



Neil's breaths came short and quick as he rounded the curve and jogged down the dark road past houses hidden behind high hedges and bougainvillea-covered walls.

Almost home.

It was unseasonably warm for November, even by Miami Beach standards, and his T-shirt was drenched with sweat from his five-mile run. It couldn't be much after seven, since he'd headed out around six fifteen. He'd shower, grab a beer and last night's leftover Chinese food, then work on his research paper for a few hours. Give the packing and boxing a break and maybe get to bed early for a change.

The narrow sidewalks were cracked and overgrown with bushes so Neil stayed in the street. There were very few cars, just like when he was growing up. It was weird; he'd only been back a few days, but it seemed as though he'd never left. This was where he used to ride his bike, sneak over to the vacant lot by the bay to fish, hang out behind the big old banyan tree and smoke pot.

In the distance he could see an unnatural, wavering brightness coming through the windows of the neglected two-story house next door to the one where he'd spent his childhood. The movement of low-hanging palm fronds in the front yard created the illusion of an old black-and-white movie on a broken projector. He tried to process what he was seeing. The interior lights were expanding and contracting. A lot like flames.

What the hell?

He went from a jog to a sprint. The 1930s house came into blurred focus—tall columns holding up the portico, black shutters slightly askew against white stucco walls overgrown with ivy.

A shadow, backlit by the vacillating glow, appeared behind lace

curtains. Neil squinted and wiped the sweat out of his eyes, trying to make out the short white hair of the old woman he knew lived there alone. Then he saw an orange glimmer. More tiny flames appeared. He slowed down. Maybe she was just lighting candles. But throughout the whole damn house?

He stopped in the street, just across from the house, and watched the flickering brightness in all of the windows. The old woman's silhouette was perfectly still. He could make out her profile—straight nose, angular jaw ending in a pointed chin, long, slender neck—like a flawless cutout for a valentine. She was holding her arm in front of her. In her hand was a long candle.

Suddenly, a blaze of orange-blue climbed the lace curtain.

Shit.

He darted across the street and banged on the door. "Mrs. Campbell. Mrs. Campbell. It's Neil. Open the door."

No answer. He didn't have time to wait to see if she would. He ran to the side of the house, unlatched the rusting gate, then pushed around the garbage cans and past the smell of rotting vegetation and cat musk. The backyard was overgrown, but the terra-cotta planters on the cracked patio were where they'd always been. He shifted the one closest to the door away from its base, and found the spare key beneath it. The dried dirt came off when he rubbed it against his shorts. He stuck the key into the door lock. It resisted, then turned.

He rushed into the house, pulling his sweaty T-shirt over his head as he made his way into the living room. "Mrs. Campbell, get back."

She seemed paralyzed, the candle clutched in her hand. The fire had spread from the lace curtains to the outer drapes and flames darted up and down the dark velvet.

He pushed her away from the window, wrapped his hands in his damp T-shirt and pulled the drapes down. The heavy curtain rod grazed his forehead before banging against the marble floor. He could feel the heat and sting of fire on his arms and chest as he smothered the burning fabric with the shirt, then stomped the last flames out with his sneakered feet.

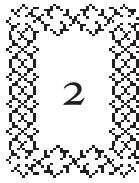
The acrid smell of smoke and singed hair pierced his nose and lungs. He stepped away from the smoldering drapes that lay on the floor.

“Mrs. Campbell, are you okay?”

The old woman stood perfectly still, tears running down the creases in her face, her dull blue eyes wide with grief. Dozens of small candles flickered around the room—on the fireplace mantel, the built-in cupboards, and on the surface of the coffee and end tables. They cast shadows over her trembling form.

Her lips were moving, but her voice was so quiet he had to strain to hear her.

“Forgive me,” he thought he heard her say. “Please forgive me.”



Kali was inside one of her paintings. She could feel the caress of enveloping arms, fingers sifting through her hair, a fairy kiss on her forehead.

Somewhere, in another dimension, was the sound of ringing. Kali took in a deep breath of oil paint and turpentine. The easel was so close that she was only able to make out smudges of colors rather than defined images.

She stepped back and checked her phone. Two missed calls from Seth. Damn. It was almost eight. They were supposed to meet at his parents' for dinner.

Kali threw off her paint-spattered smock, changed into a short yellow dress over her faded denim leggings, and raced out of her studio to her car, texting as she went, *On my way.*

She knew she was driving too fast, but wasn't that the point of the four-door Volvo? Seth had insisted she replace her two-seater with the battle tank when they learned that Kali was pregnant, but she still missed her candy-apple-red Miata, which she'd bought herself ten years before when she graduated from college and got her first job as an illustrator.

Her nose itched and she rubbed it, not surprised to feel a dab of dried paint.

The traffic slowed. Kali hit the brakes as she got embroiled with cars heading for Aventura Mall. It was only November 9th—were people seriously already doing their Christmas shopping?

By the time she pulled her car under the grand entrance of the waterfront condo in the exclusive North Miami community where her in-laws lived, she was imagining Seth pacing outside his parents' apartment, dinner burned.

The valet held the car door open and seemed to be inspecting her as Kali climbed out. She brought her oversized satchel in front of her chest. Her body had changed in the three months of pregnancy and she wasn't sure if she was more self-conscious about her too-large breasts or her no-longer-narrow waist.

"Thanks," she said, taking the ticket from the valet.

"Sure." He gave her a crooked smile that suggested he'd noticed the breasts, not the waist.

Her phone beeped and she dug it out of her pocket. Text message from Seth. *Where r u?* She typed back. *Just got here.* Then added, *Keep nodding and smiling.*

The lobby was high ceiled with black granite floors, gray modular sofas, and rectangular sculptures, and the air smelled vaguely of perfume and made her a little nauseated. Wasn't she supposed to be over that by this stage of her pregnancy?

She got into the waiting elevator, pressed 18, and checked out her disheveled reflection in the mirrored walls. Wisps of blonde hair had escaped from the thick braid she wore down her back. She pushed the loose strands of hair back behind her ears; this only seemed to accentuate the sharpness of her face. There were shadows under her blue eyes, and her bowed lips were skewed as though the air had been let out of one side. Even her nose, which she'd once considered an asset, had turned into a source of amusement for the Miller clan, who referred to it as "Kali's tiny *goyisha* nose." She spit on her finger and rubbed off a trace of paint.

The elevator came to a sliding stop, causing a fluttering in her stomach. She reached into her satchel for a saltine as she got off the elevator and practically bumped into her husband.

"Seth." Kali took a step backward.

He was only a couple of inches taller than she, about five foot six, and tightly built like a small, perfect "Ken" doll. He was still wearing the white shirt, striped burgundy tie, and navy suit pants he'd put on that morning, but she could swear there were no wrinkles in the shirt. She glanced down at her own red sneakers covered with Rorschach globs of paint.

“Thank God you’re here.” He ran his hand over his head. His dark hair was so closely cropped it looked lacquered on.

“Couldn’t be that bad.”

“Not that bad? Mom’s hovering, and Dad’s blackmailed me into playing golf on Sunday with some people he thinks would be good for my career. Golf, Kali.”

“Oooo. That is bad.”

“Don’t make fun. You know I hate that scene. Small talk about football, then drinks in the locker room with all that cigar smoke. I’d much rather be home with you.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“You know I would.”

She had that nice feeling inside—like she was immersed in a warm honeycomb. They went down the hallway to the Millers’ apartment. Close, but not quite touching. Who needed physical groping when the mental and emotional connections were so strong?

The front door was slightly ajar and a mixture of spices that were unfamiliar to Kali wafted into the hallway. At least nothing smelled burnt.

Seth was studying the door like it was a stone wall he was about to charge.

“You know, your dad’s probably right about the career stuff,” she said.

“Yeah.” He blew out a puff of air, his lips twitching like a gerbil’s. “But I wish I could just be a lawyer and not a whore.”

“A lawyer that isn’t a whore? Isn’t that some kind of oxymoron?”

He smiled. “Thanks for the support, baby.” He glanced down at Kali’s abdomen. “By the way, how’s Bucephalus doing?”

“Oh, lord. Please let’s not name our child after a horse.”

“Not just a horse. Alexander the Great’s mighty horse. A name that represents strength and excellence.”

“It’s definitely better than Isambard—your morning suggestion. But what if it’s a girl?”

“Hmmm. A girl.” His eyebrows went into a squiggle above his fudge-brown eyes. “Bucephala?”

A singsong soprano voice leaked into the hallway from somewhere in the apartment. "Se-eth. Se-eth," Mrs. Miller called.

They looked at each other for a moment.

"Bucephala," Kali said. "Somehow I don't think your parents would approve."

And they both laughed.

They ate in the dining room by candlelight. The table was set with gold-rimmed china and cut crystal wine glasses—a family heirloom, Mitzi never failed to mention. Al Miller sat at the head of the table, Seth on one side of him, Kali on the other. Mitzi was in the kitchen putting final touches on the main course. Although Kali had gotten up to help several times, Mitzi kept shooing her out of the kitchen.

Al was telling Seth a story, gesturing with his hands, his grayish-blue eyes wide with excitement. He had lost most of the hair on top of his head. What remained was pure white and worn longish around his deeply tanned face.

Kali settled back against the cushioned dining chair. She felt cocooned here—a member of a real family.

From where she was sitting, she had a view of the living room, which was done in a rich palette of browns and beiges and wonderful textures—chocolaty chenille-covered sofas, silk russet throw pillows, a tweedy rug over hardwood flooring. The sliding doors to the balcony were closed, but she could see the lights of towering condos against a black sky.

Mitzi, still in the striped apron she wore over a sleeveless white camisole and pencil-thin jeans, carried a casserole dish in from the kitchen with oversized gloves. She had corded, defined arms and a head of wild, curly auburn hair, which made her look like a moppet despite her recently having turned sixty.

She set the casserole on the table. "Ta-da!" Her skin was freckled and wrinkly from too much sun, but Mitzi wouldn't consider the idea of cosmetic surgery, even though her husband was a well-regarded plastic surgeon.

"It smells so good," Kali said.

“Brisket and potato *kugel*,” Mitzi said. “And the *kugel*’s vegetarian, Kali, just for you.”

“*Kugel*?”

Mitzi laughed. “I keep forgetting you weren’t born into it. *Kugel*. It’s the Yiddish word for pudding. I guess they didn’t teach you that in your conversion classes.”

“No, but maybe they should have. I would have loved learning about Jewish food—especially how to cook it.”

“Ha!” Al said. “Imagine—classes in *kugel* and *kneydlach*. Then everyone would want to convert to Judaism and we’d lose our exclusivity.”

Kali smiled. Although Seth’s parents weren’t particularly religious, it was important to them that their sons marry Jewish girls so their grandchildren would be Jewish under Judaic law. Kali also didn’t want her kids to be confused or torn about their religion, so she had decided to convert. Besides, after growing up with no religious beliefs, she welcomed the chance to belong somewhere.

“So what’s new with our little artist?” Al asked.

“Kali’s been asked to do the illustrations for another children’s book,” Seth said.

“How nice,” Mitzi said. “I love your work. Especially those beautiful fairies and adorable cherubs. Are you going to make a mural in the nursery?”

Seth was mouthing something. *Bucephalus*. He winked.

“I’m planning to,” Kali said, holding back the urge to laugh, “but I’m going to wait a while.”

“Very smart,” Mitzi said. “No reason to tempt the fates.”

They ate and drank. Al entertained them with a story about a woman who had begged him to surgically alter her husband’s face to look like George Clooney.

“Now, mind you,” Al said, shoveling a forkful of brisket into his mouth, “the husband was this big, ugly clod who bore about as much resemblance to Clooney as a gorilla to a deer. So I said to the wife—”

“More sparkling cider, Kali?” Mitzi held up the bottle. The others were drinking wine.



"A little, thanks."

"And I said, ma'am, this is a complex procedure involving a great deal of discomfort and recovery time. With your husband's facial structure, I'm not sure how close I can get to Clooney. And the wife thought for a minute and says to me, 'Well, how about Schwarzenegger, then?'"

Everyone laughed, Al the loudest.

Although Seth was smiling, his eyes seemed disengaged. He was probably thinking about his trial tomorrow. Or maybe he was worrying about the golf game next Sunday. He'd loosened his tie and rolled up his shirtsleeves, exposing lean, pale arms covered with dark hair and the thin gold watch she'd given him for their first anniversary a couple of months before.

"Isn't Schwarzenegger one of your *landsmen*?" Al said to Kali.

"Excuse me?" Kali always felt awkward when they used Yiddish, like it was a secret language. "*Landsmen*? What is that?"

"There I go again. A *landsmen* is someone from the same hometown. I thought I remembered someone saying your grandmother was from Austria, like Schwarzenegger."

"That's right." Kali took a sip of her cider.

"You'd never know it," Al said. "She has no accent. She must have moved here when she was a little girl."

"I don't think so. I believe she came later." Kali felt herself blush. She only had the vaguest idea of when her grandmother had moved to the United States and of the circumstances.

"Al," Mitzi said, "pour me a little wine, please."

Al reached for the wine. "Beautiful country, Austria. What part's she from?"

"I'm not quite sure." Kali noticed a splotch of turquoise paint on one of her fingernails. "She doesn't really talk about it."

A peculiar silence fell over the table. Everyone looked down at their food and concentrated on eating.

"This is terrific brisket, Mitzi." Al's voice was too cheerful. "Just like your mom used to make."

"It's her recipe."

Kali took another sip of cider. So what if her grandmother was from Austria? It wasn't like she had any involvement with the terrible things that had taken place during the war. She put her glass down, grazing the side of a serving dish.

Everyone looked up at the tinkle of breaking glass.

"Oh no. Your good crystal."

"Are you okay?" Seth said. "You didn't cut yourself, did you?"

Al reached for Kali's hand and turned it over in his. "She's fine. No cuts."

"I'm really sorry," Kali said.

"It's nothing," her mother-in-law said. "No big deal."

"It's just a glass, Mom," Seth said.

"I said it was no big deal."

Kali felt her phone vibrate in the pocket of her dress. She ignored it, the moment too awkward for her to check the caller ID.

Seth looked at her, eyebrows in a squiggle.

Her phone stopped, but a few seconds later began vibrating again.

Mitzi was picking up the pieces of glass from the table, putting them on a plate.

"Isn't that your phone, dear?" Al asked.

"Yes."

"Well, go ahead and answer it."

Kali slipped it out, glancing at a number she didn't recognize. "Hello," she said. "Yes, this is she."

She listened to the voice at the other end. "What?" Kali's stomach did a somersault. "You're sure it's nothing serious?"

Seth and his parents were watching her, his parents with concern, Seth with something more like panic.

"Yes. I know where it is. I'll be there as soon as I can." Kali closed the phone and bit down on her lower lip.

"What's wrong?" Mitzi asked.

Kali pushed out her chair and stood. "Seth, we need to go. That was the hospital. My grandmother."

"Oh dear." Mitzi brought her hands to her face.

"She's okay," Kali said. "But she almost burned her house down."