felt bad for complaining about Annabel in his head. She didn't mean to be messy, she didn't mean to be unemotional- she couldn't help it. No one would chose to be like that. Life made her that way and she did the best she could with what she'd been handed. Plus, John just liked looking at her. She was good to look at, he felt all protective and manly and...she wasn't a robot. Robots didn't cook dinner for their husbands at the end of the day.

As the bus traveled through John's childhood neighborhood, he felt himself grow warm with sentimentality. His anger melted as he thought about his wife. His *wife*. John was sentimental about many things: her shoes kicked off and left at the front door, spilled make-up on the bathroom counter, lipstick stained coffee cups balanced next to the computer keyboard, breakfast scraps saved for the neighbor's mangy dog, her underpants placed neatly in the lingerie

bag waiting to be washed, and the stringy pot roast with overdone, starchy potatoes that she would serve him with a flourish at the end of her long work day.

Thinking about Annabel gave John a break from thinking about mothers until they passed a section of freeway overpass that stood where John's childhood neighborhood once had. And boom! Another mother spam bomb went off in his head.

###

“What's wrong with her nose?” And the twin wriggled his own to demonstrate.

His mother's nose wasn't something John thought about until the twins moved in to the house next door, and one of them, the smaller, kind of squirrely one, pointed it out. He pointed it out loudly.

The taller twin slapped the shorter one on the back of the head, but it was too late, as far as John was concerned. Everyone, the twins and their mother, John and Mrs. Landingham from the other side of the twin's new house, they all looked at John's mother's nose. The twin's mother and Mrs. Landingham flushed with embarrassment on her behalf, John saw, but his mother didn't. She didn't blink, or put up a hand to feel what was wrong with her nose, or even stop talking about the street sweeper coming every Tuesday and God help you if you didn't move your car. John was confused by this because his family no longer owned a car. Grandpa refused to buy them another after John's dad wrecked the last one, that piece of Jap crap, he called it, while driving home 'sick.'

Maybe John's mom didn't hear what the little twin said. A lot of times John's mom lost her hearing. Or at least, that what's John's dad said. “Are you deaf?!” John's dad asked that a lot.

Maybe John's mom had something wrong with her ears as well as her nose because now that John noticed- it was different.

The curves of the nostrils were not connected to the flesh under her nose. Her nose itself was slim, delicate, almost transparent, and the tiny slits on the outside edges of her nose seemed to quiver in time with her breathing. The nose slits on his mother's face reminded John of the gills on the sun fish he and his Grandpa pulled from the estuary- back when Grandpa used to take John to the estuary, that is.

And now John's mother noticed him noticing her nose. Without looking at him or pausing in her advice to the new neighbor about which Laundromat on Imperial Avenue was least likely to destroy your laundry, (John knew this information was not needed, from his hidey-hole in the Podocarpus hedge he'd watched a washer *and* a dryer being brought into the twin's garage) John's mother reached out a hand and pushed him away.

She placed a hand on the top of his head, twisted it so that he faced down the street away from her and their house, and pushed. The taller twin caught John's eye as his head turned and this twin raised his eyebrows. He gave a funny head jerk of acknowledgment at the same time like Grandpa did when they used to run into another fisherman at the estuary- a head jerk that said 'we-who-are-up-to-no-good-salute-each-other.'

The taller twin fell into step beside John as the momentum from his mother's push sent him down the driveway. As they walked, the shorter twin, breathing heavily through his mouth, joined them. "What's wrong with your mom's nose?" the mouth breather asked.

The taller twin smacked his brother's head again. "Shut up, Toby," he said, but both twins looked at John, waiting for his response.

John, with no idea of how to explain his mom's slit open nose, said "it's a secret."

The three boys continued walking down the summer hot street, a twin on either side of John. "My name is Tim," said Tim. "What's yours?"

###

No doubt John regretted inviting Tim when Annabel got up to clear the table that evening. Tim had brought a bottle of wine and consumed the majority of it himself. He was elaborately polite until the third glass when he became jocular, and therefore, in John's eyes, dangerous.

"You're getting kind of hefty," Tim said with a perfectly straight face. "Expecting already?"

Annabel turned white and then flushed red. She looked down at her body, smoothed a hand across her formerly concave belly and over her hip. The lights were on and it was dusk outside so the windows make perfect mirrors.

"What? What, really?" She studied herself anxiously. Then, realizing what he meant by 'expecting,' looked sick. "No! Expecting? God, no."

John leaped to his feet, but then didn't know what to do and hesitated. He looked back and forth between his wife, panic stricken, and his best friend, who was smiling at her, pleased with her reaction.

"How much weight have you gained since you moved in with John? You must be an emotional eater."

“Hey!” John broke his paralysis. “She was ten pounds underweight before, the doctor said. She wasn’t even having her per...”

“Shut up, John,” Annabel said, still looking in the window mirror.

“He is my best friend, Annabel!” John yelled, but looked extremely uncomfortable doing so. “I told him we wanted to start a fam...”

“Shut up, John.” Annabel looked overheated, but otherwise calm when she turned to glare at Tim. “God. Both of you just shut up. I am not fat. I am healthy. I do not want to start a family. You want a baby, John, and you never asked me. We do not need a hostage to fortune. Just shut up,” she repeated loudly, neither man having ventured to say anything. Perhaps she was talking to herself.

John was white and his eyes were wide open and wet looking. He still stood between the others, nervously shifting his weight from one leg to the other and back. Tim sat in his chair, long legs stretched out, and arms folded. He raised one eyebrow at Annabel, running her hands over her hips, patting them reassuringly, and he looked her in the eye and he smirked. He gave her an open once-over, and then held her gaze again, smirking.

Annabel flushed darker red and fled to the bathroom. This wasn’t far enough away, so she grabbed the laundry basket and dragged it down the hallway, its metal feet making a horrible noise and no doubt scarring the wood floor. John followed, still pale, paler than usual, now looking abandoned. Annabel slammed the door in his face.

John wandered back into the kitchen. “She forgot the quarters. Why did you do that?”

Tim shrugged. “I don’t know. She bugs me.”

John sat down and picked at the chicken carcass spread eagle on its platter, breast meat gone. “Why? You said business was improving. You said she was good.”

“Good at her job. Not good for you.”

“Not good for me? She’s my wife. I love her.” John was getting angry again. Annabel out of the room meant he could take sides, he didn’t have to mediate their shit. “This is her home and you called her fat after eating the food she cooked for you. Jesus, man, I don’t know who you are.”

Tim straightened in his chair and then sat still. He stared at John, studied him. Maybe he didn’t know who John was, either. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think…”

“Don’t tell me. Tell her.”

“Yeah, should I?” Tim moved to stand, not used to John making him feel like a shit heel.

“Nah,” John looked worried once more. “Not now. She might throw something. Mr. Presbytery’s got a lot of tools down there.”

“See, man,” Tim was angry, now, too. “That’s not normal. You shouldn’t be afraid of your *wife*.”

“I’m not afraid of Annabel.” John ripped the lone leg off the chicken and gnawed it. “I’m afraid of Annabel whacking you upside the head with a hammer and going to jail. And don’t give me marriage advice, your marriage lasted like six minutes, son. You are no expert.”

“All I’m saying is you can’t lay down and let her walk all over you and then complain when she treats you like a doormat.”

“I’m not complaining!” John was enraged when Tim started laughing. “And I am not her doormat!”

Tim stopped and shrugged at him, again. “Whatever.”

“Not whatever. You’re not in my marriage, okay? Quit giving my wife shit.” John threw down the naked chicken bone. “Damn. How do you two get any work done?”

Tim looked away from him, into the mirrored windows. “Work is different. She’s completely different.”

John paused in his destruction of the chicken carcass. He studied Tim, who continued to avoid any eye contact but his own in the window. There was a tone in Tim’s voice John didn’t understand, a current underneath the conversation he decided he didn’t want to understand. Being as they were both silent, they heard the third presence in the room. They looked to the doorway.

“I forgot my quarters.” Annabel frowned.

She opened a kitchen drawer to remove a royal purple velvet bag that clinked heavily, and walked out again.

“Annabel,” John started after her.

“It’s all right,” she said over her shoulder. “I’m just going to do the laundry.”

When the door slammed behind her, the two faced one another.

“I don’t get it,” Tim said, but he dropped his eyes to the carcass on the table. “I just don’t.”

“You said she was beautiful.”

“A. I’d had a few beers and B. a pretty face and nice boobs is not worth this much aggravation.” Tim emptied the wine bottle by tilting it directly into his mouth.

“Leave the boobs out of it,” John advised. “You don’t understand, every guy talked about her at the Museum and she shined them all on. Everyone wanted her and she chose me.”

“She didn’t choose you, John. You stalked her when she was vulnerable. You gave her an easy way out when she was scared and now she realizes it and resents you.” Tim blinked. “Wow. I figured it out. I am a genius.”

“Don’t worry,” John said. “Once the alcohol wears off you’ll be back to normal.”

Tim left shortly after to avoid running into Annabel again. John hadn’t offered him coffee, the couch, or to call a cab. John was getting the hang of this anger deal.

####

Tim felt bad. Not just drank-too-much bad, although he felt that, but what-was-I-thinking, what-have-I-done bad. Bad like he probably shouldn’t be driving. Bad like he might have just destroyed his relationship with his best friend *and* the best funeral director he’d ever seen, let alone employed. Tim frequently wished his dad could come pay a visit to the business and see Annabel in action, because his dad would love Annabel. Or, at least, he’d love Work Annabel. Wouldn’t he?

Tim hadn’t felt this bad in years, most likely because Tim hadn’t been this drunk in years. He’d drank beer ripping apart the Nash, then more beer after John left, and then the bottle of wine at Annabel’s dinner when he’d felt himself start to sober up with the food. Tim didn’t like to drink because Tim didn’t like to lose control so what the hell was

he thinking? Was he trying to destroy everything? Did he want change so badly he was willing to destroy them all to get it?

The last time Tim had felt this badly, drunk this much, was when he realized that getting married to please his dying mother was a very stupid act, the desperate negotiation of an immature idiot. *Here, God, please don't take my mother and I'll marry this girl she picked out and we'll all live happily ever after.* But Tim's life wasn't a fairy tale, unless it was a Grimm one where the sister's feet get chopped off and Cinderella's happiness is founded on everyone else's suffering.

Tim's mother died and Tim lived with to a woman who bored him brainless even when he wasn't sad. Tim used 'Dutch courage,' as his dad called it, got sloppy drunk and told Lisa he wanted a divorce. She'd been devastated, John was upset, Tim's mother was dead, and all Tim felt was relief that he could have his house all to himself again. John was shocked when Tim made the mistake of telling him of the joy of coming home to an empty house and awakening in a bed containing only Tim.

John was upset because he wanted to believe the fairy tale- people get married and then live ...despite the fact that the marriage that produced John was a horror story and John his parent's happy puppet. Tim stopped himself, that wasn't fair. John deserved to be happy precisely because of the horror story he grew up in. Tim had no right to mess with John's happiness. He had no right to hurt Annabel's feelings.

Tim stopped himself again as he stopped a light two blocks over from his street. He might have sat through two lights except that the rowdy Saturday traffic wouldn't allow it. For the first time Tim admitted that he wanted the right to hurt Annabel's

feelings. That sounded wrong. He wanted the right to hurt Annabel's feelings because he wanted the right to apologize for it and promise never to do it again. What Tim wanted was so, so wrong that as he drove home, knowing full well he shouldn't be behind the wheel, he decided to never drink in John's presence again. God only knew what would happen if Tim lost control now that he knew what he wanted. He knew what he wanted and Tim went from feeling bad to much, much worse.

Chapter Six

A beautiful hint of moist ozone, the first harbinger of the rain that San Diego was always starved for and never got enough of, crept through the cracked-open windows of John's apartment and drifted to the big brass bed. The scent and the cool, damp fingers of air that carried it, roused Annabel and she rolled closer to John's warmth. Then a breeze began and the slight tap, tap, tapping of the bamboo blind hitting the windowsill in time with the cessation of the puffs of wind. The sound woke Annabel fully, making her slightly irritable, ready to be busy with the clatter of the day rather than stay in the warm bed and be made nervous by an innocuous noise.

The streets were taking on moisture from the first drops when she walked out the door. The scent of wet asphalt rose up, a warm, comforting scent to a city bred girl and the exercise to the trolley line relaxed her. John had a meeting away from the museum and she had left him their one working car. The Nash was in the shop again, hopefully. John had taken it to Tim's house to see if they could fix the wiring together and it had never come back. John was being close-mouthed about it and Tim, when asked, just laughed. It was a mean sounding laugh and Annabel didn't ask again. She figured the car would eventually return. Or not. She didn't even know where Tim lived.

John hadn't wanted her to leave so early and had attempted to pull her back to bed, but she resisted. To shut the window on the beautiful rain scent would have necessitated an explanation of the bothersome noise. It so seldom rained here. Besides, she was tense and the best way to dispel this, she had learned, was motion. Keep busy, keep moving and the anxious tension had a harder time keeping up. The puddles went splash, splash, under her shoes. She wished she were barefoot. She pushed this thought away. She inhaled deeply and the moist air felt good.

Walking under a catalpa tree, enormous with age, the branches dripped splat on her umbrella and she twitched in nervousness. Why was she so bothered by little noises? Never mind, push it back down. She walked further up the edge of the sidewalk to avoid the big droplets.

As soon as the catalpa trees lining the block gave way to jacaranda trees, she would not be too far from Tim's building and her work. She forced herself to slow down, take another breath of the scented air, and not think about why fleeing to work meant safety. Why a newlywed would be more comfortable away from her husband at work with a bunch of dead people and her boss was a question best left unasked.

A school bus driving by hit a water-filled pothole and the jolting, wet, ker-thump knocked her thoughts back into line. *Stop thinking, Annabel*, she ordered. *Just walk. Count the raindrops on the umbrella. Count the footsteps, count your breaths. Just don't, don't think.* So she didn't. She simply walked, counting, until she was closer to peaceful.

By the time she reached the old Victorian that housed her strangely beloved work, it was raining in earnest. Although she had a generous umbrella, everything she wore was damp as she walked up the steps, except for her shoes, which were soaked. There was even more wind here, closer to the coast and the screen door ripped from her hand and slammed open against the wall. After her calming walk, the noise reverberated through Annabel, making her heart feel like it was filled with boiling water. She jumped and a bird, knocked loose from its nest under the eaves by the bang of the door, screeched by. Its wings brushed her cheek before disappearing into the house.

Annabel let out a matching screech as the feathers touched her and froze. The screen door slammed once more against the wall. Annabel stood still. She would be hosting a funeral that morning for a retired school principal. Chairs had to be set up, tea and coffee prepared. The

guests would be mostly academics, a group not known to appreciate tardiness. Now was not the time to be standing in a panic over a banging door and a bird's wing in the face, but Annabel couldn't move.

“Who let in this damn bird?” An angry voice yelled from deep inside the house. And the spell broke.

But Annabel didn't want to go in the house. Mila said a bird in the house was bad luck. Granted, Mother said this was only a superstition and to pay no attention to it, but other things Mila said turned out to be true.

Annabel didn't want to go in the house because that was Tim's angry voice yelling, which meant he was there, and Tim had been making things weird. Once again Annabel had gotten into a situation that was strange enough on its own merits, she didn't need Tim complicating it any further.

He'd left a note, written on the back of a liquor store receipt, apologizing for his 'boorish' behavior. She'd watched him leave from Mr. Presbytery's hideout window (John didn't know Mr. P had given her a key and she planned on keeping it that way) and had gone upstairs once she was certain he wasn't coming back. But she'd had to forgive him after reading the note. After all, who used the word 'boorish'?

John was worried about Tim drinking so much. He didn't like it, it wasn't Tim's nature. What should John do about it? Annabel was astounded he'd ask her advice. Mila sent her alcoholic brother amethyst cufflinks as a preventive measure, but Mother said this was a superstition as well. John found this advice interesting and ran to his computer to research amethyst as an anti-alcohol prevention. Their earlier tension was forgotten and Annabel was too

worried about Tim's accusation that she'd gained weight to have nightmares. She didn't want to be fat. Her clothes wouldn't fit if she were fat.

But now there was a bird in the building, Tim's building, and Tim himself. The rain was pouring down, creating a waterfall off the eaves and splashing back up off the sidewalk and even under the protection of the porch it was heavily misting her. Her hair was going to be a frizzy mess and her shoes were surely ruined. She studied the soggy, ox-blood colored leather.

"What are you doing?" Tim was standing in the open doorway, not looking *too* annoyed. "Did you let in that bird?"

"I didn't mean to. It attacked me." She stayed outside, although he moved aside and waved her in. "Its bad luck, a bird in the house."

He pulled his head back, frowned. "That's peacocks. A peacock feather or something like that. It's a superstition."

Annabel thought this was perfect. She walked in the doorway he continued to hold open for her. "Why would a peacock be in the house?"

"I don't know, Annabel. That's why it's a silly superstition." He shut the door.

###

Whenever Mother had wanted to refute one of Mila's arguments she'd call them 'superstition.' Throwing spilled salt over the shoulder, sitting down briefly before leaving the house, becoming hysterical if a bird got in, all of these were labeled superstitions by Mother and mocked. The blessing of a sneeze was a useful social nicety and Mother, always the successful saleswoman, was all for useful social niceties, so it got a pass.

Mila was equally vehement when it came to refuting Mother's attitude towards men. 'No good, worthless sponges, who want one thing only and will use you up until they've had all they want and then they'll throw you away like a used Kleenex,' was mother's frequent refrain. Mila's mouth would turn into a white line of displeasure when Mother would start on the subject of 'men.'

Mila had explained the whole birds and bees and the bleeding and how babies were made years ago when Annabel's favorite teacher became very misshapen and then left only to reappear later with a squalling baby. Annabel had not been impressed with the baby. She was interested in how the baby had been made since, it seemed, Mother had created Annabel on her own.

The next year, during a trip to Sea World, a shark had given birth despite being in a tank all by itself. The lady giving the lecture used the term 'parthenogenesis' to explain the lack of a daddy and Annabel, going by her own mother's personality, expressed her view to Mila that this explained a lot. Despite her amusement, Mila couldn't agree with Annabel's theory and she told her not to ask Mother. It would be cruel.

At thirteen and menarche, Mother seemed to see Annabel as a person. She definitely spoke more to her about men, and how and why, to avoid them. Mila's disapproval grew more overt, and the tension between them made the apartment unpleasant. Finally, after Mila openly told Mother she was a misguided bitter woman who was doing her best to warp Annabel (previously she had only implied it and muttered in Serbo-Croat) Mother decided Annabel no longer needed a nanny.

Mila seemed relieved, she'd longed to return to her home country, but Annabel was devastated and wept and demanded to be allowed to go too. She was placated with promises of a visit, later on, when she was older. The last bit of advice Mila gave her was in her native language

she'd taught to Annabel. "Remember baby, every man you meet is some mother's little boy." It sounded better when Mila said it.

###

Annabel was studying her shoes, the ox blood colored leather still soft, and she was deciding what to do. They felt disgusting on her feet, moist and slimy, but if she took them off the leather would dry up into unwearable snails of expensive Spanish cow hide. Every step was a small squish of unpleasantness and abruptly she couldn't stand it and sat down to remove them.

Her bare feet were stained red and she studied them now instead of her ruined shoes. Those she threw into the trash. She heard multiple footsteps approaching. Two of the walkers were wearing boots, the third she recognized as Tim's soft-soled moccasins. He always wore those after the floors had been polished. She dropped her eyes to her stained feet again. The skin was the exact color of spilled blood.

The moment she spied the police she was resigned or even relieved. If you forever expect bad news, it's less shocking when it eventually arrives- had always been her theory. The policemen had yet to speak before Annabel leaned abruptly back in her chair and looked at Tim to finish a conversation never started.

"I knew something was coming," she said. "It was all too normal. He was so happy. There was that damn bird. I always knew it couldn't last."

The policemen looked to Tim for advice. He shrugged. He obviously didn't know what was going on, either. It was to Tim that they told their story. Annabel sat in her white plastic

chair, her eyes on the mouth of whoever was speaking as they took turns telling the story. One red foot covered the other and her hands were folded politely in her lap as she listened.

It had been a wet morning and San Diegans drove in it the way they always did, too fast and over confident, the larger policeman told them. A woman's car stalled and John stopped to help her move the vehicle to the side of the road. A big truck had taken the corner too quickly, hydroplaned and slammed sideways into John's car shoving it into the other car's rear. John pushed the woman onto the verge as he was crushed between the two cars. She had some injuries, but would live. John's death was instant and he most likely felt no pain.

The taller policeman, he who had walked in with the slight limp, was the one to finish the story and as he fell silent they all waited. They looked at her and Annabel knew something was expected of her at this point. But what was it?

She wanted to ask Tim, what do they expect from me? What am I to do now? But she couldn't look at him. These men, (*she didn't like the boots they were wearing*) they were telling her it was all over and done with. They told her John was dead. She appreciated the use of the word 'dead.' It was a plain, honest word; one she could understand, one that apparently needed a response from her. She opened her mouth, realized she wasn't ready, and closed it again. She dropped her eyes back to her stained feet.

'John is dead,' she told her feet. 'He is never coming home.' She felt a prickling sensation behind her nose and at the back of her throat. 'They think he didn't feel anything. Maybe that's what they tell everyone. He saw enough to save someone else, so he saw enough to feel it.'

Annabel realized that the policemen had never known John and so they wouldn't know that John felt everything. John felt pity for the lady with the stalled car. John felt obliged to help

her when no one else did. John probably felt bad for the driver of the truck that hit him and the weight of guilt the driver would carry for John's death. At the last, John would feel for Annabel, left alone without him.

Finally, Annabel showed an emotion the policemen felt qualified to deal with. The two men patted and attempted to console her as she slumped over in her chair, hands covering her face, weeping. She still knew when Tim left the room, however. She felt it.

###

Tim was sitting in his office. He had just left a message asking John's mother to phone him, when the taller policeman knocked on the doorframe. Tim waved him in, not trusting his voice. The man placed a piece of paper, some kind of form, on the desk. Tim didn't touch it.

"She asked me to give this to you," he said. "She asked us to pass her a box of tissues and to please leave her alone. My partner is waiting in the car. Mrs. Nash is an odd one. Is there anyone we can call?"

Tim shook his head, not able to speak. He was aware that the man didn't know he'd uttered the thought about Annabel's oddness aloud. She had that effect on people.

"Would you like to talk to a grief counselor? I could send one over," the policeman went on, determined to do his job.

Tim made a noise that might have been a laugh half an hour ago. The man winced. "I guess you know a few of those yourself, huh?"

Tim nodded and regained the ability to speak. "Thank you for coming. I can handle it from here."

The policeman, his nametag read 'Decker,' looked skeptical of Tim's ability to handle anything. Tim caught glimpses of himself in the mirror behind the policeman's shoulder. He was the color of beef fat and just as waxy. He did not realize the phone was off the hook, in his hand, making horrible noises until Decker pointed at it and Tim placed it back where it belonged.

"We offered to drive Mrs. Nash home, but she said she can't go because she doesn't have any shoes and her car is missing and if she has to tell Mr. Presbytery why she is home early it will make it real." Decker was reading from a little notebook, he had recorded Annabel's words verbatim. "I really recommend you let us call in someone for you and Mrs. Nash."

Every time he heard 'Mrs. Nash' Tim thought of John's mother, something he preferred not to do. He couldn't think of Annabel that way. He wasn't even sure Annabel had ever taken John's name. It had been hard enough hearing that woman's voice on the answering machine and to know he'd have to talk to her when she finally called back. Tim wondered if she'd even show up to the funeral (because Tim was going to throw John a hell of a funeral, damn whatever ideas Annabel might have). If Mrs. Nash did show up, Tim would make sure Annabel knew exactly what kind of mother that woman had been and then he'd leave them alone together in a locked room.

Decker coughed politely. "She had stopped crying and said she was fine, but..." he stopped because Annabel was standing in the doorway. She walked silently on her bare feet.

"I am not talking to anyone and I am not going home." Decker moved aside as she drifted into the room to lean against the wall.

"You can't go home," Tim said and he knew that he said it coldly. "We have plans to make. A lot of work to do."

Annabel looked relieved and at the same moment, she began to cry again. It was not the body shaking sobs, but a steady slow stream of tears down her face. She wiped them off and stared at her wet hands. She looked confused.

Decker looked back and forth between them. “All the information is on that form and here is my card.” He placed it on the desk next to the first form before backing out the door.

“Thank you,” Tim said and noticed the limp again. “And thank you for your service.”

He immediately turned to Annabel, leaning against the wall. “Sit down Annabel. We are going to give John the party you wouldn’t let him have before.”

Annabel didn’t respond, but her tears stopped. She sat down and they got to work.

###

The morning of the funeral Tim was sitting alone in the chosen parlor, the largest one, for John had many friends, when he heard the front door open, and Annabel walk in. He knew it was Annabel because of the usual clicking and who else would be here at this hour? But mostly he knew it was her because he wanted it to be her. She came directly to the room where he waited, shoved open the pocket door, and stepped inside. She had an insulated cup in her hand, the paper tag of a tea bag dangling from the lid. She never glanced at the casket in the corner. Tim was sitting with John one last time.

Annabel had on a black dress, something that absorbed light so the details were hard to see. It covered her knees and elbows, but was a little low-cut; if it weren’t for the neckline she’d look like one of the Orthodox Jewish ladies who lived nearby. They didn’t use his professional services, of course, they had their own, but he always admired them in town. Their modest outfits reminded him of his mother.

Annabel's heels were so high and sharp she looked balanced on black needles. Tim bet she'd manage half an hour on those things. He raised his eyes to her face and lowered his estimation. She wouldn't last fifteen minutes.

She was green-white, like expensive cheese, no make-up, and her eyes swollen and puffy with black circles underneath, the lids lined with red. The skin of her lips appeared grated and was dotted with blood. The way she stood trembling reminded Tim of his grandmother's ancient, inbred poodle. It was awful.

Annabel sat her cup on the entry table, automatically straightening the sign-in book and smoothing the tablecloth. She sat down, then immediately stood up. She moved closer to where he sat. She sat down beside him and got up again. She did not look at the casket. She walked away to lean against the wall.

"I should have let him knock me up," Annabel said. "All he wanted was a baby and now there'd be a piece of him around. Why didn't I let him?"

"I thought you *were* trying," Tim was uncomfortably interested. "He said you went to the doctor."

"To make sure I didn't get pregnant." Annabel slid down the wall to sit on the floor. She removed the needle-heeled shoes, rubbed her feet, put them back on. "I didn't tell him that part." Annabel raised blood-shot eyes, looking for his judgment.

Tim couldn't bring himself to regard her harshly, however much she seemed to want it. She stood up, but then went still, waiting for him to speak. A baby was the last thing their train wreck had needed, no matter how nice a remainder of John would have been. Tim tried to

imagine Annabel with a fat mini-John on her hip right now, but her stilettos kept getting in the way.

“That cat you guys adopted died,” he reminded her finally.

“It got ran over,” Annabel said. “We wouldn’t have let a baby crawl into the road.” Nevertheless, she looked satisfied. Then her mouth twisted and she cried. The sobs sounded painful, like dry heaves from the eyes and lungs.

Tim took her arm and pulled her out of the parlor and to the ladies’ room. There was a sofa there and he pushed her down, swung her legs up, and removed her shoes. He placed a tissue box on the floor by her pillowed head and left her there. He took her shoes with him. They looked like possible weapons.

Tim resented Annabel’s emotion. He had since the tears started the day they were informed. He resented her forcing him to care for her. Why hadn’t she showed some of this to John? He would have been ecstatic. Tim resented the unfairness of it; he loved John more than she ever had. He should be the one on the sofa. Maybe that was it? She’d never loved John enough so her guilt was greater?

Tim had to stop thinking like this. People were arriving and he still held Annabel’s shoes. He saw Pei-Hua studying them, knowing to whom they belonged. He put them in the bottom drawer of Annabel’s desk, she’d never find them there. When he went back to the vestibule, it was full as people made their way through to the parlor. Pei-Hua was standing with three scrawny blondes, looking surprised. Tim understood why when he recognized Annabel’s ‘Turncoat Bitches.’ He didn’t know whether it was kind or galling for them to be present. He was doubly glad he’d removed Annabel’s shoes.

The CEO of John's museum walked in accompanied by his nemesis, the CFO of the museum. There was a flutter of excitement among the blondes as they joined them. Pei-Hua sidled away, Tim liked her the more for it. She bumped into an old man who apologized gallantly. Mr. Presbytery, without his cardigan, looked a little like Thurston Howell, the Third as he introduced himself to Pei-Hua. She blushed as Mr. Presbytery offered to escort her to a seat. Tim tried to smile.

From the back, Jesus and Moses came in with their wives. They hugged Tim, all of them, one by one, the wives kissing him on the cheek. He had to excuse himself for a moment. He used the Ladies' room in order to check on Annabel at the same time. She was sobbed out and asleep, her hands fisted between her chin and her breast. He covered her with a fluffy white towel and left again.

In the hallway he bumped into a man who shook his hand and offered condolences. The man was only vaguely familiar until he walked away and Tim recognized the limp. It was Decker, the policeman who'd delivered the news.

People were taking their seats and things were about to get started. Three stewardesses rushed in and sat down, their matching polyester uniforms setting them apart. Tim found this strange, but Pei-Hua said hesitantly as she approached, "They were his downstairs neighbors." Then she started to cry.

He helped her to the bathroom door and before he left, asked her to wake Annabel and bring her. The service would begin soon. Pei-Hua chased him down before he got too far. "Annabel can't come. She's puking."

Tim went back, sending Pei-Hua into the parlor, her tears dried with rage. John always underestimated Pei-Hua's hostility to Annabel. Annabel was sitting on the floor in an open stall, her arm draped over the raised toilet seat.

"You really don't want to be here," she said into the bowl.

"That's true," Tim agreed. He reached around to wipe her face with a handful of toilet paper before ducking out for a wet washcloth.

She took it from him and scrubbed up thoroughly, but promptly ruined the job by vomiting again. She blew her nose on the paper he handed her and flushed it. "I'll give Mona this," she said, her voice muffled by the washcloth, "she's a hell of a cleaner."

"That guy, Reverend, whatever," Pei-Hua stammered from the doorway, "he wants to know if he should wait."

Tim turned to face her without rising from his squat while Annabel leaned in over the bowl, hunching her shoulders, as if for protection.

"He said he could play music..." Pei-Hua started when they didn't answer her.

"No music!" Annabel coughed out.

Tim didn't look at Annabel, but he didn't stand up from his position behind her either. "She doesn't want music..." He started, addressing Pei-Hua.

"It's just noise! Noise when people are sad." Annabel started to cry again.

Tim and Pei-Hua sighed in unison and Pei-Hua blushed.

"Tell him just to start, okay?" Tim looked at his wristwatch before reaching around to wipe the hair from Annabel's sticky-wet eyes. "We'll be in soon."

When he looked up, Pei-Hua was gone.

Annabel's heaving and crying let up enough for them to catch the last few minutes of the service. They sat at the back. The metal trashcan at Annabel's feet, in case of accident, was barely noticeable behind her matte black skirt.

###

Annabel would have fled the moment the service ended, but she stood too quickly, and her head spun. Tim and a strange man helped her back into her seat and she didn't know where she could have possibly escaped to anyway.

Tim shoved some tissues into her hand, for she was leaking again, and she would have thanked him, thanked him for everything, but he'd moved away to join the exodus. Annabel was grateful she looked so God-awful (the ladies' room was dim, but not dim enough) that people left her alone. She saw Jennifer, Brittney, and Heather sucking up to the CEO and CFO by the door and felt another wave of nausea hit her. They saw her, too, and had the grace to look away.

Annabel closed her eyes for a moment before realizing that the stranger who had helped her into her seat was still there, now sitting next to her. She opened her eyes to study him. "You're the policeman." She smiled, but her chewed bottom lip cracked open. "Is this part of your job?"

"No," said Decker, handing her another tissue. "Your husband seemed like a good guy, saving that woman the way he did. I thought I'd pay my respects. That's the lady's family over there." And he pointed discreetly at a middle-aged man and a teenaged boy taking a card at the door.

They looked like normal people, happy their wife and mother was alive, sad her savior was dead. Annabel couldn't summon much interest in them. They were waiting to shake Tim's hand, like everyone else preferring to avoid Annabel. She sucked the blood from her cracked lip. "What was your name again?"

"Jonah Decker." He didn't look offended. Maybe his name was usually forgotten. "Everyone calls me Decker."

"Nobody calls me Mrs. Nash," Annabel replied. "Apparently John's mother is a drugged-up psychotic bitch."

"It happens."

Annabel found Decker easy to sit with and said so. He nodded in thanks or agreement or both. "She didn't come to the funeral. Tim was relieved but he never thought she actually would. I could tell. He talked to her. I didn't- I never have. John didn't want me to. I should have been curious about that. I should have been a lot of things."

The room was emptying as people made their way to where refreshments had been laid out by someone other than Annabel. There would be no graveside service. Annabel thought it gruesome and Tim couldn't stand the idea of throwing dirt on the casket containing John. After the coffee and cookies it would be over. If some of the attendees wanted to go and drink in John's memory- that was their business. Annabel had found herself in unexpected accord with Tim in wishing to be left in peace with their grief.

They didn't want to be with each other, they didn't want to be alone, but they really didn't want to be with anyone else. They'd had a brief hostile discussion about this in Tim's office the day of John's death. Annabel had only gone home finally because Tim drove her to the

apartment where Mr. Presbytery was waiting with a pot of hot tea and canned chicken soup. Tim must have called him. Annabel hadn't the energy to ask, she was only grateful she didn't have to say the words- John is dead- out loud. She hadn't asked Tim for a ride home, either. He'd steered her into his truck, as if he knew. Annabel no longer owned a car.

Decker stretched out a leg, but didn't seem impatient, just uncomfortable.

"What's up with the limp?" Annabel asked.

"Got shot." Decker didn't seem to mind the personal question, either.

"By a criminal?"

"Desert Storm, but it was friendly fire, so no medal for me." Decker smiled in a wry way. Maybe he was embarrassed, Annabel couldn't tell.

"Which side were you on?" She asked.

"The United States?" Decker said and it went up like a question, as if he was questioning her state of mind, not his side of the war.

"Oh, right. Sorry." Annabel was too tired to be embarrassed.

"When was the last time you slept?"

Annabel thought about it. "Before...you know. So that's what? Three days, two nights? It's okay. I'll sleep later."

Pei-Hua walked into the room, not willingly judging by the expression on her face. She handed Annabel a glass of milk and a cookie on a napkin. She glared at Annabel, who ignored her, and then at Decker, who frowned in return. "Do you want some too?" Pei-Hua asked with reluctant courtesy. "Tim asked me to bring it."

“No thank you, I’m fine.” Decker barely got the words out before she marched off. “Friend of yours?” He asked Annabel.

Annabel, dipping half a cookie into her glass, was startled into a laugh. The milk jostled and splashed over her hand. It was a terrible sounding laugh, but it was genuine. “Yeah, right. Best buddies.”

Decker laughed as well and Mr. Presbytery poked his head through the doorway. He studied the man sitting sprawled in the chair next to a milk-covered Annabel before leaving. He returned moments later with a handful of napkins and an entire plate of cookies and tiny crust less sandwiches.

“Your husband’s friend said you’d been ill all morning, dear.” Mr. Presbytery frowned at Decker. “Why don’t you eat these and I’ll take you home?”

Annabel shuddered. “I don’t think I can eat anymore. Mr. Presbytery, this is the policeman who informed us about John.” Annabel struggled for a moment before going on. “Mr. Decker, this is my friend and landlord, Mr. Presbytery.”

Discovering Decker was a respectable public servant melted Mr. P’s ire and he shook hands politely. Annabel was firm in her convictions so Mr. Presbytery patted her shoulder, offered his condolences and left. Mrs. Presbytery was never mentioned.

Annabel ate the ginger cookies on the plate Decker offered, but refused the sandwiches. “Those are fish paste and the nastiest things on the planet. I think Tim only orders them to torment me.”

When the cookies and milk were gone, she asked him to peek out and see if they could make it back to the Ladies' room without interference. He complied and reported back that the people hadn't left yet. Everyone seemed to be sticking around. Tim could throw quite a party.

"Yes." Annabel was disgruntled. "He is an excellent host."

"Do you need to use the facilities?"

Annabel laughed. "Now that sounded like a cop. No, I thought you might be more comfortable on the couch in there."

Decker put the plate on another chair. "You want me to sit with you on a couch in the woman's bathroom?"

"You make it sound weird. The only other comfortable seating area is the intake parlor, which is crawling with John's friends. I would rather avoid them. You are the first person besides Tim I can stand being around right now and frankly, he can't stand me right now or ever, come to think of it, so I am trying to hang on to you. Sorry."

"You don't usually talk this much, do you?" Decker asked conversationally.

Without warning, Annabel felt her head fall to his shoulder as she began to cry. He sat there and waited, making no objections, until Tim walked into the room. Decker spoke to him, Annabel couldn't.

"She wanted to go back to the couch."

Tim picked her up. Decker followed him. People's conversations stopped. Heads turned, but after all, it was her husband's funeral. They were a newly married couple, that nice limping policeman was helping so the watchers didn't have to. Annabel wasn't anyone they'd ever be able

to get to know, even for the sake of John, whom they'd loved. They turned back to their interrupted visits. The two men made it to the Ladies' room without any further talk of their own. Tim put her on the couch, Decker covered her with the towel. Annabel grabbed Tim's hand when he turned to leave.

“Annabel, I have to be the host. You are in here. I don't have the luxury of falling apart.”

Is that what I have? Annabel's tears stopped. She felt Decker pat her consolingly on the shoulder, but she couldn't respond. She was too busy indulging in *the luxury of falling apart*.

This wasn't grief, she knew that. Oh, grief was mixed in there somewhere, but this was something else feeding off the grief. She'd known grief when she found out her mother was dead. She felt true grief when Mila left her. What she was feeling now was a savage, cannibal monster in comparison to an honest, heart breaking grief. Annabel was afraid she had no heart to break.

She sat up on the sofa. Decker sat down next to her, stretching out his leg. Annabel ignored him and leaned over to put her covered face in her lap. Decker patted her shoulder again, gently, tentatively. Annabel started to rock.

“You look like you're praying,” Decker said. “Do you want me to leave?”

He stopped patting her. Annabel sat up and took her hands from her face. She didn't want him to leave.

“This *is* grief. It is. I'll miss him,” she insisted. “It is all my fault.”

Decker returned her look calmly, but a little too calmly. Annabel could see that he wore his poker face. Didn't all cops play poker? Maybe she better explain.

“It’s all my fault because I never loved him like he wanted. I loved him like he loved computers. I loved him like Jesus loves the hearse. But I didn’t love him in the right way, like you’re supposed to.” She tried to smile to show him that she was done, that she was okay, but her lip cracked open again. Decker’s poker face was gone.

###

When Annabel let go of Tim’s hand, he left. He made a few circuits of the room. Seeing that the food and drink was going, maybe the people would too. All the time he shook hands, exchanged sympathies, and offered tissues, he felt badly for his treatment of Annabel. She hadn’t wanted to be left alone, and he’d rejected her in front of that cop. He didn’t want to hurt her further.

When he went back to check on her, they were gone. Jesus’ wife Marta reported Annabel and the ‘nice police’ had left through the back. Marta was a little worried because Annabel was barefoot, but surely she was safe in a policeman’s hands? Tim wondered himself. He wondered how safe the ‘nice police’ was in Annabel’s hands.

That was unkind, he told himself. Unkind and unfair. Hmm, it was definitely unkind anyway. Tim wondered how safe he was going to be now that John was *dead*. Annabel insisted he used the actual word and for that he didn’t blame her. In this one area at least, he didn’t blame her. Euphemisms like ‘gone’ or ‘passed’ made his teeth hurt. He understood how Annabel felt, she needed to hear the truth to accept that it was real.

He made her view the body. That was god-awful, but once John’s body was cleaned up and presentable, he took Annabel by the elbow and they viewed the body together. He thought she’d fight him about it, after all she’d shaken her head so violently when he’d first suggested it that the tears had flown off her wet cheeks, but then she’d calmed down and agreed.

Obviously, John wasn't her first dead body, but Tim had expected something, some reaction. She'd last seen this body, warm and breathing, sprawled out in their shared bed. She told him about it as they walked together and he really wished she hadn't (who was torturing whom, here?) but viewing the body was a healthy psychological practice, his training had taught him, and God knew that Annabel could use all the healthy psychological practice available.

And yes, there was a part of Tim that wanted her to look at the body (*John's body*) and lose her shit. Look at what they had lost- the both of them- and he wanted her to wail and throw herself into his arms so that he could push her away. Except that he wouldn't. He recognized this, he'd always known. It was part of his problem, Tim knew.

He wanted his best friend's wife and he resented her for it and he resented his best friend for dying and leaving the way clear for Tim to act on his desire. Tim had always been the good guy. He would never have acted while John was alive. But John was dead, there was the body to prove it, and Tim didn't know who he was without John. Without John was Tim no longer the good guy? No longer required to play by the good guy rules?

Everything was wide open and it made Tim nervous. Did wide open spaces protect predator or prey? Tim couldn't remember so he went back to cleaning up other people's messes and putting his business back in order. If people noticed the hard look on his face and his red eyes and gave him his space, well, all the better. It was safer for everyone if they left him alone. Safer that Annabel had left, damn her anyway.

Chapter Seven

Annabel had been alone before, it was not new to her, but that was before John. Being married to John, living with John, she got used to the companionship. He could be annoying as hell, but he was there. Once he had coerced his way into her life they never spent a night apart and, despite everything else she might have felt, Annabel appreciated that.

John may have been the most manipulative little nebbish she ever met, (she felt a major twinge of guilt, her new companion, for admitting this) but he was there to wake her from her nightmares. He didn't let her slip into her sadness. He fed her when she was cranky and took her shopping when he didn't know what else to do to fix her.

Annabel couldn't explain the sadness to him. Someone would need to explain it to her first. It was always there, threatening to pull her down, and now that John was gone- she was terrified. She could admit it. Without her husband, who was there to stop her from going under?

While Decker was driving her home, she was plotting ways to make him stay. She recognized this as desperation, not to mention really bad form, the day of her husband's funeral. But even her newly developed sense of guilt couldn't stand in her way. Self-preservation would win over guilt or propriety every time, of that Annabel was certain. It wasn't about sex, even. It was pity. Decker felt sorry for the poor widow, and she fully intended to use that to her advantage. Who was she hurting?

Then his phone rang and he spoke to his wife and another new emotion hit Annabel. What if she was that wife, sitting at home while her husband was driving another woman around town? Annabel put herself in Mrs. Decker's shoes, which were probably ugly but comfortable loafers, and she didn't like it there. Was this empathy? Empathy sucked. Annabel had been with

married men before, and the boyfriends of other girls, and she hadn't felt one thing. After all, she wasn't the cheater, they were.

But now Annabel was a wife. Even if her marriage was a strange mess, it was hers. She built it with John. She hadn't liked John spending so much time with Pei-Hua, really. She never said anything because she wouldn't give either of them the satisfaction, but having felt that, well, it changed things. It changed Annabel. She guessed she was going to have to change her habits. It was a very inconvenient time to grow a conscience. Annabel sighed.

At her apartment, she thanked Decker politely and sent him on his way. There was always Mr. Presbytery. And he was waiting. He made her a pot of tea and another of soup and put a shawl around her shoulders. The whole time he spoke soothingly to her, like she was a stray cat. For the first time, Annabel found his attentions creepy.

###

Annabel adroitly got rid of Mr. Presbytery as soon as politeness would allow, citing Mrs. P's need of him. He wasn't ready to defy either woman so after one last hug, he scuttled off. Annabel waited until she was sure he was gone before she checked the mail. She had a stack of cards, a few notices from insurance companies, and a florist's vase of lilies leaning against the mailbox. It said 'Mrs. Nash' on the card, but she brought it inside anyway. She had never taken John's name, but obviously no one cared.

Before she made it back to her door another florist's van pulled up. The teenager offered to carry the vases and potted plant up to her apartment, "Your arms are full and you look..."

"Like hell?" Annabel supplied.

"Sad," the boy replied.

Annabel propped her door open in case of more deliveries and left the vases of lilies, carnations, and the one inexplicable Boston fern on the floor of the hallway. Tim had listed ‘The Children’s Defense Fund’ as needing donations in lieu of flowers. Annabel didn’t know the charity, but it sounded good to her. Maybe these flowers were from people who hadn’t read the notice. Or thought she needed flowers. Stinky, messy flowers.

She collected the little cards and added them to the unopened pile of mail on the kitchen table. When she returned there was another boy depositing another plant by the door. Annabel waved in thanks and went to answer the phone.

People, John’s friends were all generic ‘people’ to Annabel, called all day and it was like the afternoon when Decker told her John was dead. They wanted something from her, but she didn’t understand what. She didn’t know most of these people. She didn’t know what their sorrow had to do with her. It was exhausting and finally, she stopped answering the phone.

It was dark outside and she locked the door. She turned on every light and drew all the shades and then the curtains. She made another pot of tea and read the return addresses on the mail on the table. She left everything where it lay and went to draw a bath. It was going to be a long night.

###

The morning brought more deliveries and Annabel, already sleep deprived and headachy, couldn’t stand the smell any longer. She called Pei-Hua, who wasn’t any friendlier over the phone. Mostly she just sounded confused, though, not openly hostile.

“Annabel?” She said, “Like *Annabel*, Annabel?”

“Yes,” Annabel sighed into the phone. “Good morning. What’s the name of that home where you keep your grandmother?”

“I don’t keep her there,” Pei-Hua shot back. “She lives there. It’s not a kennel.”

“Fine.” Annabel felt she showed admirable patience not reaching through the phone and strangling Pei-Hua with the cord. “Where does she live? And do you still drive that panel van?”

Annabel didn’t add ‘like a weirdo’ to the end of the sentence, but her tone implied it. Pei-Hua must have heard it because she was quiet long enough for Annabel to lose all control. “I need you to come collect all these flowers for John and take them to that old people’s place.” Annabel knew she was snapping, but couldn’t stop it. Pei-Hua was so irritating. “That’s what Tim does with leftover flowers at the mortuary. He takes them to a nearby home.”

“So call him.”

“I’m calling *you*,” Annabel replied. “You are John’s other best friend. Didn’t he go visit that Grandma with you? Just take her the damn flowers!”

Annabel was enraged when she burst into tears again. Would this never stop? She ran the fingers of one hand roughly over her face, trying to rub the tears out of her head. One good thing about the sobbing, Pei-Hua stopped arguing and after a moment said a quiet, “okay,” and hung up.

Pei-Hua arrived sooner than Annabel expected. She barely had time to try and cover with make-up the mess that was her face before Pei-Hua was knocking on the door. It unlocked and Mr. Presbytery was revealed, master key in hand, Pei-Hua peeping over his shoulder. Annabel stared at them both from the gloom of the hallway.

“She was worried about you,” Mr. Presbytery explained. The look on Pei-Hua’s face said otherwise. They walked in uninvited.

“I can’t see anything,” Pei-Hua kicked over a vase as if to emphasize. “Let in some daylight, for Pete’s sake!”

Silently, Annabel obliged as Mr. Presbytery and Pei-Hua began carrying flowers out. Annabel rescued the Boston fern. It was a bit of a monstrosity. She rather liked it. She didn’t recognize the name on the accompanying card and she showed it to Pei-Hua when she came in for more vases.

“Wronski?” Pei-Hua thought, frowning. “Oh, Dave the projectionist. You know him.”

Annabel gave a snort of laughter that transformed into a sob partway out of her nose. She grabbed a kitchen towel to cover the snotty result.

“For Pete’s sake!” Pei-Hua yelled again and then looked like she felt remotely bad about it. “Stop crying and get your shoes.”

“Why?” Annabel stopped crying.

Mr. Presbytery put down the vase of mixed lilies and ornamental cabbage he was holding and left. The recluse next door had been hailing him about a running toilet the entire time Mr. Presbytery was schlepping plants. Annabel, used to Mr. P’s preferential treatment, ignored the noise. Pei-Hua kept glancing over her shoulder toward the source and seemed relieved when Mr. Presbytery finally made it stop.

“You’re coming with me,” Pei-Hua explained. “I’d have to make like eight trips by myself.”

“I don’t know your grandmother,” Annabel said. She picked up the vase of lilies and cabbage, toying with the notion of keeping it. Someone put cabbage in a flower arrangement, she just liked the idea of it.

“So what?” Pei-Hua tugged the vase away from her. “You’re not paying a visit. You’re delivering flowers. I’m doing you a favor here. Haven’t you ever heard of meeting someone halfway?”

Annabel let her take the lilies and went to find a pair of shoes. She chose her pink satin kitten heels and heard Pei-Hua mutter something that sounded suspiciously like ‘jerk.’ Grabbing a pot of bronze and yellow mums, she followed the other girl out. She didn’t bother to lock the door knowing either Mr. Presbytery would lock it for her or he’d simply wait there until she returned.

###

“Grandma liked you,” Pei-Hua said, but she sounded like she begrudged it.

“Some people do,” Annabel commented, studying the dirty soles of her bare feet. She’d given her pink satin shoes to Pei-Hua’s wheelchair bound grandmother. The age shrunken woman wore the same size and loved the shiny satin. Annabel assured her they went very well with her flowered housecoat. The look of disapproval on Pei-Hua’s face was an added bonus.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” said Pei-Hua, although she thought she probably had.

“She said she liked John,” Annabel replied. She managed to avoid all the work of bringing plants inside and placed in the various rooms by sitting and visiting with Pei-Hua’s grandmother and mostly talking about 1950’s fashion. “Your grandmother told me she liked him a lot.”

“He fixed things for her,” Pei-Hua said. “Adjusted the speakers on her stereo, changed the needle on the record player. She called him ‘that nice boy.’ She made him nervous, though. He wasn’t good with family.”

“Did you ever meet his?”

“I talked with his mother once when she called him at work,” Pei-Hua hesitated. “She sounded stoned. She asked him for money.”

“Bitch,” Annabel said viciously and then, “Not you,” when Pei-Hua looked at her sideways.

“I’m not good with people,” Annabel announced, thinking back to John.

“You work in the service industry.” Pei-Hua wasn’t disagreeing with Annabel’s statement, merely pointing out the irony.

“I’m good at faking,” Annabel replied.

“Not really,” Pei-Hua was arguing now, not gently. “Not the way you think you are. We all just cut you slack for John’s sake.”

Annabel turned to face her, looking very much like she’d enjoy hitting Pei-Hua. Pei-Hua braced herself, both hands on the steering wheel.

“John loved you so much, you jerk,” Pei-Hua said. “He made us see you through his eyes.”

Annabel’s pique dissolved. She dropped her dirty, naked feet to the floor of the van and turned her face to the window. “Whatever,” she whispered. “Just drive me home, okay?”

She brushed her shoulder against her cheek, as if she wanted Pei-Hua not to see the tears that freely ran again. Pei-Hua obliged her.

###

When Pei-Hua dropped Annabel off the door was closed, but not locked. Mr. Presbytery had cleaned. The debris and spilled water were gone from the hallway. He had also left things out so Annabel could make tea. A container of her favorite gingersnaps sat next to the kettle. Annabel was glad Mr. P hadn't waited for her, she wanted to take a nap. Maybe sleeping in the daylight would stop the dreams.

Daylight didn't stop the dreams. She was dumb to think it would. And very tired and now scared and sad. Annabel wanted some comfort so she went and looked at her shoes. She pulled them all out of the closet and lined them up, pair by pair, down the length of the hallway.

When her closet was empty of shoes, Annabel could see the previously hidden boxes stacked on the shelf above her head. Her name was printed neatly on them in her mother's handwriting. There was no way in hell Annabel was prepared to deal with those boxes so she closed the door and went into the living room. John's computer sat on its altar-like desk in all its techno-plastic glory and Annabel sat before it for the first time.

"Let's see what he had going on here," Annabel muttered. "Let's stalk him, see how he likes it."

There were no passwords, nothing protected. His desktop was an open door, it was like his sleeping position- sprawled out and overly trusting. Clicking through the files Annabel found Budgets, Insurance, Cars, and Annabel. Being Annabel, she opened that one first, but it was

nothing spectacular. Her social security information was there, all her vital statistics. John had a tidy mind, she acknowledged.

Then she saw a file titled only with a date. When Annabel realized what the date signified, and it took her a moment because it predated her meeting John by a good ten years, her heart felt seized by a fist. Her spine tingled and all the hair stood up on the back of her neck. She opened the file and started reading. Some of the documents (where *the hell* had he'd gotten them?), especially the photographs, made her start crying again. Enthralled, Annabel didn't even notice the emotion until her sleeve was soaked from wiping her face dry.

Annabel picked up the phone, then she realized everyone she wanted to talk to- her mother, Mila, John, and ...and- they were all dead. Annabel put down the phone, went on reading for a while, and then decided to take another bath. She had two weeks off from work, Tim had told her. Annabel didn't believe she was going to make it.

###

She never drew her bath. Walking down the hall she tripped over a pair of bronze leather strappy high heels and remembered the boxes in the now shoeless closet. She read John's secret stash and survived. She was stronger than she thought. Surely her mother's boxes of god-only-knows-what couldn't be any more painful. Everyone was dead. She wanted her mother. There was a box with her mother's handwriting on it, waiting for her. It was all she had. Whatever was in those boxes was literally all that was left.

The tape had lost its stick and she was able to pull it away with her hands. The dry box crackled as she lifted the flaps and ten years of accumulated dust puffed in her face. Annabel sneezed and sat down on the floor of the closet. It was too dark to see the contents of the box, so

she stood back up to jerk the light's chain and then plopped down. She sneezed again, the fine spray now visible in the dust-mote filled light.

It was just paper. Paperwork, deeds, and address books and birth certificates and passport information. In her hurry to dig through it, to find the secret treasure that her mother had surely left her, Annabel missed the thick, creamy legal envelope the first time. She dug through the second, just as disappointing, box before returning to the first. During another frantic look through the first box, she finally spied what she had been seeking. It was stuck on the glue strip of an unsealed 10 x 13 manila envelope containing Xeroxes of Mila's passport and visa. Also stuck on the glue strip was a long, curly, black hair gone brittle with age. Annabel knocked the contents of a smaller envelope out into the box- it looked like a thank you note for her mother's years of service- and carefully coiled the hair inside.

The creamy legal envelope with her name on it was so clearly what she had been looking for, she hesitated. She shut the flaps on the box, folding them in on themselves to close and crawled out of the closet, envelope clenched in her fist. In the kitchen, the light had gone, and the windows were once more mirrors. Annabel closed the blinds, made a pot of tea and watered her plants. She discovered the Boston fern needed to be repotted. All the time, the fat, smooth letter, her name written in her mother's hand, was waiting for her on the kitchen table. Annabel ate an entire box of gingersnap cookies before she finally slit open the envelope and began to read.

###

Dear Annabel,

With no way of knowing when you'll return or what condition I'll be in when you get here, the doctors and lawyer (I almost wrote Indian chief because the morphine makes me silly) advised me to tell you what I need you to know. This is difficult for me because I've always thought it was

better for you not to know much- not about me or my family or your father anyway. And I knew that you wanted to know.

You were a good, obedient child. You never asked me for details when I said my family was lost, but it often worried me, your good behavior. I was a good girl, too, at first- in the beginning. There was no other option in the family and community in which I was raised. When I stopped being a good girl, when I tried saying 'no,' when I tried for a little autonomy (and okay, yes, I was trying other things also- boys and alcohol and drugs not nearly as powerful as morphine and sleeveless blouses) well, that was it for me in the Orthodox community. I was O-U-T and they sat S-H-I-V-A. I worked very hard to keep religion away from you. Which is another thing Mila held against me. Religion only harmed me. I wanted better for you.

You want to know about your father. Ever since you asked me about parthenogenesis after your field trip to Sea World (that did hurt my feelings, I admit) I've been wondering what to tell you. How to tell you that your father was just a guy I met in a bar during a sales convention in Elko, Nevada? I think he said his name was David, but men in bars at conventions frequently lie. Hell, men frequently lie, period. But then so do women. See? I am trying to be fair. Just in case you found Mila and brought her back with you. I hope you did. You're going to need her.

I've left you a little money, I hope you use it for schooling or a down payment on a condo or even a car, although I'm leaving you the Nash as well. If you want to use the money to bring Mila and her entire village to the U.S. that's fine, too. I hope you found her. I hope she's with you. I know you're going to need her. You've never been good at being alone. You didn't get that from me. Maybe you got that from David- or was his name Daniel? I'm sorry I can't remember. I'm sorry I wasn't a better mother. I'm sorry to go and leave you alone.

In the address book in the box are the names and addresses of my sisters and brothers. I've kept track of them mostly to avoid them, but also in case you needed them. I hope you don't. I want you to be independent and I think Mila wanted the same. We both came from cultures where we were treated like possessions. Nice possessions, valuable ones like a good Louis Vuitton suitcase, you understand, but no one wants to be a suitcase.

Mila was a better mother to you than I could ever be. I didn't know how to mother you without smothering or entrapping you. My mother practically ate her babies alive with love until we were ambulatory and then we became another chore. Once her children could walk away she lost interest, but of course she was usually pregnant again by then. The poor woman. I should feel sorry for her, but I can't bring myself to do it. She should have had the strength to get away. I did. I really hope you stay away, too. I hope you found Mila. I hope you found peace.

I wasn't a very good mother, but I did my best. I always loved you in my way. Go see the lawyer, he has all the documents and access to the money. He'll help you. Don't go see my family. They'd help you, but they'd make you pay. I'm still paying, the doctors say this cancer is genetic. You should probably look into that.

I hope you found Mila and she's reading this with you. I hope you are together. They are bringing me the methadone now so I'll have to stop. It works better than morphine, but it knocks me out. I love you.

Your mother,

Abigail Berkowitz

###

Discovering that John knew her secrets...Annabel stopped. Could she refer to her past as a secret? Could you call it a secret if you kept it so far in the back of your mind you didn't even think of it? Was it a secret if you walled it up in the deep dark and bricked it over so the only way it ever escaped was in the form of an amorphous nightmare or the sighting of an occasional ghost? Discovering that John knew was bad, it was brick-cracking, mortar-melting, nightmare-inducing bad, but finding the letter from her dying mother? Her dying mother who was still lying or prevaricating or, at least, withholding the truth. Was Annabel was supposed to believe that her father was just some guy her mother met at a convention?

Bullshit. It was bullshit. It was nonsense, it was too convenient. Annabel didn't believe it for a second. Even while dying, her mother wouldn't expose her own secrets, wouldn't crack open the door and let a little light into Annabel's origins. The selfishness of it hit Annabel in her bones.

Annabel first wondered about her father in kindergarten. Around the time another little girl asked about her two mommies (it was always another little girl who asked, little boys only cared whether you could kick a ball properly and didn't cry when life got a little rough on the field). Questions about Annabel's daddy were met with evasions, dodges, and later, as she grew older, outright hostility from Annabel's mother. Mother seemed to think Annabel's father had nothing to do with Annabel. Father remained Mother's property, her secret, even unto death.

Yes, it was nice to read that Mother loved her, worried about her, tried to provide for her, and left her information about this supposedly large clan of family (*that* was something Annabel was going to think about later, much, much later), but wasn't it just like Mother to lard this love and care and provision with a complete lack of information on the one subject Annabel had always desired to know.

Annabel wanted her mother. Unlike her wedding dinner night, Annabel didn't want her mother for comfort, she wanted her mother present, back from the dead, because she wanted to rail at her. Annabel wanted to be angry at someone who loved her enough to take her anger, understand it, and forgive her. Who was more deserving than her mother? But it was never going to happen because her mother was dead. She was dead, but it didn't matter. Annabel wanted her anyways. And in that moment Annabel felt the last of the mortar melt, the bricks crack apart, and the door open up on her deepest secret. Mother had died with her secret, Annabel was going to learn to live with her own.

Annabel looked down at her hands and she dropped the crumpled letter. Had she really traveled alone through Europe? Survived disaster? Protected others? *Protected* herself? Annabel heaved an exasperated sigh. She was angry, she was sad, she was frightened, she was...hungry. She was only prepared to deal with one of these fun facts. It was two a.m. when she sat down to eat the breakfast she had cooked. She didn't know if she was shaking with hunger or exhaustion or because all her walled defenses were gone and, for the first time in her adult life, she was completely exposed.

###

A week after the funeral Tim found Annabel sitting in his office at nine in the morning. She was dressed for work, but as she had lost weight, her suit hung on her. There were half circles under her eyes that she hadn't bothered to try and cover with make-up. Her violet suit matched the half circles. She looked more like a client than an employee. Tim backed out of the room and returned with two cups of tea. Annabel took hers with a silent nod of thanks.

"I've always appreciated your lack of curiosity," she finally said when she realized he wouldn't speak first.

“John didn’t,” he replied. “He said it was unnatural.”

She smiled into her cup, but didn’t drink. It was too hot on her chapped lips. “I can’t be home anymore. It will drive me insane. I keep expecting to hear his key in the door or to burst in with his latest project. Every time the phone rings, I swear to God, I think it’s him telling me it’s all a mistake, some sick joke that got carried too far. But it’s usually an acquaintance of his and they say they’re calling to offer condolences, but really they want me to console them and I’m sick of it.”

She paused for breath and Tim waited a beat. “This is the most you’ve ever said to me at one time. Is it going to go on for much longer?”

Hurt flashed across her face before she saw the humor on his lips and she started to smile back gingerly at him. “John was convinced we secretly hate each other,” she offered.

“Yeah,” he said and took a sip of tea. “He was continuously lecturing me on being nice to you, it was annoying. He had this idea you needed his protection.”

“Huh,” Annabel’s face was rigid for a moment as she struggled with herself. Then the moment was over. “I’m coming back to work.”

“Okay,” he shrugged. “What happened with Decker?”

“He drove me to the apartment and went home to his wife.” Annabel widened her eyes. “Why? What did you think happened?”

Tim shrugged again, but he looked relieved. Annabel would have liked to throw something at him, but his change of subject stopped her.

“A guy was here yesterday, asking for you. Wanted your home address.” His mocking attitude left no conjecture as to his response.

“A guy?” She asked, “Not a client?”

“No, some guy, one of those Ken doll types. Said he knew you.”

“Ken doll,” she muttered, drinking her now cool tea. “He knows me. I have no idea. Probably a loon. Wasn’t there something in the paper?”

“Yes, which is why I didn’t give him any information.” Tim left the room in response to an inquiring yell from a member of the cleaning staff.

“Nobody knows me,” Annabel said to the emptiness.

###

Decker telephoned once, to ‘check in.’ Annabel was sorting the papers from her mother’s boxes, making stacks on the dirty hard wood floor, sunlight turning the floating dust motes into miniature aurora borealis. She couldn’t remember when she’d last cleaned house. Normally, before the place got this filthy John would be looking mournful, wiping his running nose and itchy eyes, implying with his hang dog attitude that her neglect was killing him. *Killing him.* Annabel almost laughed but couldn’t, quite. Not that he’d ever picked up a damn dust mop himself. And now she was angry, resentful of a dead man. Oh boy. It was a relief, for once, when the phone rang and she was forced off the dusty floor and out of her wobbly thoughts.

“Hello.”

“Hello, this is Decker.” Annabel imagined she could hear his limp in his voice. He was a slow talker. “I’m just calling to check in.”

Annabel sat down on her unmade bed and it felt so good, soft and comforting (although when the hell had she last changed the sheets?), that she went ahead and collapsed entirely upon it.

“Is that part of your job?” Annabel’s own voice slowed and lengthened, now that she was supine.

There was a pause. Was he taken aback or just thinking?

“No. Not officially, but morally...”

“Oh, morally.” A moral married cop calling to ‘check in’ on her. “How does Mrs. Decker feel about that?”

The pause was twice as long this time. “She’d probably be okay with it.”

The ‘probably’ hit Annabel in the gut; this call was becoming more entertaining by the minute. “Maybe we should all get together,” Annabel threw out. “Have coffee, something like that.”

“You want to meet my wife?” That came fairly quickly.

“Sure. Why not? But would your wife want to meet me?”

“Why not?” He echoed back.

“Oh, Decker,” and Annabel inadvertently let a world of sorrow into her voice, “Wives never want to meet women like me.”

“But you were a wife,” this was pointed out in a reasonable tone, like he was starting to enjoy the argument- finding his sea legs as it were.

“Right,” Annabel agreed, adjusting the twisted sheet under her hips. “I’ve been on both sides. I know from both angles...Remember that cranky girl at the funeral?”

“With the freckles?”

“Yeah, that one. She worked with my husband, he called her his best friend- well, the other one- and they were always chatting on the phone or visiting her grandmother together. That’s just weird, right? Visiting someone else’s grandmother? Anyway, that girl has all the sex appeal of my big toe, but I was super jealous of the time John spent with her. *I was jealous of her.*”

There was a very long pause.

“Are you there?” Annabel was getting sleepy. The bed, his silent presence, she could imagine successfully sleeping if Decker would just stay on the phone. What was wrong with her? Why was she arguing for his wife’s interests, against her own? Stupid Annabel, she should be persuading him to come over, climb into this messy bed, and be her human sleeping pill.

“I’m here. So what you’re saying is my wife would be upset if she knew I was calling you?”

If she knew...there, that was the operative phrase. Annabel was sick of secrets; sick of keeping them, sick of being one. John named her his girlfriend their first night together. He was proud to call her his wife. There was no going back for Annabel. All the secrets were out of their boxes, out of the closet, laying exposed in the dusty sunlight.

“What I am saying is, while I appreciate your concern, you shouldn’t call me again. Have a nice life, Decker, and thank you.”

Annabel clicked off the phone and then got up and changed the damned bed sheets.

###

After drinking her tea in Tim's office, Annabel went to her desk, answered a few telephone inquiries, read the files of the two current clients awaiting their final ceremony, and for a good portion of the morning set staring blindly into the space in front of her. That is how Tim found her when he returned.

"He's here again," he announced flatly. "That guy. I left him on the porch."

Annabel was curious, mostly about Tim's reaction, but she made her way onto the wide veranda of the house with her usual slow walk. The Ken doll was facing the street, which wasn't rude of him, only natural as the fanciest of Tim's hearses was pulling into the driveway after a trip to the gas station. Annabel had yet to meet a man who could resist the attraction of the hearse.

Just from the back view, with his wide shoulders, narrow hips, and prominent scapula that jutted out like clipped wings, she knew him. She didn't need the sun to shine off his Renaissance angel blond hair to recognize him; but it did. She thought he was an apparition, summoned by her recently excavated reading material.

"Hey, Johnny Boy Scout," she blurted.

He turned, and in the same movement leaped forward to grab her in a bear hug, the exuberance of which lifted her off her feet. When he put her down and stepped away, self-conscious now, the way he had always been about expressing any affection for her, she realized she had tears on her face.

"Damn it," she said, sweeping the backs of her fingers across her cheeks. "Don't take this personally. My husband just died."

“I know!” he said. “That’s how I found you. There was an article about the Good Samaritan being killed and a photo of him with the grieving widow in their happier days. You’ve changed your hair, but I recognized you!”

A movement from the side of the house stopped Annabel’s smile at his inappropriate excitement and drew her attention to the fact that they had an audience. Tim had joined Jesus, as he exited the hearse, and they were openly watching the reunion. Their expressions betrayed more suspicion than sentimentality.

“Have you got a car?” She cut through Johnny’s continued explanation of his search for her. He turned to see the other men staring. Johnny waved at them. Jesus waved back, half-heartedly.

“Of course.” He turned back to point at an ostentatious yellow thing, parked at the curb.

“Of course,” she nodded in reply and dragged him toward it by the hand. “Let’s get out of here. You can take me to lunch. I’m going to lunch!” she yelled towards the watchers.

“Feeding Annabel. Just like old times.

Chapter Eight

They went to a sidewalk café in the Gaslamp Quarter. It was exactly the type of place Johnny would enjoy and she was glad enough to see him that she was willing to overlook the touristy implications. She let him talk during the drive, the walk to the café, and during the seat selection process. She remembered his compulsive need to exclaim when excited and that the best way to end it was just to let him talk himself out. It came to an end as she was removing the red onion from her spinach salad, and without either of them thinking about it, threw the unwanted vegetable onto his plate.

“I can’t believe I’m with you,” he said one last time as he popped the onion into his mouth. “It feels surreal.”

“My whole life feels surreal right now.” Annabel told him around a mouthful of salad. She stopped chewing. “Or rather, no. It has stopped feeling surreal...Happiness felt wrong to me. Or what I should have been happy about and never really was because I didn’t feel like it was really me feeling it. I don’t know. I can’t explain it. I never even tried with my husband. It would have hurt him and he definitely wouldn’t have understood. Or, at least, that’s what I thought at the time.”

Johnny had stopped talking to listen intently, but couldn’t help himself any longer. “No one does!”

He spoke in a quietly intense hush. It was the tone people use to share conspiracy theories or used at funerals to discuss the dead lying in state not two feet away. Annabel found it soothing. “You’ll never be able to explain it. I can’t. My dad made me go to a shrink and that guy certainly didn’t get it. He went from calling it culture shock to post traumatic stress, to an elaborate fantasy construction, but it wasn’t. It was the real world.”

Annabel nodded and her eyes filled with tears again. This time she didn't react angrily. "This is the elaborate fantasy construct. We were alive there and then we came home and they say this is the real world, but it's like being dead. Nothing feels real anymore."

Johnny almost glowed with the joy of being understood and he grabbed her hand that wasn't holding a fork. "Let's go back!"

"What?" The fork dropped.

"I want to go back. You said this isn't real, let's go home. This isn't our home anymore. We don't belong here. Let's go back."

"They say it's impossible to go home once you've left." The waitress brought their entrees and added to the conversation.

They looked up at the interruption, but not at her. They looked right through her. They didn't see her and, non-plussed, she retreated.

"Johnny," Annabel spoke in a gentle voice so sweetly understanding John wouldn't have recognized it and Tim could make a fortune off it. "Johnny, that's impossible. It was the time, the four of us, the background. It can't be recreated. Those people," she gestured, somehow including both of them, yet behind her as well. "Those people never left. We can't go back there, because we never left."

Johnny sat back, deflated, devastated. He had the will to argue, but no actual argument. He saw her stonewall face, but couldn't help one more plea. "But why not?" Still hoping somehow for an explanation.

She didn't have one. "We just can't." She leaned back in her black wrought iron chair, the discussion over. She put her sunglasses on.