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“This was a mistake,” I said, peering down the hall of the art building at a display of framed watercolors and a bulletin board smothered with notices of upcoming events.

“Why?” Laurie asked.

I tried to untangle my thoughts, but found no explanation to give my friend. “Because it’s bad luck to return to the scene of a crime.”

“Marguerite, you haven’t done anything wrong.” She nudged me forward. “Come on. We’re going to be late.”

As I led the way into the shadowy stairwell, memories poured over me. Back in college I’d waltzed up these stairs with my paint box in one hand and a stretched

canvas in the other. And in the painting studio I'd found my lover, Phil.

With Laurie on my heels, I reached the second floor and shoved open the door. I inhaled the smell of turpentine and oil paint, what used to be a sweet perfume. But tonight the biting odor assaulted my nostrils. Moving forward, I spotted our room, number 213. I slowed my pace and tried to settle my jagged breath, but a tornado of anxiety whirled through my chest, as if I were about to topple off a cliff.

Laurie swished past me and breezed through the classroom's doorway. Watching her angular silhouette disappear, I stood for a moment in disbelief. Why had I let her bamboozle me into taking this class? This was the last place on earth I wanted to be.

Get a grip, I told myself. There was no reason to come unglued. I could fake it through one evening; I was a master at camouflaging my emotions. Not even my parents or best friends knew the real me. And that was how it needed to stay.

I straightened my spine and widened my shoulders—the way I did when tackling a difficult real-estate client—and followed Laurie into the room where ten people sat at low worktables set up in a semicircle.

She and I found vacant seats off to the left just as a man standing at the front of the room said, “Good evening. I’m Professor Marsh, your instructor for this session of Beginning Drawing.”

He wasn't what I expected. Judging by his thick peppered hair, he was probably fifty, about ten years older than I. He seemed muscular under his collared shirt, as though he worked out with weights. No wedding ring, I couldn't help but notice, and not bad looking. But I'd vowed to steer clear of artists. Once was enough.

Professor Marsh scanned the students, and his gaze settled on the woman in the seat next to me. “Please, call me Henry,” he said, the corners of his mouth lifting.

Behind him stood a chalkboard. On its greenish surface in a bold, slanted hand were written the words: *Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up. Pablo Picasso.*

“Tonight, we’ll review some drawing basics.” Henry’s baritone voice rang with easy confidence. “We’ll explore how our eyes perceive the three-dimensional world, then translate those images onto a two-dimensional surface.”

As he spoke about drawing techniques, I surveyed the still life arranged on the table next to him: a dented brass kettle, a stack of weathered textbooks, three mason jars, and a hideous-looking orange lamp with a crooked shade. Had he brought this mishmash from home? I grimaced as I imagined what the inside of this guy’s house looked like. Probably a typical artist’s hovel, I thought, remembering my ex-husband Phil’s apartment the last time I’d seen it. His place was a pigsty, and it stunk of cigarette smoke and stale beer.

Henry adjusted the lampshade, then stood back. “Regard these objects as geometric shapes: cubes, cones, and prisms. Nothing more than solid shapes sitting on top of other solid shapes.” His face brimmed with enthusiasm as he gave instructions on cross-hatching and blending methods used to create the illusion of shade. “Now let’s get to work.”

I watched my classmates sharpen their pencils and spread out their drawing paper. At least I wasn’t the oldest person there. More than half of the students in the class were what my eighteen-year-old son would call middle-aged, meaning over thirty.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Henry standing at the far end of the desks chatting with a young redheaded woman. Our professor probably relished the attention of pretty, naive students, I thought, and maybe even took advantage of their eagerness to please, if you catch my drift.

He moved to the next student and stopped to make a suggestion. I admonished myself to get busy and at least appear to be participating. Slipping my new notebook out of its bag, I opened the pad to the first page and stared at the gaping white surface. When it was time for Henry to view my work, what would I show him? I couldn't remember how to draw anymore. It had been twenty years.

My slacks pinched me around the waist, and I felt cool dampness gathering under my armpits. The desire to jump up and escape seized me—almost lifting me off my chair. But I couldn't leave; Laurie was my ride home. Anyway, I wasn't the type to skitter away with her tail between her legs. I was my father's daughter, the eldest child, a single mother who had made it on her own.

Quite honestly, it required all my willpower to force my attention back to the blank page. Focusing my eyes on the kettle's wooden handle, I pressed my pencil tip to the center of the paper and started drawing. What an odd sensation, almost as if the pencil had a mind of its own. I quickly filled in the dark area and was soon working on the spout.

I looked up to see Henry wandering down the line of students observing their work. Laurie, her eyes sparkling from behind frosted bangs, giggled when he came by her desk.

"I haven't drawn since grade school," she said, one shoulder lifting into a coy shrug.

“You’re doing fine,” he said. “Have fun, and don’t worry about making a finished product.” He stepped behind me. My shoulders hunched and my hand gripped my pencil as he glanced at my work. I held my breath and braced myself for his critique, but instead of addressing me he said hello to the older woman on my other side.

“Emily McBride, I’m honored to have you in my class.”

Emily’s beautifully wrinkled face bloomed. “When I saw your name in the Extension School catalog last week, I couldn’t resist,” she said. Her silver hair was combed back into a loose bun and secured by two wooden picks. “And I’ve missed you. We haven’t seen you at church for a while.”

“I’ve been trying something new. Smaller fits me better right now.”

“That’s fine, dear. Just know you’re missed.”

“Thank you.” He patted the back of her speckled hand, then strolled to the front of the class.

So, he’s religious, I thought, which told me a truckload about him, and none of it good.

Laurie leaned over to me and bumped elbows. “This is fabulous, don’t you think?” she said. “I’ve already learned so much.”

I managed a smile. “I’m glad you’re having fun.” At least one of us was.

“Good work, everyone,” Henry said. “That first forty-five minutes flew by.” He unbuttoned his sleeves and rolled them up, revealing a splotch of yellow ocher paint on one forearm. “We’ve explored how the eye perceives objects as solid masses. Now let’s look at the same grouping as nothing but lines. Extending one arm, use your index finger as a pointer and visually define the contour of each item on the

table.” He demonstrated with his hand as he spoke. “Take that finger around the edges and through the shapes.”

I don’t know if I was being obstinate, or maybe grumpy, but his instructions annoyed me. I kept my hands in my lap as the other students, their arms reaching out like children playing Simon Says, followed his directions.

“Continue studying the contours,” he said, “and without looking down at your paper use a pencil to record what you see. Let your eyes tell you where to move your hand.”

The others turned the pages of their notebooks. The rustling of paper prickled my eardrums, and my stomach clenched into a fist. Once more, it took Herculean strength to position my pencil on a new piece of paper, then I fastened my gaze to the still life and began outlining a jar. A moment later, much to my surprise, my pencil glided across the paper in a flowing line and captured the curve of the lamp.

Just as I was beginning to enjoy myself, I noticed Henry walking my way. I tried to look as though I were concentrating on my work and paying no attention to him. Again, he paused for a moment, glanced at my paper, and said nothing.

Was my drawing so awful it didn’t warrant a comment? My throat tightened around a growing lump, but I swallowed it down and told myself I didn’t need his approval. I was a grown woman, for goodness sake. Who cared what he thought?

“You’re all doing beautifully,” he said, striding to the front of the room. But I didn’t feel included in his gratuitous compliment. If he thought I was doing well, he would have spoken to me directly.

He glanced at the clock on the wall. “Let’s take a short break. I brought a thermos of decaf, and there’s a pop

machine down the hall for those who've heard how bad my coffee is."

The sound of chair legs scraping the floor and voices chattering filled the room. I watched most of the class stretch to their feet, then straggle over to the thermos and Styrofoam cups.

"I love our teacher, don't you?" Laurie said, gushing like a teenager experiencing her first crush. "What a wise man."

I looked at her crude drawing—a jumble of squiggly lines—and felt a wave of fondness for my dear friend of eighteen years. "It looks like you're doing great," I said.

"I figure I can only improve."

While the other students mingled and inspected each other's sketches, Laurie and I talked about our kids.

"Day after tomorrow my Rob's off to college." I raked a hand through my shoulder-length hair and found a snarl. "It's hard to believe. Like the end of an era." Rob's choosing to attend school down in California had seemed like a good idea last spring, but not anymore. I couldn't imagine how I would fill the long expanses of my days without my only child close by.

"Are we even old enough to have children in college?" Laurie asked.

I coughed a laugh. "I'm afraid so."

"I can't believe I'm turning forty in six months."

"Welcome to the club." Not that sliding into another decade had hit me that hard. I liked to think I'd grown wiser. Although looking back now, it was plain to see I hadn't.

"Never mind. I've decided to stay thirty-nine for a few more years," she said, a grin fanning across her face.

I heard footsteps behind us, then recognized my ex-husband's voice saying, "Let me introduce you to the mother of my child."

He sounded like an elephant trumpeting in my ears, and my first impulse was to dive under my desk for cover. But I figured I was imagining things. Phil here? Impossible.

I inhaled a whiff of spicy aftershave, his favorite brand, then felt a pat on my shoulder, making me flinch. I turned around to find his baby blue eyes gazing into mine. Against all logic, a warm breeze buzzed through my chest as I examined his handsome face crowned by curly blond hair. I hadn't seen him for more than a year, but he hadn't aged one bit, which struck me as profoundly unfair.

I clenched my jaw and waited for this momentary attraction to Phil to pass. It always did. I reminded myself that he'd given me nothing but grief. And if I hadn't threatened to sue him two years ago, he never would have paid me the back child support.

Henry, several inches taller than Phil, stood at his side. "Hank, meet Marguerite Carr, my ex-wife," Phil said, as if he were introducing his two best friends.

"Margo," he said to me, "do you remember my talking about Hank Marsh? We go way back—shared studio space and did several shows together." His hand moved to Henry's shoulder. "You're in for a treat. This man's talented."

If I wasn't mistaken, Henry was avoiding making eye contact with me. I flushed with annoyance. "Nice to meet you," I said, and noticed his vision finally taking me in.

He replied, "Good evening," then pivoted his head to speak to Laurie, who said something about how much she was enjoying the class.



“This is just like old times finding you here,” Phil said, smoothing his jaw line with his fingertips.

I got to my feet. “I wouldn’t go that far.” I looked him over and saw that a dusting of white plaster sprinkled the front of his ragged jeans and T-shirt. I sniffed the air for alcohol. He appeared to be sober. And I couldn’t even detect a hint of cigarette smoke.

I crossed my arms and said, “I’m still not comfortable with you driving Rob to school.”

“I thought we had this all settled. I’m the one with the passenger van, and you’re the one who has a hard time taking a day off from work.”

“Are you going to show up?”

“Of course.” He raised his right hand as if being sworn in. “I’ll be there. I promise.”

I knew better than to believe what he said. I arched an eyebrow the way my father did to show disapproval. “See that you are.” I couldn’t stand having Rob disappointed again by his flaky father.

“I’m helping a buddy do some casting tonight and need to get back to work.” He turned to Henry, and the two men began discussing a gallery opening as they strolled toward the door.

“I haven’t seen Phil in years,” Laurie said. She watched him shake Henry’s hand, then leave. “He looks different somehow. Better.”

I frowned as a thousand agonizing memories coursed through my brain. When we were married, I’d seen Phil crawl into the bathroom, hang his head in the toilet and vomit his insides out, and then get up and chug down another beer. I’d smelled marijuana and cheap perfume on his clothes after a

night of partying with his buddies. And in the dead of the night, I'd felt his hot breath caress my ear, then heard him murmur another woman's name.

"Not that I'm suggesting you two—" Laurie added.

"Don't worry," I snapped. "I know way too much about Philip Carr to ever be sucked in again."



I watched Laurie zoom in on the display of best-sellers planted inside the doorway of Seattle's biggest Barnes and Noble.

"There it is." She scooped up a hardbound book with the title *Unearthing Your Childhood Dreams* printed across its jacket and handed it to me. I turned it over to examine the photo of the author, a woman in her early thirties with short permed hair and a pixie face.

"Are you sure this is good?" I asked. I didn't have extra money to waste on books I didn't need.

"I saw her on *Oprah*. She sounded fabulous." Laurie grabbed another copy and hugged it to her breast. "Let's both buy one. Please. Then I'll have someone to talk to about it."

As we headed to the cash register, I silently tallied my collection of self-help books. Most of the two dozen or so pertained to child rearing, a subject quickly becoming obsolete. I gave the cashier my money, careful to slip the receipt in the book in case I decided to return it.

Moments later, Laurie and I climbed the stairs to the café on the mezzanine. Up ahead I could hear an espresso machine blast, then sputter. On the final step, I felt exhaustion blanket me like a lead apron. I scanned the room, which overlooked the

rest of the store, to see that only three of the dozen or so tables were occupied. I bought a single nonfat latte and plopped down at the nearest empty table.

Laurie picked up her order, then trotted over clutching a tall mocha latte and a scone. At five-eight, five inches taller than I, she seemed able to consume practically anything and remain her gorgeous trim self, while I needed to watch my calories. And she was a head-turning blonde—almost my opposite in hair color and skin tone.

She sat across from me, wriggled out of her red quilted jacket, and bit into her scone.

“Sorry if I’m not very good company,” I said, recalling my depressing 8:00 a.m. sales meeting. It seemed like every other realtor in my office was enjoying a dynamite month but me. And the past few months hadn’t been much better. “It’s been a long day.”

“Don’t fade out on me yet,” she said. “I’m too pumped to go home and watch Dave vegetate in front of the TV or deal with the kids’ homework.” She tasted her latte and left fuchsia lipstick on the cup’s rim. “Mondays will be ladies’ night out, okay?”

“I’m still not sure a night class is going to work for me.” I had to find a way to get out of going again. “The real-estate market’s hopping, and I want to be free to meet with clients.” No need to mention I’d nearly run out of prospective buyers.

“You’ve got to keep coming. It would be terrible to miss even one class.”

“Sweetie, I only went to keep you company. You’ll do fine without me.”

“But it wouldn’t be half as much fun.” She watched me rip open a packet of sugar substitute. “You’re lucky you can already draw so well. How come you never do it?”

“I guess I don’t feel like it.” As I stirred the white crystals into my drink, my brain searched for the true reason. “No self-discipline maybe.” The past twenty years whirred by in my mind like a one-star movie on fast-forward. “Somehow when Phil and Rob showed up in my life, I lost interest. It’s just as well, because it’s almost impossible to earn a living as an artist. I should have gone to the school of business instead.”

“I love that painting in your living room.”

“Thanks.” My *Morning at Cannon Beach*, the only painting I still owned, hung above my couch. I supposed some might have called it well crafted or even quite good, but I’d completed the piece so long ago I felt as though someone else had painted it.

“I wish I had your talent,” Laurie said. “But I had fun in class, and I think our teacher’s a doll.”

“I’d better warn you, any friend of Phil’s is probably a flake.”

“Maybe. But that older lady knew Henry from church. He might be a good Christian man.”

Let me tell you, the word *Christian* grated in my ears. “Some very wicked people have called themselves Christians,” I said, hearing anger amplify my words. I glanced around the room and was glad nobody at the surrounding tables had heard me. I lowered my voice. “That’s the last trait I’m looking for in a man.”

“There are worse things.”

At that moment an orange-haired youth with a ring in his nose sauntered across the room.

Laurie chuckled into her hand. “Don’t you agree?” she said.

“I suppose.” I sipped my latte to avoid continuing our conversation. I knew she attended church every now and

then, and I didn't want to hurt her feelings. But as far as I was concerned, religion served as a pacifier for the ignorant and the weak.

"Hey, what happened to the cute accountant you brought over for dinner a few months ago?" she finally said. "He looked like a keeper."

"He was boring. No sense of humor." I yawned with drama. "I fell asleep every time he opened his mouth. And he drove like a little old lady. I couldn't wait to get home."

She tossed me an exasperated look. "I've heard a list of complaints about every man you've dated."

"I don't care. I have Rob and my girlfriends and work to think about. Now, if I could find someone like your husband, Dave—a cute, successful businessman—I'd marry him on the spot."

"No way. I see you with an intellectual, a scholar."

"I tried that head-in-the-clouds type once, and we know how that ended. Since the divorce I've learned to rely on the logical side of my brain." I sighed as I remembered how innocent I'd been, and how stupid. "Phil told me right from the start his parents were supporting him, that he hated work, and all he wanted to do was hang out with other artists." I tapped my temple. "He was completely honest, and I married him anyway." Not that I'd had much choice.

"I was hoping after we had a child, his adolescent behavior would change," I said. "Like magic, Phil would grow up and metamorphose into my Prince Charming. Is that pathetic or what?"

"Don't think Dave and I haven't been through the wringer a few times. He's not perfect either." Laurie cupped her chin in one hand and leaned on her elbow. "About ten

years ago, things were so bad I almost called it quits. Remember?”

I eyed her one-carat solitaire wedding ring. “I’m glad you two came back to your senses.”

“Yeah, I’d hate being single in today’s world.” She must have seen my features sagging, because she added, “Oh, sorry, Marguerite.”

“That’s okay.” I noticed a couple strolling by, their arms looped around each other’s waists. “I’d consider marriage again if the perfect man materialized. But being single has its advantages too.”

Although I couldn’t think of any at the moment.



As I mounted the porch and stepped inside my small two-story Victorian, I listened to Laurie’s Lexus roll away from the curb, then purr down the street. I carried my new book to the second floor and tossed it on the bed. My work attire, a boring navy blue pants suit and white cotton blouse, lay draped across the back of the chair. I dragged off my clothes, tossed them on top of the suit, and slipped into my nightgown. Then I fluffed my pillows against the headboard and slid between the sheets.

My hand found the book. At first I just stared at the jacket and contemplated the title: *Unearthing Your Childhood Dreams*. I wondered if I had the strength or desire to dig up anything. Not really, but I opened the book to the first chapter and started reading.

“As we grow to adulthood,” the author wrote, “we become our own worst enemies, our most ruthless critics. Kind and

encouraging to those around us, generous in our praise, we recognize ability only in other people's creations. When we hear our own unique voice or see our own pen on paper, it seems somehow meager and inadequate."

The first step toward achieving one's lost childhood dreams, the author claimed, was to recall them. A lengthy exercise with numerous questions made me sleepy. I got stuck when I couldn't remember my favorite food or teacher in elementary school. And my favorite toys? Surely I had some, but all I could recall were my art supplies. I'd always longed to be a famous artist.

I clapped the book shut and set it on the bed table next to a ten-year-old photo of Rob cradling our cairn terrier, Charlie, then a puppy the size and color of a russet potato. I remembered Rob begging for a dog, as if his world would snuff to an end without one. Charlie, a squirming bundle of energy, was my son's best friend for more than a year until my boy discovered lacrosse, a sport, he informed me, originally played by Native Americans. Then, when not in school, Rob often skipped out the door carrying his lacrosse stick in search of someone to throw him the ball, something I couldn't do worth a hoot.

I remembered how Rob—who'd once snuggled on my lap with his knees tucked under his chin—started shrugging off my embraces as if I were a stranger with bad breath. By age eleven, he couldn't fit in my lap anymore, his giant feet reaching the floor and ready to escape. Almost overnight he towered over me and had to lean down to receive an obligatory kiss on his cheek. Then the girls started calling.

I yawned, but my lungs refused to expand all the way. Maybe I should have bought a book on empty-nest syndrome,

I thought. Is that what I was going through? My father always said a midlife crisis was an excuse for not taking responsibility for one's obligations. Well, I was sick of acting responsibly.

I flicked off the lamp and sank into the mattress, its spongy softness comforting my stiff back. I tugged the covers up around my neck and drifted into slumber.

After what seemed like a few seconds, I awoke in a cave of darkness. I instructed myself to fall asleep again, but my brain thrummed with activity. In a few hours I would help Rob pack for college. I wondered if I'd collected enough cardboard boxes for all his clothes and his sound system. Would he have too much to fit in Phil's van? I dreaded Rob's leaving. I couldn't imagine life without him.

Hoping to doze off, I forced myself to lie in bed for another hour, but visions of my son kissing me good-bye swirled through my head like snowflakes scattered by an icy wind. Finally, I flipped over and read 5:30 on the clock's illuminated face. I staggered to my feet, put on my chenille robe, and padded downstairs. Charlie watched from his basket in the corner of the kitchen as I poured water into the coffee-maker.

"Too early for an old guy like you?"

Charlie moaned a lengthy response and stayed put.

I opened the canister and breathed in the nutty aroma of Italian Roast, then scooped grounds into the paper filter and switched on the coffeemaker. When the urn stood half full, I poured myself a cup of the syrupy liquid and headed to the living room. As I eased down onto the couch, my eyes turned to the window. I expected to behold nothing but dismal blackness, but instead saw a huge, glowing moon staring back



at me. The porcelain sphere, so brilliant it seemed to produce its own light, was framed by a halo of mist.

Feeling dazzled, I almost dashed upstairs for my camera, but I knew the sky's splendor would appear insignificant on a three-by-five snapshot. I gazed at the moon like a child staring at a Christmas tree, trying to affix every detail in my mind. Then without thought, I took a piece of scratch paper lying on the coffee table, grabbed a pencil, and began sketching the moon. First with a heavy hand I drew a small circle, then a paler one around it to depict the ring of fog. Finally, blurred lines described the wisps of horizontal clouds partially covering the moon.

For several moments I looked down at my finished drawing. When I glanced back to the window, I saw a bank of clouds had taken over the sky, completely masking the moon. Only a piercing shaft of light shone down to the earth like a dagger.

I watched the morning sun tint the clouds smoky-pink, and the vague shapes of my garden transform into shrubs and bushes. A robin warbled up the scale, then another bird answered.

I felt a pleasant tightness in my throat. Many years earlier, I'd experienced those same sensations when I gazed upon my new baby boy wondering what to name him. Even before his birth, Robert Laurence Carr had been a part of me.

This drawing was my new infant. And it begged for a sibling.