

Joni Paredes

The steel doors of the hotel elevator opened with a whisper, like the wind rushing through the cracks of a marble mausoleum. With her dark shoulder-length hair bouncing, Joni Paredes stepped out and strode down the hotel’s elegant hallway as if she owned the place. Put on a smile, put on a smile, she told herself. Athena would be a beautiful bride but was probably going nuts. Joni knocked at the right door.

“Mom?” came the voice, higher than usual.

“It’s the Easter Bunny.” Too ironic? Joni added the word “Honey.”

The door swung open, and her daughter, Athena, gorgeous, thin, and far too young, charged at her in a flash of white and hugged her. Joni wasn’t a huggy person generally, but for her daughter, anything.

“I didn’t think I’d be so nervous today,” Athena said.

Joni smiled as they hugged. Her daughter just didn’t know herself.

Joni glimpsed at the room that Athena and Glen would share that night. The king-sized bed was angled toward a view of palm treetops and greener Pasadena. Fresh red roses stood in a clear vase on an antique writing desk. A painting of a bowl of fruit hung on the wall by the heavy blue-and-gold window side panels. The money Joni was spending was worth it.

Athena pulled back and gazed, now aghast, at her mother. “You’re wearing that dress today?”

Joni frowned. “What’s wrong? It’s a nice dress—a dress worthy of my only child.”

“It’s red! As usual, are you trying to take away my spotlight?”

“As usual? What?”

“Red?”

“It has flowers on it,” Joni said.

“Bold Georgia O’Keefe flowers.”

“It’s okay. You’re just nervous.” Joni straightened the shoulders on the gown. “You probably want to get out of this—don’t want to wrinkle it yet. Then let me take you to breakfast.”

“Can I be in charge for once? It’s my day.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Go to breakfast, not in this dress.”

Joni threw her hands in the air and said, “Are you listening, God?”

“Don’t be that way,” said Athena. “At least give me the illusion I have choice.”

“You’re marrying, aren’t you? That’s your choice.”

Athena started pulling off her gown, and Joni stepped behind her to help.

“You said you loved Glen,” said Athena.

“Of course I do,” said Joni.

“You accept him, I think. Love? That’d be a stretch.”

“Now you’re telling me how I feel? I’m very fond of him.”

“Yeah. That’s what I thought,” Athena said, sounding disappointed.

A feeling, an odd rumble, hit Joni in the pit of her stomach, something she hadn’t felt since she slept under a staircase at sixteen, having run away from home. Panic. She pushed at that feeling, demanding it leave. “Athena, come on. Let’s have breakfast.”

“I’m not going to be like you,” said Athena. “Glen and I are for keeps.”

“Really?” Joni wanted to spank her—something Joni hadn’t done since Athena was two, when she wouldn’t stop crying about a French fry that had dropped on the ground.

Athena pulled the last of her gown off and tossed it hard on the bed. “This is exactly why we have to talk. On my twenty-first birthday three weeks ago, we got those damn wolf-head tattoos on our butts to match each other. What was that, a cattle brand for me?”

“You thought it was a cute idea!”

“I know you wanted it—ten whiskers on my wolf’s face, eleven on yours, to make twenty-one. Cute. I did it to prove you aren’t losing me.”

“What? Just because you were a psychology major doesn’t make you Freud.”

“You love ‘em and leave ‘em,” said Athena. “You never even take their phone calls or texts after you decide it’s over.”

“My dates?”

“Yeah. Your Match.com guys. You’re like a presidential game-show host: ‘You’re fired.’”

“Just a couple cases, and they weren’t my type.” The image of her late husband on the bed with all that blood flashed in her mind. “Can we *not* talk about this? Don’t ruin your day.”

Joni had dated a yoga teacher once for three dates. She couldn’t stand his analyzing what she ate. “All that meat,” he’d said, as if it were some strange psychosis, especially the pork. Still earlier, he had explained his breathing technique in beginning yoga. First breathe so air fills the lower belly, then fill the lower rib cage, and move up into the throat and nose. He’d called it “ocean breathing,” which sounded like bullshit at the time, but then when she was alone in bed, inhaling and exhaling through her nose, it did have an ocean sound. She found it helped her control any flare of anger, especially as she focused on the air in her nose. Now, as Joni made herself busy by hanging the dress in the closet, she breathed, starting at her belly and moving up to her nose.

Once calm, she said, “Is this Slam Mom Day? If you want me to change my dress, I’ll go home. I have plenty of others. Blue? Is that acceptable?”

“Can’t you listen to me for once?”

Joni turned sharply. “What has gotten into you? You don’t want to marry Glen?”

“Of course I do!” Athena said, poking the air for punctuation. “You think you’re losing me, right? You’re not. But Glen and I are going to move to another state.”

“What? Where? I can’t just up and leave.”

“Seattle. And you’re not invited. Glen got a job there. I’m going to get a graduate degree in psychology at the U of W. I’m good at psych. That’s how I can see into you.”

Joni waved it off, then straightened her collar in the mirror.

“You made sure, when I was a tween,” said Athena, “that I knew about birth control. You sent me to the best schools. You’ve been a good mom, yet the way you run your life with men, you don’t think I notice?”

“I’m just picky. I can be picky, can’t I?”

“That’s what you call it.”

“What do you have against me today?” said Joni. “I do everything for you.”

“Are you going to give me the speech about birthing me at seventeen? My cocaine-addled father?”

“Honey, honey, calm down. It’s your wedding day.”

“I know you think I’m too young.”

“We’re not going to get into this today. Today is for fun.”

“You married at twenty-one,” Athena said.

“And how well did that work out?”

“So you’re ‘fond’ of Glen.”

“Listen, I’m going to meet you in the Terrace dining room in a few minutes, okay?” With that, Joni left.

Back in the hallway, Joni found herself shaking. Breathe, she told herself. Breathe fucking deep. Only Athena could do this to her, and Joni didn’t like being this way. Joni was a person who

could control her feelings, and, frankly, she needed to keep doing that.

Glen, a thin young man, had recently landed his first job out of college in Los Angeles as an insurance actuary. He helped calculate risk assessment and figure out insurance premiums. He stood on the lawn with Athena under the wedding arbor. Was he going to work for his same company in Seattle? He'd been a math major at UCLA—what calculations had he done in getting into Athena's heart? As Joni stared at Glen in his tuxedo next to Athena, the sun revealed a red hue in his closely cropped hair.

Who dates a math major, especially one so skinny? Joni wondered. She sat in the front row of the ceremony, which had just started—on a white chair on the green perfect grass of the grand hotel. Why had Athena been attracted to him? Was it because Glen was a type that Joni wouldn't have selected? In the last four months on Match.com, Joni had seen two men, an airplane pilot and a columnist from the business section of the *Los Angeles Times*. Both had been nice, but they started falling in love with her too fast. They'd probably be too emotional, like her late husband. She didn't need that. They didn't get beyond a handful of nice dinners, a concert in one case and a flea market in the other – plus a few evenings of sex, which hit the spot each time.

Didn't Athena understand that she, Joni, left men the way she did because it was clean? Joni was dignified and emailed them. They'd realize she was not their soulmate. Once Joni could see the futures they projected on her, and that was not what she wanted, she left. She was a doer, and she had most everything she needed in life: a good car, no debt, and a great kid. Joni was still young, thirty-eight, so no need to rush into anything.

As Joni watched Glen put the ring on Athena's finger, she thought of his pure devotion. Joni liked that about him and wondered what she would do if she found such a match. Either of those two men she'd recently dated could have become devoted, but it was a man's world, and she didn't need a man telling her

what to do. If she could only find the right guy who wasn't that way.

The wedding continued without a hitch with Reverend Jim from the Church of Good Luck officiating. The man was a friend's father, someone, as Athena explained, who had a great sense of humor and loved collecting old-fashioned pinball machines. When Joni had met the reverend, she asked him why one needs a whole church for good luck. He said, “It's to increase one's good fortune and protect the luck you have. Have you had good luck?”

“Do you call having a bitch of a mother whose boyfriend burned my hand over an open flame when I was seven bad luck? Or my running away and getting pregnant at sixteen bad luck?”

“So you'd been victimized,” Reverend Jim said.

“No. I'm in control of my life, not luck.”

“We're talking the same thing,” he said with a smile. “I like you.”

From that instant, she liked him.

Now Joni was at the head table in the Georgian Ballroom across from Reverend Jim and next to one of Glen's uncles, a man who was a professor of filmic something at USC's School of Cinema. She guessed he was ten years older than she, and he was half a head taller, with wonderfully dark thick hair and a charming smile. He mentioned he was divorced.

Did Athena place him here purposely? Joni glanced at Athena, who chatted with her bridesmaid, Monica, the girlfriend with great white teeth. As if feeling the stare, Athena glanced over at her mother and smiled. Joni smirked, shook her head at her daughter, and turned back to this Stewart something-or-other.

“Have you ever seen anything by Stanley Kubrick?” Stewart asked. “Such as *2001: A Space Odyssey* or *Full Metal Jacket*?”

“I don't go to movies very often,” Joni said.

He looked down as if he'd sat at the wrong table.

“I don't mean to be negative,” she said, “but movies just seem a great way to use up time and money.”

He shook his head and said, “Someone must have treated you wrong.”

“Why would you say that?” said Joni.

“Movies are just stories,” he said, “but stories help us live. Until the printing press, most stories were passed down orally, but they were vital to people. The Vikings told the Icelandic tales through the dark winter. The Greeks passed along Helen of Troy.”

She held up one finger to interrupt. “And everyone talks about *Game of Thrones* now, as if it were a real thing. I’m sorry, but it’s just made up, all to eat up our time.”

He smiled broadly, wildly shaking his head. “You’re missing out. The Bible stories are just metaphors, otherwise made-up, so—”

“Watch it,” she said with a laugh. “I’m Catholic.”

“Most of the Bible didn’t really happen, but it’s illustrative. The Greek myths didn’t really happen but they absolutely show how people are. Same with all of Shakespeare—same with even *Spiderman* movies and *The Dark Knight*. The point is we need stories to live, and movies and TV, the best of them, help us.”

“That’s a lot of power you’re putting into movies,” Joni said.

“It’s no different from your dreams. Your dreams are your brain working out problems, and while most people don’t analyze what it means, dreams work on a subconscious level. Same with movies.”

“I did see *2001* at the Cinerama Dome. Incredibly weird. I liked how the guy overcame HAL the computer. I remember HAL. I didn’t get the ending. I didn’t get the metaphor.”

“Few people do – but think of Odysseus returning home,” said Stewart.

“Okay,” she said, not knowing who Odysseus was.

“It’s the journey’s end, is all. Like the end of *The Wizard of Oz*, there’s no place like home.”

She laughed and said, “Oil can, oil can,” with clenched teeth like the Tin Woodsman. “Okay. Maybe I’ll see more movies.” She liked the guy.

He smiled again and looked right in her eyes. “I’m sorry. Are you Athena’s sister? I missed the connection.”

“I’m her mother.”

He looked astounded. “You look so young.”

“I had her young.”

Glancing at her nametag in front of her place setting, he said, “Is there a Mr. Paredes?”

“You don’t dither around, do you? Mr. Paredes died four years ago,” she said.

“A widow then.”

That stopped her for a second. “I guess so. I never think of myself that way—seems for older women. But, yeah, he died young—a nice guy otherwise.”

“Sorry for your loss.”

She nodded, looking appropriately subdued, even if she thought of her dear hubby as a chickenshit for shooting himself in the head after she left him. She had left saying she loved him, but he had to stop drinking. It had been his big weakness. His gun turned out to be one way to stop.

Joni noticed Stewart staring at her bracelet, a yellow gold Bismark-link bracelet with a lobster clasp that she had found at Macy’s once. Matias had noticed her looking at it and then he’d given it to her on a Valentine’s Day. It was one of only two things she still had from him. Everything else, she had thrown out.

“That’s a beautiful bracelet,” he said.

“My daughter gave it to me,” she said and looked over at Athena. Stewart looked, too.

“Nice daughter,” he said.

“The best.”

Again he looked in her eyes, as if trying to look into her soul. She couldn’t remember the last time someone did this.

“I’m glad Glen put me here,” he said. “What do you do for a living?”

“Gosh, I feel I’m on Match.com.”

“I didn’t mean—”

“Kidding. I have my own real estate and property management company. I specialize in selling apartment buildings as well as managing some buildings for owners. I have a staff of twelve.”

“You’re self-made then?”

“Yes—from single teenage mother to computer programmer to being my own boss. I love it.”

“Impressive.”

“Thank you.”

“Plus you have a great smile and voice.”

Who was this guy? He made her smile.

After dinner, a live band took to the stage and the singer, a woman with an Irish accent, said, “We’re the band The Blessed Union—great name for a wedding band, right? And we have a first song request from the bride, Pink Floyd’s ‘Wish You Were Here,’ in memory of her father.”

“Stepfather, actually,” she told Stewart. “But they were close.”

“I love Pink Floyd,” he said.

“Did my daughter tell you to say that?”

“No, why?”

“I love the band, too.”

The band leader said, “We learned this song for tonight, took out the long guitar solos, and we have a beautiful version. It’s danceable.”

“Want to dance?” she asked Stewart.

He looked surprised and said, “I was getting up the nerve to ask you.”

“You don’t need to be nervous around me.”

“I’m not so sure about that—and I’d love to dance.”

They started apart, but the song was tender, written about a missing band member, yet the words could fit many people, talking about fears and years and souls and bowls, and it was so loving and smooth, and Joni and Stewart found a groove. They came together and held each other at the waists, smiling whenever their eyes met. It was nothing she could explain. She hadn’t planned on meeting anyone at the wedding. The only plan she had

had was to make sure the wedding planners were doing their job. Now Joni didn't even think of them. She did what she did rarely, just let herself go and see where the tide of time took her.

When Joni caught Athena smiling at her as Athena danced with Glen, Joni smiled back. All was forgiven.

At the end of the night, after the dancing, the toasts at the cake cutting, the flower toss, and the good-byes to the hundred guests, Stewart said, “Joni, thank you for the pleasant evening.”

“Do you think we could meet again?” she asked.

“Like a Match.com date, you mean?”

She nodded. “No online emailing necessary. Let's just go have fun. What do you like to do for fun?”

“Do you bowl?”

“I'm terrible at it,” she said.

“Me, too. Let's do it!”

She pulled out a pen from her small clutch purse—she wasn't a big-purse woman—and she wrote down her phone number and home address on the back of her business card for Pine Crest Realty.

“Here,” she said. “Give me a call, and we'll set up a time and place. Want me to research where a bowling alley is?”

“Now that I have your address, I'll find the closest one.”

Days later, they sucked at bowling, but scoring was done automatically now by computer, and they clapped for each other when they knocked down pins. They even made one strike each, drank a lot of beer, and slid pizza down their throats.

Over the next few weeks, they saw each other often. She took him walking in the hills above the Descanso Gardens before and just after sunset, and they witnessed the lights of the city come on. The tall distant buildings of Los Angeles looked like a movie set, all sparkle and golden light.

While walking, she asked how long he'd been divorced. Three years. He and his wife Miranda had been married fifteen years, and she'd had an affair. Normally, this information would have been a red flag for Joni, as it meant he could have trust issues.

Still, he said only nice things about her, that she'd been very introverted and never told him how lonely she started feeling in marriage. “I'd sensed something going on with Miranda,” he'd said, “but she said she was fine.” He said they had an amicable divorce, and he was able to buy a house in Pasadena for himself afterwards.

The next weekend, Stewart took Joni to the planetarium at Griffith Park. She'd never been to one before—she'd never thought of it. The stars were so beautiful and the solar system so endless. How could there be no end? At the end of the universe, what was on the other side? As they walked out of the planetarium, he asked, “So? What did you think?”

“The stars are so amazingly beautiful, like beach sand glowing. It's too bad in Los Angeles we can only see a handful of stars at night. It must be amazing to live in, like, Bumfuck Idaho.”

He laughed. “Can't say I've been to that town.”

“But it did freak me out that there were a billion stars in our galaxy alone—and a billion more galaxies. How is that possible?”

“Less than a hundred years ago, we thought there was only one galaxy, the Milky Way, and that we were in the center of it.”

“We're in the center of nothing. We're just little lost souls swimming in a fishbowl, year after year.”

“A Floyd song!”

“Until we don't swim anymore? Then what? Even our ashes would be nothing compared to the vastness of the universe. Do we need one more apartment building in it?”

“In L.A., we do,” he said.

As they walked to the car from the Griffith Observatory, Stewart took her hand, gently swung her around, and they kissed, slowly at first, as they'd done a few times when he dropped her off at her home, but this time, they stayed at it. This felt so much better than being lost in space. She nibbled at his lips, and he responded in kind. She pushed her tongue into his mouth, and then he did the same thing. They hugged each other with emphasis. She looked down the canyon into Griffith Park, trees,

road and—was that the flash of a deer? Everything seemed so perfect.

She said, “Should I come to your house? A sex date?”

He smiled. “I’ve never heard that term before, but I have to tell you something about me. My marriage counselor said I bond perhaps too easily, so I want to hold off sleeping with you just now.”

“Really?” No one had ever turned her down before.

“Believe me, I could eat you up right now,” he said. “I’m extremely attracted. I sense we have something special, so I don’t want to rush into things with you. I want to do this right.”

“Oh,” she said. This surprised her. Her first instinct was to say forget it, you’re fired, but... this man was different. Most guys would have stripped naked on a first date with her, if given the opportunity. This, strangely, made her more curious about him.

“I’m an INTJ,” she said.

“Pardon me? Is that something to do with astrology?”

“No. Athena was a psychology major, and she gave me this test, Myers-Briggs. I came out as an INTJ.”

“Oh. Oh, that. When Miranda and I were in marriage counseling, the counselor gave us that test. I was an EN something, but I don’t remember what it all means.”

“My ‘I’ is for introvert and you’re an ‘E,’ extrovert.”

“Introvert? You don’t seem like that. You like to take charge.”

“That’s what INTJ’s do. You’re an extrovert, so we probably match well. I’m saying I will wait for when you’re ready.”

She’d gone out with a few rich guys before, and they had wined and dined her at expensive restaurants. They’d had a sense of entitlement as they tried to seduce her. Once she felt that she had to “give it up” as if it were a payment for a fancy dinner, that’s where those dates stopped. Stewart seemed truly interested in her, and the fact he didn’t want sex now, well, that made him unique.

They kissed again, and he was great. She knew he’d come around.

During the week, she worked hard with two new clients. She found time to email back and forth with Stewart, and she talked with him once on the phone. On that Friday, she had lunch with Kim, her company’s legal advisor. Kim wrote the contracts for all the negotiating Joni did. When they lunched together, they usually finished business quickly and then tried to figure out how men worked, their endless quest.

Kim, a short brunette who men might describe as voluptuous, was on her third husband. Joni told her how Stewart had turned down sex.

“Is he gay?” Kim asked.

“Definitely not. He’s an incredible kisser—maybe the best ever. Guys usually kiss impatiently, in hopes to get to the magic box,” said Joni, now laughing. “This guy—I feel he’s trying to find my soul.”

“Do you have one?” she said, smiling.

“Kim!”

“Of course, you have one,” she said, looking suddenly contrite. “It’s just, well, you run things, right?”

“What’s that mean?”

“I mean... I’m sorry.” Kim looked worried. Joni thought who was Kim to talk to her boss that way? Joni let her stumble on. “As we’ve talked about,” said Kim. “If a woman takes charge in anything, some men feel threatened.”

Joni nodded. “I see. You’re right. I thought you meant— never mind. I have a soul like everyone, like you. I don’t think Stewart is threatened in the least.”

“That’s good,” said Kim, quickly drinking her water. “Love at first sight, eh?”

“Love is an overused word,” said Joni. “Stewart is more than lust, though. Kind of scares me.” Joni realized she didn’t mean to say that, so added, “in a sexy way, of course.”

“Of course. Good luck, lady. Sounds like a keeper.”

As they walked back to the office, a gold Toyota Camry passed them, exactly like her last car. It was a great car while she had it. She hadn't kept it long.

Before Joni saw Stewart next, she and Athena met in Koreatown for their monthly scrub and massage. Joni hadn't seen Athena in weeks as Athena had just returned from her honeymoon in Maui—Joni's wedding gift to them besides the wedding.

Joni always felt so clean after Koreatown. An entire body scrub always felt great, like an immaculate house, even if the freshness didn't last. The woman she used, Somi, would press hard, even around and on her breasts, artificially firm due to implants after a breast cancer scare at age thirty. Joni had had a double mastectomy, leaving her chest with loose skin until reconstruction. Matias had been so supportive. “You are everything to me,” he'd said. “You're alive! I so love you!”

Then two years later, Joni had reconstruction by a master. There were two downsides, though. She wanted what she had had, a C-cup size. When she went to buy her first new bra at Victoria's Secret, the woman who fitted her insisted she was a D. “No, I'm not,” insisted Joni. However, the C-cup clearly didn't fit. The D did.

Joni cried in the fitting room for the next fifteen minutes, feeling as if she'd been turned into a porn star. When she saw her surgeon two days later so he could check the stitches, she blurted, “You gave me the wrong size! I'm a D!”

“I'm sorry,” he'd said, “but I had to make a decision. The C did not look right from the way your skin hung. You needed a little larger. Plus, it looks more balanced with your wide hips.”

“I thought any size worked, even B's.”

“No. A larger prosthetic worked—a decision made in surgery. I meant to tell you, and I'm so sorry I didn't,” he said. “Your breasts do look beautiful.”

The other downside was she could not feel the skin on her breasts. If Somi scrubbed too hard to cause an abrasion, Joni

could not feel that. Matias and the men after him, however, had been pleased with her D-cup size. She got used to it.

Joni and Athena drank wine coolers in their towels on the roof above Koreatown. Athena was thrilled about Stewart.

“He sounds different from the others,” Athena said. “I know Glen told me, but I forgot what Stewart teaches.”

“Film something at USC.”

“You don’t know exactly?”

“All I know is I feel so—” She looked for the right word. “I’m *thrown* by him. It’s like I can’t think normally,” and she looked off to imaginary stars. “It’s like I’m lighter with him. Light-headed. I even feel happily lost. It unnerves me.”

“Mom, you’re in love!”

“No, no, that can’t be. We haven’t even slept together yet.”

“Don’t you want to be in love?”

“I want... I don’t know if it’s attainable even. I don’t want mere comfort or companionship. I want something more, something like twin candle flames in the dark!” She laughed. “Someone who speaks to my soul.”

“Now you’re talking,” said Athena excitedly. “Maybe you’ve found him!”

“I’m not sure. I don’t like being not sure. Frankly, I don’t get how people fall in love time and again. I’m not built that way. I believe other people, but ... I don’t know.” She sighed.

Athena laughed and hugged her mother. “Mom, enjoy this. See where it goes.”

Joni nodded, then looked at her daughter more sternly. “You recently compared me to Trump,” said Joni, “which I didn’t appreciate.”

“I did? I don’t remember.” Athena smiled.

“You said I end a relationship the way Trump fired people on *The Apprentice*.”

“I don’t remember saying that exactly, but— Hmm,” said Athena, as if not knowing how else to express what was on her mind.

“What are you thinking?” said Joni.

“It’s just with Glen, I can tell him anything.”

“Are you saying you can’t with me?”

“You’re not always easy, Mom. With Glen, I don’t feel as if I’m in a swordfight!”

“Swordfight!”

“See what I mean?”

Joni stayed quiet.

“And, okay, now that I’m married, we’re kind of equal now, right?”

Joni merely nodded.

“So I’ll be open. Sex with Glen,” Athena began.

God, no. Joni didn’t want to hear about sex with Glen, but she had to at least pretend she was open to this, so she nodded. She and Athena never talked about sex the way Joni could with Kim. Kim could be bawdy. Joni didn’t particularly like thinking her daughter was doing the nasty.

“Sometimes with Glen,” Athena said, “I feel naked beyond naked. It’s like he gets me. What I don’t get is we can go on for hours. I mean, we might be drinking pinot grigio at sunset, fall into bed, and it’s as if time stops. We take breaks every now and then for water, but, heck. Next thing I know, it’s ten p.m.”

Hours? Joni thought. What’s the point? The right guy could get her to climax within ten minutes. Then again, that’s about all Matias could go.

“It’s crazy,” said Athena. “Sometimes I feel addicted. Then I realize it’s spiritual.”

“Spiritual?”

“Really spiritual, Mom. I didn’t think I could feel this with anyone. Maybe it won’t last. Maybe two people can’t keep this kind of thing going. What if in the future sex only goes a half hour—will I feel disappointed? I don’t know, but I’m not going to worry about it now. I just wish you could find someone like Glen.”

Joni smiled to herself. She’d never like someone like Glen. But Stewart—Stewart was different. She wondered how he was in bed.

Later that week, Joni followed the directions on her Google Maps and found Stewart’s cute single-story house just off Linda Vista in the hills above the Rose Bowl. She never ventured over to this part of Pasadena, and Stewart assured her it was still Pasadena, as if being in Eagle Rock was somehow less.

After she locked her Jaguar, Joni adjusted her dress slightly so her cleavage didn’t reveal too much in her low-cut dress. It was her killer dress, one she hoped would do the work.

“You’re gorgeous,” he said, after opening the door while she was still in the street. She walked through his front yard, a rose garden, to his porch. Joni had to step carefully on his flagstone walkway because she’d worn heels to make herself taller; he was so tall. He welcomed her in with a hug and a big kiss, which she wasn’t prepared for, and it left her light-headed for a few seconds. Joni twisted one ankle and almost fell over, but he caught her.

She laughed. “Wow. That was a kiss.”

He directed her into the kitchen where beautiful cherrywood cabinets stood with stunning granite countertops, accented with a blue-gray paint. Artichokes floated in a big pot, no flame beneath them yet. She’d never had artichokes before. “Gorgeous,” she said, motioning to the whole kitchen. “Did you have an interior designer?”

“Sort of—my cousin’s wife. She looked at photos when I was having it done. She was the one to suggest the granite and the dark paint.”

He gave her a quick tour of his home, and Joni couldn’t help but look at the place from her real-estate-agent perspective: real hardwood oak floors, nine-foot ceilings, one and three-quarters bathrooms, a back yard against a wooded hill, a redwood deck with a built-in barbecue, and one bedroom turned into an office, all great.

“Did you live here with your wife?” she asked, thinking the woman’s ghost floated around.

“No. We’d lived in Beverly Hills. She bought my half, which got me this place. All new furniture, too.”

The large dark sofas and the painting of an ancient Japanese warrior on one wall felt definitely masculine. Joni liked masculine.

The other bedroom, the master with a full bath that included a Jacuzzi tub, well, she wouldn't mind soaking in that.

“What is it you teach at USC again?” she asked.

“Filmic writing. Actually, that's the old name. Now it's called writing for the screen and television.”

“Scriptwriting?”

“Yes, but it's more than that. People don't give enough credit to great screenplays, such as, say, Aaron Sorkin's *The Social Network* or, way before that, Robert Towne's *Chinatown*. The best writer of movies of all time? Preston Sturges.”

“I don't know those writers.”

“When we met, you mentioned *Game of Thrones*. That and all good TV and film reflect life, reveal life, show us new meanings, enlighten us, reveal a fresh path. It all starts with the script.”

“What about directors? I always thought of film and TV as a director's thing.”

“That's true. A good director paired with a great screenwriter, and you have a world view. That's why I have all of Kubrick's films. Same with Billy Wilder, Coen Brothers, Orson Welles, Buñuel, Malick, P.T. Anderson, and more.”

Joni didn't recognize any of the names but said, “You like what you do—just like me.”

“That's why we're alive, right? To find our purpose.”

By his bedside, she spotted a pipe in the shape of an arm with the hand holding an urn, which was the pipe's bowl. Next to the pipe stood a little black bottle marked “The Green Earth Collective.” That's where her daughter bought marijuana. Joni had been upset at first, discovering her daughter smoked, but Athena had said, “It's legal, Mom, and it's much better than drinking. Have you ever tried it?”

Joni hadn't, so she tried it with her daughter. One time, she smoked too much, and she hated how she felt just so weird

because drinking a glass of water with ice felt special, magical, and so wet.

Joni lifted up the pipe, smelled, and laughed. “Don’t tell me you as a professor smoke. Isn’t that, I don’t know, unethical—or at least unacademic?”

“My dad grew up in the sixties, and I smoked with him as a teenager. It didn’t make me less inquisitive—maybe more. Do you smoke?”

“Very little. Maybe a puff or two.”

He patted the bed and they both sat. He rummaged in his nightstand drawer and pulled out what looked like a pen. “Have you ever vaped?”

“With my daughter once. I liked it—not as harsh as the buds she had.”

He handed her the pen. She looked for the end with the hole, put the pen in her mouth, and drew in air. A blue light on the end came on as if it were a blue-burning cigarette. She didn’t inhale a lot. She felt nothing. She took a little more and handed him the pen. As he used it, she exhaled and saw a light blue smoke come from her mouth. Joni took one more hit. He did too, offered it to her again, and she shook her head. He put the pen away.

“I thought we’d eat the artichokes first, then I’ll barbecue the steak.”

“You’re treating me so well,” she said, noticing then and there how truly handsome he was. He had a strong chin, great lips, and thick black eyebrows that she hadn’t particularly noticed before. “Are you Russian?” she asked.

“You’re good. Yes, my grandmother was Russian, so I’m one-quarter. Her father was a Russian Orthodox priest. And you?”

“Half Mexican. My father, an Argentinian, picked up my mother hitchhiking in Ensenada. She was just a teenager. He got her pregnant, so he moved her to a house next door, just outside Ensenada, and his wife let him. My mom had my brother, then had me, before my father’s wife stabbed him to death in the middle of the night.”

“Oh, my god.” He touched her cheek compassionately. It felt good.

“My mother had an aunt in Chicago, so we moved there after that, when I was five. I later became a citizen.”

Joni took his hand. He squeezed lightly.

“And you had Athena when you were a teenager?” he asked.

“Yeah, I ran away from home at sixteen. My mother had a series of violent boyfriends. I wasn’t going to put up with her bullshit anymore. I don’t regret any of it.”

“Is your mother still alive?”

“Yeah, in Montebello. I see her maybe once a year.”

She paused. She’d never told any man this story before. Shit. The pot was stronger than she’d thought. “It’s not like I spend Thanksgiving with her,” she said. She waved the topic off, not wanting to think any more about her mother, her black hole, and was about to stand, when Stewart leaned over and kissed her.

Kissing was like Roman arrows flying or a pack of dogs chasing a cat—lots of energy. She felt his desire, his breathing deeply, his rubbing the small of her back as they kissed, and she delighted in it. Soon her hand moved downward, and he did not resist. Joni flashed on the movie *Showgirls*, where Elizabeth Berkley liked to give lap dances to clothed men. That was laughable. This wasn’t.

Before long, after slowly taking off each other’s clothes, which just seemed so natural, they kissed, lying sideways, skin to skin. Rather than racing to his goal, he spent time with her. He was an attentive lover, taking things slowly when that was what she wanted and then fast for when she asked for that.

Her body rocked hard in an extreme spasm when things clicked just right.

“Are you okay?” he asked when that happened.

“Oh, yeah. It can hit me hard. I do think sex is important for a relationship.”

“Me, too,” he said.

Before Joni knew it, darkness wrapped around the room. They’d been making love for over an hour. She had climaxed twice.

Was this, dare she say, *spiritual*? It wasn't as if she heard a voice or saw a deity. Joni hadn't needed a man like this before, though, and was that good? She put spirituality out of her mind. This was merely good sex. Very good sex.

“I didn't expect that,” she said, her head against his chest, hearing his heartbeat.

“We didn't even get to the artichokes yet,” Stewart said.

“I went for the steak,” she said, laughing at her own joke.

They finally made it to the kitchen, each wearing a robe, and he whipped up hollandaise using whole eggs, Smart Balance margarine, and fresh lemons. As he continuously stirred with a whisk, he said, “My hollandaise is slightly different from traditional, but it's healthier. It took me a long time to find the right margarine to replace the butter. Whole eggs are better than just the yolks. And I really like it lemony.”

He kept stirring over a low flame, and the yellow mixture started thickening. She'd never seen the sauce made before.

“How wonderful,” Joni said. “I'm a fan of Eggs Benedict, and most of the time, the hollandaise isn't lemony enough.”

He smiled and said, “You are one in a million.”

At the table, she watched how he picked a leaf from the artichoke, dipped the tip in the hollandaise sauce, and scraped the soft pulp and hollandaise together with his teeth. She followed suit. The taste wasn't bad, not as “vegetably” as she expected. The sauce was great. When the leaves were gone, he showed her how to scrape off the “choke” as he called it and get to the heart. He'd figured out she was a beginner. He said, “The heart is everything.”

After they finished, he said, “Ready for a steak and my great potato salad?”

“Can we wait a little?”

“Why?”

“I wouldn't mind if we went back in your bedroom.”

“Where have you been all my life?” he asked, and they eagerly returned to the bedroom.

Joni did not focus on her real estate business as much over the next two months. She had been used to working most Saturdays and part of Sunday. She'd usually reserved Sunday afternoons for doing things with Athena, including now going to movies, which they did with Glen, too. Lately, she saw Stewart three to four times a week, usually staying at his place Friday and Saturday nights and doing things with him Sunday afternoons. Sometimes those things had him working on the Sunday *New York Times* crossword puzzle while she might read pending contracts or prepare her list of things to do during the week. “Sometimes” also included making love for hours. As it had for Athena, such long lovemaking seemed unusual, yet Joni lost herself in it. It felt like a high-wire act. In fact, some nights on her drive over, she hoped they'd rush to the bedroom. Was this what crack cocaine was like?

One time, a weeknight after she returned home at midnight from his place, she just had to write him an email, one that he'd read when he woke up.

Dear Stewart—

I had an amazing evening with you. In fact, I'm always amazed by our time together. Sometimes it doesn't feel real. I leave your place like I'm some space capsule floating above the equator. It's just pure bliss. Or is it just lust? Or is it lust at its best? Will this wear off? These thoughts, though, vanish as quickly as I think them because they trivialize our time together.

I love our pillow talk, enjoying hearing your take on current events to something one of your students said. I love your slow and penetrating kisses. You make me feel so at ease. You can be critical about movies, but I never feel critiqued. I can be wrapped in your arms for hours,

wondering if you can read my mind, and a
desire begins to grow. I want to absorb you into
my cells, like alcohol. It’s past two in the
morning. I count the hours until I see you next.

Affectionately,
--J.

Stewart had two dinner parties over the next month as if to show her off to his friends. He told her she could invite Athena and Glen or any of her friends. Joni said she’d rather hold off for now. Because he was cooking, she found herself surrounded by his friends who asked her questions. How long had she known him? Did she like his humor? What’s her favorite movie? Who was her favorite screenwriter?

For the last two questions, showing she’d learned from him, she said, “*True Grit*, the new version, and the Coen Brothers. They’re my favorite writers, too.”

Later that night after everyone was gone, during pillow talk, Stewart said, “You know what I like about you? I can’t predict you. I love your curiosity. You look at things in an unusual way—and you make me laugh all the time. You were great with my friends.”

She placed her hand on the back of his head, gently pushing her fingertips into his dark hair. “You’re handsome—and smart. Pardon me if I’m too direct, but I can’t get enough of you. It worries me.”

“Yikes,” is all he said, and soon they were kissing and making love again.

Afterwards, after they regained their composure, he said, “I can come to your place, you know. I’ve never been inside. Are you messy?”

“No, no, it’s nothing like that. You just have such a wonderful house. My one-bedroom apartment is rather Spartan.” She’d moved into it after Athena had moved in with Glen.

“I’d have thought a real estate agent would have found a deal for herself.”

“I owned a house when I was married,” she said. “I just... I don’t know. It’s not important to me. A great office is. I love my office.”

“You haven’t invited me there, either,” he said.

“I didn’t know you were interested. I haven’t been to USC, either, now that I think of it.”

“We’ll do each sometime,” he said.

“Absolutely,” she replied.

A few days later when they made love, as they each got into it and she was on top, feeling so good, eyes closed, blood rushing in her ears like the sound of hummingbird wings, he said, “What do you think of our taking a vacation together?”

“What?” The sound of his voice had some meaning, but she had to pause to consider.

“Where in the U.S. would you like to go? I have air miles I can use. Is there someplace you’d like to visit?”

He felt so good beneath her at that moment, and Joni wanted to go anywhere with this man. “How about New York City?”

“Yes!” he said. “We get to make love in all those different New York beds. Doesn’t that sound incredible?”

“The best,” she said.

“Plus, it’ll be a real test of how we get along, don’t you think? I think we’ll do great.”

In the pit of her stomach, anxiety grew. Why did he have to make this so “real?”

“Do you want to do AirBnB’s or hotels?”

Now she could feel her breathing come faster. “Sorry,” she said, getting off him. “I need some water.” She drank from a nearby glass. So did he.

“What would you like to see in New York?” Stewart asked. “I think we should see the Empire State Building and the 9/11 Memorial for sure. Movies in the Village. Man, this could be a start of a lifetime of wonderful trips.”

She gritted her teeth. “Could we talk about this later?” she said.

The next night, sleeping alone in her apartment, Joni woke up gasping. She just had had a most vivid dream. She and Matias had stood in a long line at a Blockbuster Video, a line that had snaked around the inside of the store. This had to be around 2008 when there were such stores. He was asking her about the two DVD movies he had, “Should we get *The Dark Knight* or *WALL-E*? One is funny, one is dark.”

“I don’t want either, really,” she’d said. “Is this our life—a lifetime of movies?” She had been in line doing the *New York Times* crossword in pen, but she never did crosswords. Stewart did. That was odd. In the dream, she stood on her tiptoes to scan for Athena in the kids section. She found her in the action section with *True Grit* in her hands, the older one with John Wayne on the cover. Athena had to be ten.

“But you suggested this place. What do you want? And you pointed to both of these movies,” said Matias, confused.

“Because they are popular. I don’t care really. They’ll probably bore me. Everything here will.” He pulled out a jawbreaker sealed in cellophane from his coat and popped it in his mouth. Joni had said in the dream, “Those things can break a tooth.”

“What do you want to do then?” he’d asked, paying no attention to her jawbreaker comment.

She had considered. “Athena is old enough to stay home. Let’s go out drinking.”

Awake in her bedroom, Joni remembered that she had really said that once to Matias. The pressures of her life were great then – lots going on at her job, and young Athena was becoming more assertive, and Matias just seemed so needy then. A few drinks could help them both. Was she the one to start him drinking? Was she the one to make him fall from grace? She was still breathing heavily.

Joni thought about finding Matias in his bedroom—which used to be their bedroom—slumped on the bed on a blood-soaked quilt, a shotgun at his side, and half his head missing. Joni had been

glad that she'd made Athena stay outside on the front stoop when he hadn't answered the doorbell. After the coroner had taken his body away, but before the cleaning crew that specialized in blood removal had come, she'd found one of his teeth in a clean part of the carpet by the door. Had it ricocheted off the wall, which looked like a giant splatter art piece with some little holes? She should have called him the night before when he had made her promise she would. Still, it was his life. He was the one to take it. God damn it! Why did he have to do that?

She didn't see Stewart for three days after that dream, but then she received an email from him late one night.

Dear Joni—

I haven't heard from you in a few days. This thought occurred to me after 10 p.m. as I'm sitting in this bed, the very bed we've had such delicious times in. I had held off making love with you for a time when it felt right, and we found that right moment. I'm not often an insecure person, but we all have our late nights, as it were, and now I'm wondering did I write or say something wrong, something insensitive? We usually communicate every day.

You have not given me one sign that I should be worried, other than I've noticed neither of us has used the word “love,” not even in our notes. You like the word “affectionately.” I often use “Yours” because I feel devoted to you.

Thinking about this has made me evaluate how I feel. I hope you don't mind my saying this, but I love you, Joni! You may not feel the same yet, which is perfectly fine. You're just taking me to

places of the soul I hadn't imagined. You have an amazing spirit. Let's talk in the morning.

Love, Stewart.

When Joni read this, she found herself breathing hard, and she knew she'd better write her thoughts down while she had them. She wrote:

Dear Stewart,

Thank you for your note and courage. You probably held your breath as you clicked on Send. Truth be told, I found myself hyperventilating after reading your last six sentences again and again. I respect your feelings and have to explain things. I don't want us to be awkward with each other. I happen to think the word “love” just comes with so many parameters and expectations. Once couples start using it, things change, and not always for the better. Flaws get masked. Labels are made. It's as if we step into little boxes that our parents imagined for us when we were kids.

I want to continue this journey with you, talking, sharing, making love, bursting into laughter, disagreeing about films, learning about stories, passionately kissing, holding each other, snuggling, feeling your skin against mine, hearing your heart beat as I lay my head on your chest, smelling your wonderful scent. I'm worried that using charged words in the “getting to know you” phase will add pressure and make the good disappear.

I realized the other day that I see the world more brightly with you. Time stops somehow with you. We're like twin candle flames in the dark, illuminating. I care for you deeply. Is that okay? Can I come to your house today after work, the usual time? I can explain more then.

--Joni

Joni reread her note when she awoke just after six a.m., and she sent it. Within a half hour, Stewart wrote her back.

Joni—

Of course that's okay! I'm glad I brought the word up and am happy to continue our journey together. What I feel is magical. What you wrote is so specific and personal, I can't help but drink it in. Maybe we should use Woody Allen's word he used in *Annie Hall*, that he “luffed” Diane Keaton because the word “love” just wasn't enough. Remember that incredible shot where they sat by the bridge in the evening? That was the Queensboro Bridge from Sutton Place Park. When we go to New York, maybe we can go there and luff each other.

I'll use my own word to end this:

Lerfingly,
Stewart

P.S. I feel like a note in a bottle, washed ashore, and your sweet hands found my words inside. See you tonight!

Joni arrived at his house at five-thirty as usual, straight from work, wearing a red dress and low-heeled shoes. She showered in the master bath, put on his robe and applied her makeup. In her little travel bag, she'd run out of Q-Tips. He must have some, so she looked in the drawers beneath the two sinks. The third drawer held a big pack of Q-tips. A small picture frame lay upside down beside it.

Joni looked at the picture. Stewart and a pretty woman held their arms around each other, apparently on a boat. The woman wore sunglasses; Stewart didn't, so he squinted. It must have been late afternoon. There wasn't enough of the boat or landmarks to show where they were. They looked happy. A long lock of the woman's dark hair came down across her face. The woman smiled brightly as if to say, “He's mine.” Was this Stewart's ex-wife? Why was it in this drawer? It must still have meaning for him. Perhaps this was his sister. No, he didn't have a sister.

Still in the robe, Joni found Stewart in the kitchen, cutting onions, and she said, “I ran out of Q-Tips, so I used one of yours. Hope you don't mind.”

“Of course not. Anything you find, you can use.”

“I also found this.” She handed him the picture, and then he looked at her, puzzled.

“It was next to the Q-Tips. People sometimes misplace things, so I thought maybe you misplaced this.”

“I'd forgotten about this,” he said.

“Is it your wife?”

“Yes. Miranda.”

“She's pretty.”

“She's a nice person.”

She felt a pang in her stomach. “She must still mean a lot to you if you have her picture in your bathroom.”

“No. Nothing to read into. I probably plopped it there when unpacking. Why?”

“Well, I mean before you, I’d dated some guys on Match, and it’s surprising how many men explain their ex-wives were not affectionate, and that’s why—”

“That’s not the case, Joni. Is there something you want me to explain? I’m unclear.”

“I just told myself I didn’t want to get involved with someone with past-marriage issues or—”

“I don’t have—”

“Like one guy I saw was only legally separated.”

He looked shocked. “Is that what this is about? My legal separation?”

“You told me you were divorced. I was just giving that as an example.”

“I am, in essence. Miranda and I went through divorce proceedings with a divorce mediator. A few days before we were to sign the papers, Miranda found that once she was divorced, she’d have to refinance the house because I’d no longer be on the deed. While the monthly mortgage was affordable for her, the bank told her she would not qualify for a re-fi—not enough income.”

“Are you saying—”

“The lawyer explained a legal separation works exactly like a divorce. We did it so she could keep the house and pay me off.”

She looked down. Joni worked on her breathing until she had the ocean. “It just seems you still have ties to her.”

“What I have is the same as a divorce. She had to buy me out, and I’m not legally responsible for the house. It’s in her name. The legal separation is the same as a divorce. Besides, I never see her. I’ve been truthful.”

“This is just a surprise, is all.”

“If I want a true divorce, all I have to do is pay forty dollars to the city, and my legal separation becomes a divorce. Is that what you want me to do? You don’t like the word ‘love,’ but I love you. It’s not a label. It’s not a box. I’ll pay the forty dollars if you like.”

“No, I mean... no. It’s fine. We’re still getting to know each other is all.”

“Are you okay?” Stewart asked.

“I’m not hungry,” Joni said. “I don’t know why I get like this. All I know is I like feeling you next to me in bed.”

He led her by the hand to his bedroom where he sat her on the bed, and he plunked right next to her. When he put his arm around her, that only brought up the picture again with his arm around Miranda.

“I don’t want anything to get in the way,” he said. “Is there something more I can say?”

She shook her head. What she wanted was him, and she kissed him hard as if her molecules could meld into his. As the sun set, shadows moved across the walls, bats with belfries, tiger salmon on the river leaping up the rapids over boulders, and somewhere else on the globe, the sun rose, perhaps over a jungle with cicadas loud as carpenters. Incense burned for Buddha, and the lovemaking sang of guitars giving in to sweet surrender. Purple seemed the color of the day. Dream on, on to the heart of the sunrise.

“Are you okay?” he said again after she became quiet, her synapses firing like rockets. “We hardly got started.”

“I’m fine,” she said, even if Miranda’s dark lock swung across her face. “I don’t like losing myself.”

“What do you mean?”

Joni said nothing. She did not know. They held each other for the longest time until it was fully dark. Joni said, “I have to go.”

“Why? Don’t you want dinner?”

“How about I come back in two days, and we’ll try this again? You can make me dinner then.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. I’m just tired. It was a hard day.”

“Okay.” He flicked on a light. He looked like a stranger. Joni quickly dressed, and he put on the robe she had worn earlier. It was his robe. She stepped toward the door when he said, “Don’t I get a hug?”

Joni hugged him, then drove home.

“Joni Paredes” by Christopher Meeks - 32

She couldn't sleep. Instead, she wrote Stewart an email.

Stewart—

Tonight got me thinking, more than usual. You brought up my definition of love again, which made me ponder. I sense you love Miranda. You’re still tied to her. You’d kept the information of your legal separation from me, and that’s because you like that tie.

As we were in bed, I kept seeing that picture of Miranda. Before she was an abstraction for me, but the way you two looked so happy. I can’t imagine we’d ever have a photo like that of us together. You shouldn’t have dated until you had a real divorce even if that meant she lost the house. Divorce is about cutting all ties.

I’m sorry. I’ve really had great times with you. Thank you for making the time together so exceptional. This will be the last communication you’ll ever get from me. It’s best to be clean.

In truth,
Joni

With that, she slept well. In the morning, her phone rang, and she could see it was from Stewart. She didn’t answer. A half hour later, an email arrived from him. She opened it. It began, “I am absolutely devastated. There’s a tragic misunderstanding here. Let me explain.” Joni didn’t let him. She deleted the note before she read the rest of it. This had to be clean.

A half hour later, she received a text from him that said, “Did you get my email or message on your phone? Please call. I’m sorry if I miscommunicated anything. We need to talk.”

She did not call. Joni drove to work, smiled at Joyce, her secretary, nodded to others in the office, and concentrated on an offer for a house in the hills for one of her clients.

Joni received three more text messages over the next few hours from Stewart. One said, “It’s normal for miscommunication to happen. To fix it, we need to talk. May I call you?” Minutes later, he tried calling again, so she just powered down her phone.

A half hour later, her office phone rang, but she let her secretary pick it up. Joyce said, “It’s your daughter.”

Joni lifted her receiver and said, “Hello, my dear.”

“I just received a phone call from Stewart.” The tone was stern—so unlike Athena.

Joni’s heart fell. “You don’t need to get involved,” Joni said. She realized it had been dumb to date someone with ties to her daughter.

“He’s trying to understand what’s wrong. What’s wrong, Mom?”

“Nothing. He’s like some other men I’ve met. He really loves his ex-wife. He has divorce issues.”

“He read me your note. Stewart said you have it totally wrong, Mom. What’re you afraid of?”

“Don’t take that tone of voice with me.”

“I’m not a little kid anymore,” said Athena. “And at this point, I’m worried about you. Here’s a man who clearly cares for you, even loves you, and you shut him down. Why? Why so harshly?”

Joni tried a different approach. “Athena, my dear. Did he tell you he’s not completely divorced?”

“You know he is. The fact a bank doesn’t recognize it only means he’s smart.”

“I didn’t mean for you to get involved. Stewart’s nice, don’t get me wrong—but it wasn’t working. He’s into movies, and I’m not. He likes cooking artichokes. Listen, I’ve appreciated you and Glen setting him up for me, and I truly thought this would work, but he has issues with his wife that he didn’t tell you about. I’m sorry to involve you.”

“I don’t mind being involved. Is this something to do with Dad?”

“Your stepfather? Not that fucking psychology shit again.”

“I’m happy to help.”

Joni could see the opening and said, “You help me a lot, Athena. Maybe I don’t credit you enough, but even finding Stewart for me, that was very nice.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Mom, we’re here on earth to make relationships. It really takes two people to make it through the daily shit. That’s why I have Glen.”

“That’s why I have you, honey.”

Athena paused, then said, “Should I call Stewart back for you and explain whatever you want me to say?”

Joni truly did not want to talk with him ever again, so she said, “Sure. You can tell him about your stepfather, if you like. Even if I’m over that terrible incident, it’s a good excuse. Just realize, I’m not a victim, Athena. I didn’t raise you to be one, either. Tell him whatever. Wish him a good life.”

“What if he comes to future family events?”

“We’re adults, we’ll be fine.”

However, Joni started blubbering, and her eyes watered, and, God help her, was this going to turn into fucking tears?

“Mom, are you crying?”

Joni made it sound more like a cough, and, once she had her steady breathing back, said, “I must be getting a cold. I’m fine, dear. I’m meant to live alone. You and Glen move up to Seattle. I’ll be fine.”

There was a long pause. “Maybe we shouldn’t. I don’t want to abandon you.”

“Honey, this is just life. We’re really just parchment in bottles that have drifted ashore. The sand washes over us all.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s something Stewart said. Did you know the Milky Way has over a billion stars? What are we, just stardust?”

“Mom, are you okay?”

“Yeah. Are you up for a Korean scrub in the next few days?”

“Sure. Can I say—”

“We’ll talk in Koreatown.”

With that, Joni hung up, wiped her tears, and paced around the room, wondering how she let herself think she and Stewart were two candle flames in the dark? How absurd was that? Yet part of her felt as if she’d lost something. But what, really? She wasn’t in control with him. She didn’t get enough work done. Now things would be fine. She felt in control again.

Stewart wrote emails daily for a week, which she deleted. One more text came on a Sunday afternoon when he normally did his crossword. It said, “I give up. Have a good life.”

That’s what she expected to do. He contacted her no more.

That same Sunday, the curtains in her living room were drawn. The only furniture that stood in the room was a cotton-covered easy chair the color of burnt sienna, well worn, dependable, like someone who didn’t drink or didn’t play with guns. She plopped into it. Beneath the chair’s threadbare cushion lay something she put there to remind her of things: a single tooth.