

Chapter One

Joe didn't look at my face today.

He's gone. Forever, or so he said. I believed him because he never looked at me when he said the words. He didn't touch his coffee, didn't play with the spoon. He only stared at the green spot on the carpet at the Landslide cafe. Our place.

Mine now.

He always looked at me. Used to say he loved my face. That's how I knew he meant it this time.

Not even a good-bye today. No "see you pretty face." Just walked away.

Heard the ding of a text message, dug in my purse. It's not Joe. It's not for me.

The woman with the red hat at the next table giggled. It's for her. She's too old to giggle. Only little girls should. Her red hat has a purple flower.

I looked around for a piercing laugh that rang in my ears. In my head.

"What's so funny?" Vera said.

Stopped. Realized the laugh came from me.

"Ah... don't know."

A second of silence.

“More coffee, Isabel?”

“Thank you.”

“Joe coming back? Does he want pie?”

Joe always wanted pie.

“Not today,” I said, looked out the window.

Vera reached for my hand. I felt her touch and laughed. She smiled. Could everybody see my pain?

“Excuse me, Vera,” the woman with the red had said.

Vera let go of my hand.

“A pot of Earl Grey, please. My husband’s coming.”

I hate Earl Grey. Tastes like perfume.

The sound of the door. We both looked up. No, not her husband. Not Joe. A beautiful, strong young man with a bouquet of red roses. Long, curly brown hair. Reminded me of Peter, my high school sweetheart. Haven’t thought of Peter in, what? Twenty-some years. Last time I saw him was here. And here Joe and I had our first date when I was in college. UCLA.

The young man looked around, took a seat at a booth by the window. Waited.

The woman picked up her phone, started to type. Looked at her fingers. Fat, red like her hat. I should take her shopping. Take her to the gym. Make her my friend. Force her to be my friend.

Red shoes. Red? A woman her age, my age, should not wear red shoes. She took out a compact and applied more red lipstick. What's with all the red? Next came the rouge. Blush, that's right. Only old people call it rouge. That's what Joe said. How he knew these things I can only imagine.

The woman looked cheap. Oh, what did I care? But I did because I was alone and she was not.

Forty-eight. Daughter, girlfriend, wife. Always somebody's something, except mother. Joe never wanted children. Until now.

Left me for a younger woman, such a cliché. Happened all the time, right? Common, right? Didn't feel so common when it happened to me.

New life, new beginning. Why then does it feel like the end?

Because Joe hasn't loved my face in a long time.