

One

*M*y journey back to the States was a whirlwind of clouds, my thoughts torn between the grief of summer and those shaded days of autumn that were to come. I had taken the first possible flight out of Vienna after receiving the carefully penned letter from my mother. While rushing back to California under the pretence of urgency, I knew in my heart that I only longed to escape the nightmare I had found myself in beneath the shadows of the Alps. Could the beauty of the prior week on Lake Millstadt be compared to the agony of last Sunday afternoon?

Don't cry yet, Edda, I told myself, biting my lip as my eyes focused on someone's paintbrush that had rolled into the plane's center aisle. Summer is over now and autumn is here; it is all gone and nothing is left. When the pilot announced that we would be arriving in San Francisco shortly, I decided to have one last cry before reaching ground. With the restroom door locked and my restless puppy drinking from the water faucet, I allowed myself to remember it all once more, the memories marauding my fragile mind with vivid accuracy. I sobbed while staring at the dirty floor and then tried not to gag as I washed my face with cold water while Ruby watched me in the mirror, the two of us staring up into my darkened blue eyes.

Still, everything would be just as I had requested. There would be no one to meet me at the airport, and I would have plenty of time alone to think during my drive down the coast to Carmel. After an unsettling landing, I jumped up from my seat, anxious to fetch the worn leather duffel without any possible risk to the bag or its contents, the only remaining evidence of my final days in Austria. In any case, now I am starting a new life, I sought to convince myself without ceasing to guard the duffel as if it were all I owned in the world, believing that tangible memories were less likely to fade than dimming reminiscences.

Once settled in a cab, I rested my head while gripping the scarred duffel on my lap. The driver had seemed a bit baffled by my unusual attachment to the scruffy bag, though I hardly cared about his exaggerated shrug when I refused to allow him to store it. No, now I cared for little else than instant retreat from everything and everyone. Even so, there was the puppy to care for, the howling puppy that had made the same long, painful journey that I had. Taking my tiny Scottie dog from her kennel, I sighed and comforted her as I stared out the window, seeing the lake again in the reflection of the cab's window. I remembered the day Preston gave me the puppy.

"She is adorable, Preston! When did you get her?"

"This was my secret errand yesterday. She's for you."

I laughed. "For me?"

"Yeah, someone to keep you company that you can speak English to after I leave."

"Don't tell me you're leaving already!"

"Eventually, but let's not worry about that right now. Her name is Ruby."

"Ruby? Who ever heard of a Scottie dog named Ruby?"

"It's my gift and I took the liberty of naming her, so let me be. Someday when you remember me, you'll like her name. I named her Ruby after you, Edda."

"After me?"

"Yeah, for your lips."

Horns sounded and yet Ruby was fast asleep, lodged between my chest and the duffel. I longed to sleep as well but attempted to keep my eyes open out of a lack of trust for the driver's skills and, to a lesser degree, to learn the route from the city to Carmel. I had never even been to Carmel and yet, by some strange stroke of fate, there I was, living out some unformulated dream of having inherited a cottage in a coveted neighborhood on California's Central Coast. It was my mother's doing, or so I thought, though even she could not have chosen the timely date of Mrs. Bunyard's death to free up my new living arrangements just in time for me to escape my duties in Austria. Still, Mother's letter had arrived precisely when I needed it most, allowing me the pretext I needed to get out of my year-long contract as an au pair on the banks of Lake Millstadt in Austria. I could not live there anymore, not now, no matter how much I had longed for an overseas adventure. I had my fill, the best and worst days of my life now passed, or so I believed, as though the loss of my innocence was somehow already complete.

A project was precisely what I needed to consume my time as I grew accustomed to my new life. The cottage would keep me occupied enough, as I assumed it was probably vacant and in need of much care. While I did not know a soul in town, my father had already secured a decent job for me at an art gallery on Ocean Avenue as he attempted to settle me into town as painlessly as possible. Perhaps he even felt guilty about talking me out of following my dream of majoring in art in college, a decision I had come to be both grateful for and loathe. As I had packed my things in the Wieland chalet overlooking the lake, I thanked my father over the phone in a robotic fashion, not thinking, not feeling, knowing he could not imagine that for me to set foot in an art gallery now would be to smother out whatever breath still remained in my damaged lungs.

Ruby began to stir and I asked the driver to pull over to let her run about on the sand dunes off the shoulder of a sleepy road. Gazing out over the sand dunes with their tapestry of colorful flora, I still clutched the worn straps of the duffel with my trembling hands. This is home, I whispered, striving to convince myself of that which was to be, of days and years, life and breath, beauty and light. Once we reached Ocean Avenue, I handed the driver a piece of paper with scribbled directions to the cottage, explaining to him that in town the homes did not have address numbers. Only the names the owners posted on each individual cottage revealed the home's identity.

"So what's the name of your cottage?" the driver's raspy voice called back for the first time during the drive as we turned left onto Casanova.

"I'm not sure, honestly. I never even looked," I answered mindlessly, absorbed in watching tourists saunter along the immaculate road.

"Whadaya mean you don't know?" the driver shouted, breaking the car suddenly as Ruby whimpered and the duffel fell from my lap. "The girl has her own cottage in Carmel and she don't even know the name of it."

"I am sure it's written there on the sheet I gave you, so look for yourself!" I snapped.

"You know I can read just fine, miss, but it don't say," he said tossing the sheet of paper back.

I picked up the paper from atop my aqua peep-toes, quietly scanning the brief directions only to find he was right.

"What cross street is this?" I asked, unbuckling my seat belt while almost setting the duffel down, but then deciding against it.

"Seventh," he answered, adding an exaggerated yawn as I glared at him.

"Stay here," I muttered, hopping out of the cab as I noticed a woman stepping out of an inn on the corner. "Excuse me!"

The woman turned toward me, fumbling with her red plaid umbrella as tiny drops began to fall from the sky. "Yes? Oh come under my umbrella, dear. You will be drenched within half a minute out there."

"Thank you. I was wondering if you could help me," I said, trotting over to the large smiling woman while continuing to watch the cab out of the corner of my eye. "Do you by any chance happen to know which cottage belonged to Mrs. Bunyard?"

"Oh dear," the woman whispered as she avoided my gaze, passing the umbrella from hand to hand. "I'm sorry, honey, but Mrs. Bunyard passed away just last week."

"Oh I know that," I exclaimed, wishing to put the poor woman at ease, only to watch her redden. "Please don't misunderstand me. I never had the honor of meeting Mrs. Bunyard for myself, but I've inherited her cottage, though I'm not even sure which one it is."

"Her cottage?" The woman dropped the umbrella, almost poking me in the eye.

"Yes," I smiled lamely as the woman's large brown eyes searched my face, an almost eerie, quizzical look engaging her prominent features. "It is rather odd, isn't it? Actually, my mother was Mr. Bunyard's goddaughter so that's how it all came to be. Life is funny like that."

"Yes," she answered, eyeing the duffel I embraced until the driver began to honk, waking the woman from her daze. "Go four more blocks, honey, and you'll find it easily enough on the left hand side."

"Thank you so much." I smiled as I turned to make a run for the cab. Once across the road I called back to the woman, who still continued to gape. "Oh, I almost forgot. The name. What is the cottage called?"

"Ruby Rest." The woman shook her head as if I were mad.

"It's four blocks farther," I huffed once I was seated in the cab. "It's called Ruby Rest." The words stung my mouth as I remembered Preston again.

"My birthstone is a ruby," I had said with a smile, taking the tiny puppy while walking along the Wielands' private dock out to the lake. "I was born in July."

"I should have come here sooner and we could have celebrated," Preston answered, sitting down next to me as we put our feet in the cold water.

"The company wasn't as good as it could have been, but the children had a party for me, and my parents sent me over a portable easel with some art supplies, though I probably shouldn't tell you that." I laughed, blushing before waving to the neighbor Klaus as he sped by in his boat.

"I take it you haven't been out painting in these stunning mountains behind us," Preston guessed, scooping up water in the palm of his hand for Ruby to drink.

"The children seem to occupy all my time, but you're right." I sighed, lying back on the dock to watch the swirling clouds overhead. "Every time the sun sets red, I tell myself I need to get out my paints and give it a whirl. I always seem to talk myself out of it though. It's too gorgeous, and I just sit there in a daze."

"Too gorgeous," Preston repeated, leaning back.

"Hello! Hello! Are you still alive back there?" The shouting driver slammed his door. "We're here, miss, and if you don't mind, I'd like to be on my way."

Peering out the window as I gathered my things, I strained to see in the heavy darkness. While the other, well-groomed cottages along the narrow street were ablaze in light, I climbed out of the cab to face the dim outline of an overgrown forest behind a broken wooden gate. In front of the shadowy roadside, the driver stood with my collection of suitcases, looking over his shoulder as if debating whether or not he would carry my bags all the way to the door, the pathway being obstructed by branches and other debris. I smiled at the wary driver to help sway him in to accompanying me to the door, suddenly feeling safer in his presence than in the darkness of my inheritance. As I reached into my purse to bribe him, the driver gave up with a shrug. While he rummaged through the garbage underneath his seat in search of a flashlight, I pretended not to notice the gawking faces halfway concealed behind the drapes and shutters of neighboring homes. All those who had heard the cab were now fixated on who would enter Mrs. Bunyard's Ruby Rest.

A sign that dangled by one nail revealed the fateful words painted in muted red, and I could not, as I had first hoped, tell the driver that he was mistaken and to keep driving to find the real cottage that was mine. There would be no rest here, I was certain, as the driver shined his flashlight to reveal the boarded-up windows and chipping paint of a tiny home whose front porch appeared to be rotted through. After following the dim ray of light to the front door, I groped for the key on the uneven steps.

"I'll wait here for ya while you open it, if you'd like," the driver mumbled as he ducked under a cobweb.

"Thank you, I think I would like that," I answered, all my feigned bravery now pure cowardice as I held back tears.

Examining the filthy door, I contemplated if it was really necessary to stay the night at Ruby Rest. Perhaps the inn down the street had vacancies, though I remembered that their sign had said otherwise. I looked over at the driver, whose mouth hung open stupidly, more curious than I was as to what would meet us on the other side of the barrier. Just as I gained the courage to claim the cottage as my own, a black widow rapidly descended onto the doorknob. Wide eyed, I pulled back the key, turning to the driver, who took a moment to

muster up his own nerve before charging at the grotesque spider with his foot. The ensuing crash did little to bolster my confidence, though I could not help but laugh through exhausted tears at the poor driver, lying on his face on top of the door, which had collapsed into the entryway of the cottage. The driver glared at me as he climbed back up onto his feet, and I offered my hand, heartily thanking him for all his trouble. Though the driver searched for a lightswitch to aid my task of finding his pay, we were left in the darkness and he was forced to hold his flashlight over my purse as I then counted out the wad of money.

"Hey, kid, I think you'd better keep this," he muttered with an exaggerated shiver as he handed me the flashlight. "Oh, and keep your head up."

"Thank you," I whispered in a final effort of civility.

"Yeah well, at least ya got a dog and all," he answered with an unconvincing nod before stepping out into the heavy rain.

Shining the ray of the sticky flashlight down into the kennel of my tiny, sleeping Scottie was hardly comforting. In an attempt at defiance, I spun around to pull my baggage inside off the leaking porch. Then, picking up the hollow door, I vowed to purchase one of solid wood with my first paycheck. The wind howled as the arms of a cypress beat against the roof. I shined the light up along the coved ceilings of what appeared to be the living room, and then onto the flagstone fireplace. The wind rushed again and ashes blew out from the flue onto the otherwise spotless floor, my sneezes echoing down the hallway through the vacant home. After I could no longer absorb myself in the petty tasks of my arrival, I stood shifting my weight from side to side in internal debate. To explore the cottage would be a long, frightening affair in the midst of such a storm, though would I be able to sleep without first knowing I was completely secure? Glancing at the front door that leaned precariously against the threshold, errant raindrops spotting my polished toes, I was severely determined in my cowardice.

Grabbing the duffel, my purse, and Ruby's kennel, I aimed the flashlight through the archway beside the grand hearth to shine a pathway of light across the hallway. Rapid calculations muddled my mind as I chose from a series of closed narrow doors before discovering a tiny bathroom. Waving the light about in all directions, I mouthed a thank you to discover that, at least by the judge of the dim flashlight, the bathroom was spotless. After setting Ruby and my belongings down next to the pedestal sink, I fetched my suitcases, lugging each piece down the dark hallway while refusing to allow my gaze to drift right or left. I observed the strangely beautiful wood of the floor until I was finally ensconced in the small confines of the bathroom, kissing Ruby's rain splattered face. After examining the crystal doorknob in vain for a lock, I stacked my bulky luggage up against the door before drying my tears and muttering worthless assurances to myself.

Leaning against the tiled wall, I watched the shadows of the storm through the window's mottled glass. As the ceiling thudded above me, I sprang forward, pacing my tiny quarters until my pulse regulated itself. As I studied the pedestal, cast iron tub, my lungs refilled with air. The ark-shaped tub was surprisingly elegant, and the white porcelain of the interior seeming to be in perfect condition. With a warm blanket, perhaps I really could fall asleep, in spite of the beaten, creaking house, for if I had been willing to admit the truth, I had hardly

slept since the previous Sunday, even under my comfortable eiderdown quilt at the Wielands' chalet. There's a blanket in the duffel. My heart palpitated at the thought of the old, wool herringbone blanket. No, Edda, don't! My eyes fell on the shadowed duffel beside Ruby's kennel, and I closed my eyes to block it out of sight. No! Turning toward the tub, I resisted the urge to shout, hastily untying my honey blond hair from atop my head and letting my tired tresses fall down my back as I climbed into the tub, and sank inside. My aqua capelet would have to do for warmth. Pressing my cheek against the cold porcelain, I closed my heavy eyelids as my thoughts began to dull, the frolicking overhead not yet touching my still deaf ears.

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