

Number 26

By Danielle Wolf

"I don't usually do this," I said twisting the forkful of spaghetti.

She sipped her wine. "Do what?"

"This." A small complicated gesture to her and the food. Then I shoved a tangle of spaghetti into my mouth and chewed.

"So you don't bring all of your dates to Chuck's Spaghetti Station?" she asked, tearing off a chunk of bread.

For the first time that night I laughed. Which I normally don't do.

She lowered her voice into a deep Southern twang: "Chuck's Spaghetti Station. Serving lukewarm spaghetti, awkward small talk, and shitty wine since 1985." She raised her glass. "It's like church."

"If that were true maybe I'd go."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Maybe I'd go back."

I took a small sip of the red wine in my cup and struggled to choke it down. "Where are you headed?"

"Denver," she said. She combed her hand through her hair, stared down into her food.

"What's there?"

"A fresh start."

"I know that feeling. The need to get away. To find something new. Something different."

She nodded. I moved closer.

"I'm just glad I finally had the courage to leave."

"You're here now," I said and touched her hand. "I'm glad for that much."

When she looked at me her eyes were odd and vulnerable. Then a little smile eased across her lips.

"Me too."

I knew I had her then.

An hour passed. The kitchen closed. She led me to her room. On the door handle, a sign: DO NOT DISTURB. A king size bed - mauve sheets, faded from years of use. Long brown curtains blocked the light from the only window in the room. She sat down on the bed, waiting.

“Mind if I use your bathroom?” I asked.

She clicked on the radio and pointed down the hall. “So, Miss Roberts. Is it Barbara, Babs, or just B?”

“Who do you want me to be?” I closed the door. A flicker of fluorescent light, a soft hum. The radio music trailing as if from a tin can. In the mirror my reflection stares back. Dull-eyed and thin-lipped. Hair pulled back into a ponytail. A few blonde strands fray at the ends. A slight turn of the head. The tattoo below my right ear. The shape of a bird wing. A little cuckoo bird, my mother used to say. But that was long ago.

A turn of the handle, then a spray of cloudy water. Cold was the only option. I splashed my face and scrubbed. First, the lips, then the eyes -- left, and then right, like all of the other times. I turned off the faucet and watched the little whirlpool dance around the drain. I didn’t bother to look back at the mirror. I always looked the same. Until after.

“Are you coming?” Her words slurred together a little at the ends. Only cheap wine had that wonderful effect.

When I turned the corner she was sprawled across the bed beneath the sheets. Her bare shoulder caught the light. Her tan skin nearly glowed. Bending down, I kissed the skin just above her clavicle. Then another along her neck. Eyes closed, she was a short breath, stunned. With my fingers I removed the stray hair from her face and tucked it behind her ear. She leaned in, waiting. I smelled the sour wine on her breath. Then a gentle kiss on the lips. That soft touch. The beginning of something beautiful. She pulled me into the bed and we started in on one another.

She removed my shirt, pulling it softly over my head. Tugged my jeans off over my feet, even tossed them across the room onto the chair. She pressed small wet kisses up the inside of my thigh. My breath quickened. I swallowed hard. My eyes snapped shut. I felt her hands over my body, as if she wanted to be everywhere at once.

Her eyes were still and wide. There was a small space between her lips, enough for a secret to slip out or a whisper. I called her name and waited. One mississippi, two mississippi, three mississippi... 26 mississippi. But no words came, not so much as a blink. I sat on the edge of the bed, watched the morning clouds drag shadows across the room. I could still smell her perfume. That sharp floral scent stuck beneath my skin. In the shower I used a rough bar of soap to scrape it out.

I dressed in her clothes: yellow sweater dress, long sleeves, floral print, a brown belt around the waist. Boots, ankle high, a scuff along the left toe. I took the watch from her wrist and slipped it on. Earrings: sea shells on brass chains. I bet she thought she could hear the ocean. Tweed purse, black with white stripes. At the bottom: tissues, pain pills, eye drops, and loose change. A black and white photo of Audrey Hepburn stretched along her clutch. I fished out her ID: Makena Lee Cash. March 3, 1983. My Number 26.

Another hour. Down the last of her Pom Super Tea, mindlessly switch her earrings from one ear to the other.

I locked the door behind me and tossed the keycard in the garbage at the bottom of the stairs. I didn't look back, not once. Across the parking lot the bus growled and sputtered and then evened out. An older man was tearing tickets at the front. His hands shook and I thought how it could've been the heat. A little sweat gathered above his lip. He stared down at my ticket before he ripped off the stub.

"Welcome aboard, Miss Cash," he said and smiled.

"Well aren't you the sweetest thang," I said. "Call me Makena."

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