

13. A THING UNNATURAL

For the next few months, Helena threw herself into her work. She discovered a flair that had seem lost during her time with Tony. She had been so involved with work that it left her little time to think about romance. She would come home from work exhausted and just collapse in front to the television.

Then the shock wave hit her. She had given so much to Tony that she now wondered what had happened to her passionate side. She had been only a shadow moving through her life. Tony had even come to New York, and she deliberately avoided him.

She remembered their long nights together when they burned until the dawn. She missed waking up with him at her side. She found peace in their walks in Central Park. All of this was gone. For her own sake, she thought about contacting him, about rekindling their romance. But she realized their was nothing for her with Tony. Why had it taken her all her life to see this?

“You’re not going to call him,” it seemed incredulous to Stephanie.

“No, don’t even think about. I just miss something. I was part of this great drama. Now I feel like I’m just watching life pass me by.”

“You can’t let your past govern your present.”

“I know what all that means. I just don’t want to end up with some guy like we met that night at that bar.

“Clayton from Texas.”

They both giggled.

No man appealed to her at this point. She felt as if she was in mourning.

“You can’t feel like your life has ended.”

“I know, I know. It’s just beginning. I just don’t know where to start.

“You could go on another vacation.”

“I’m still recovering from months of vacation.”

“You still deserve another one.”

Helena no longer had a Vanessa to battle. She no longer had a Tony to win over. She wanted some new challenge. Something to reawaken that spark.

“Have you ever thought that you never really got over him? You just put your love away. Now it’s become this burden on you. You have to face what you’ve gone through.”

“Stephanie, you’re making no sense. One minute you’re telling me that I need a vacation. The next you want me to work through my time with Tony. I can’t do both.”

“I know.”

“I don’t know what to do.”

The firm had just been contracted to redesign the logo for a major telecommunications company. They hd just undergone a merger, and they needed a new design to reflect the change. It needed to incorporate the sense of trust that had been associated with the company under the former insignia. But the new logo needed to express all the hope of the new direction. Helena’s crisp lines and geometric intuitions were the perfect foundation for the new work. Stephanie could complement Helena’s approach by her more rounded and gentler style.

Both spent months in conferences trying to adapt their vision to the company’s expectations for itself. The result was an award winning campaign. They used their time well to

distinguish themselves and attract other clients.

Her accomplishments made up for the fiasco with Tony. Stephanie reminded her that even a recognized artist needed a personal life. It wasn't enough to capture the attention of the business world. Helena needed to assert her personality.

"You weren't meant to be on your own. It's not natural."

"I've been misled by a thing unnatural. I don't want more of the same."

She was tired of girls who couldn't live if they didn't have some man on their shoulder. If she was meant to be alone now, she would live with it. She didn't want to go running around looking for more of the same. She just couldn't function that way. Her life had been a whirlwind and she had lost her compass. Now sense had finally been restored.

She had been steadfast for months, even avoided his calls. Once more he would sheepishly try to win her back. What was his purpose? Hadn't he already made fair game of her. He had snuck back to New York City in the hopes of starting up something. But she made sure not to make contact with him. She even instructed security to make sure that he didn't show up unannounced. She took every precaution to guard her sanity.

The winter had buried her fantasies underneath a hard freeze. As the snows blew across New York, she was the farthest that she could ever be from the passionate London spring. The ice cold shut down her feelings. With all the snow outside, she could hibernate in the warmth of her apartment.

As a productive winter came to a close, she was ready for a much deserved rest. She needed to live again. She ended up taking a vacation in the Canaries. It had been the antidote to the winter chill. But she was still protecting herself after the upset with Tony. She kept to herself on the beach. She spent her time reading. And she went to bed early. It all gave her a chance to better enjoy the sea air.

On the way back, she stopped in London. It had originally been a short layover, but she wanted to take some time to see how she had changed in the past months. It was a risky gamble. She could have easily given in to the same feelings that had besieged her in previous months.

On a return trip to Bessborough Gardens, it became obvious to her how place had influenced her sense of design. It was this combination of freedom and order that had given her a unique style. In the midst of the city, this haven of liberty offered an alternative song. This tiny space was defiant in its cry. It was a new view of nature. It was at the heart of the city's progress. But it looked back on an appreciation of the wild and the spontaneous, the need to wander, to search for one's origins, to make one's own way. She had been so affirmative that she could never really conceive of Tony's contrived attitude. He was counterfeit when she had only known the real. She had been moved by appearances.

Although though she had used her art to advance a product, her time at Bessborough reminded her what was at the heart of her creative spirit. She had tried to live her life as an artist. She looked down at her hands. They had been honed to apply her drafting skills. But they were also the tools that she used to sculpt her ideal world. Even her thoughts seemed to be expressions of hands. They allowed her to sketch her visions, to make real what she first imagined.

Bessborough Gardens offered more to her. This was where her art came to life. The lifeless forms felt the breath of the gods. And Helena participated in the transformation. She

recognized the skills that she brought to bear on experience. She herself was her ultimate art form. And in Bessborough Gardens her body could express that freedom.

Tony had known how to take advantage of her skill. But he could never apply himself in the same way. It was fascinating how he had been such a critical presence for her. But he had only watched her development from the outside. Why had she been fooled by his craft? What had motivated him to pick her out in the first place.

Ophelia had finally given in to the powers of the waters. In this primary element, the ancients expressed a reverence for this power. If everything was water, the ripples of consciousness proceeded from the might of the waves. Ophelia had felt the storms of the mind tearing at her. She had been unable to subdue these forces. She had drowned in calm waters. But the effects were the same as the rampaging seas. How could the artist contain the contradictory energies that brewed inside the human soul? As Helena wandered through the Tate galleries she recognized the evident message. The storms of the sea were only a metaphor for the inner conflict. In these massive canvases, she observed great ships swallowed up by the waves. But artist knew that he could overcome these tidal flows. But there was a place where the sea met the sky, a place where the horizon broke apart. Where the disorientation of the spirit could not be calmed by clarity of vision. This was where all the color of the universe exploded in a glorious revelation. Where the seer went blind from the excess of light. She now passed into that realm.

She had previously visited this supernatural place in the excesses of passion. But she always felt that Tony wanted to own this place. It was as if he was seizing it away from her. She sought a more encompassing revelation, a spiritual transformation. All along she believed that he wanted the same.

When he had first gazed in the eyes of Vanessa, had he been driven by the same passion? She doubted it. What had he wanted from either woman? Helena sensed that he only knew how to suck someone bone dry. He never really gave of himself to become one with the universe. He had been driven by a rage that she had mistaken for love.

She wanted to find a man who could really appreciate her understanding. As she walked the gallery rooms, she recognized that their had been other souls who saw what she did. And she really wanted to share her realization with someone else. It just hadn't worked out how she had hoped.

It was a weekday morning. Groups of children were led by their teachers through the rooms. If only Helena could offer them a warning. It seemed futile. They would only laugh at her counsel. It would take years before they were ready. For many the first step would be a rebellion against what they held sacred. She admired their desire to explore. The idle chatter was often a distraction from the solemn quality of these rooms. But it was the first step to making the art real.

In these fresh young faces, the painter could see all the life that he would try to imbue in his canvasses. And the painter would tire in frustration at capturing that natural feel. The stiff form of the representation would cut off the natural joy from its life-giving spring. It would be the painter's struggle to try to get back all that he sacrificed in this process. Helena gave her body to this ideal. She wanted a man's touch to bring her to life in the same way that the painter struggled to reinvigorate his lost skill. She surrendered herself to the vision of these rooms. She

wanted her human encounters to echo with the same power.

The world of sight seemed to dance around her. And she heard the music. Its dynamic entered her body and shook it to its foundations. She could feel it pulsing in her veins. It gave solid form to her breath.

She remember that longing kiss that she had sought from Tony. It had been the sign that their love was blessed. She had tried to test out her theory about the kiss. She felt like a scientist of human passion. But she had given her reason up to these intense sensations. She felt that there was an aspect of vanity in it all.

She accepted Tony's motives because she had accepted them as hers as well. She wanted to acquire his power. She wanted his flattery. The longer that he stayed with her, the more she believed that her loveliness was greater than the fair Vanessa. Where Vanessa had been lifeless and cold, Helena's passion would burn with a thousand furnaces. Tony would praise her sun. He would adore her with a holy devotion.

Helena's idolatry had been an extension of her artistic sensibility. It had been downfall. But she found glory in its expression. She regaled in its pagan splendor. The human body was the be all and end all of the artist. She kneeled in praise of its transfiguration.

Down deep, she knew that their love would destroy both of them. It was so ravenous in its expression. They had given so much to their passion that nothing else mattered. It was not art that inspired them. In Tony she saw a man who was ruthless in his hedonistic pursuits. To counter his voracious appetites, Tony still maintained his air of noble superiority. He needed his wife and his heir to maintain a proper legacy. Once Helena had been unable to keep up with his pace, she no doubt would be replaced by a pretty young thing, new subject for pleasure. Applying his moral strictures, Helena would come under a severe condemnation for trying to disrupt the holy family and its rights of succession.

She felt like she deserved something for her trouble. She didn't really want to start again. She was tempted. But she knew there was nothing left between them. She hated to be left without anything to show for her troubles. She tried to reach deep inside herself for some meager reward. She knew that she had grown separate from him. He would never acquire the mature knowledge about his own character that she had about herself. That wasn't enough. She wanted something to hold on to.

There had been so many journeys to London. She had often left in disgrace. This trip could radiate her new hope. In the intervening time, she hoped that nothing would go wrong. She walked around for hours in the hope that she might see something that really connected her to the city. She was an outsider. And she wasn't prepared to start something new.

Her plane wasn't until the next afternoon. She could head back to her room and get ready for the next day. She had no reason to go hide. The rains had held off. London had given her a beautiful day.

She needed to eat. A friend had recommended a Chinese restaurant in Soho. Her friend didn't tell her about the seating. The host pointed to a chair at an already occupied table.

"You sit there!"

She hesitated.

The host repeated his command, "You sit there. You don't like it, you leave."

She reluctantly took her place. She found that she was sitting across from a strange man.

She wasn't really in the mood for a conversation.

"Are you an American?"

Helena replied, "Yes, I am. But I did study here for many years."

"Brilliant. I'm Will.

"Hello, Will. I'm Helena. What do you do in London?"

"I teach English. Not a great profession. But it gives me something to do."

"Fascinating. So what are you doing at a Chinese restaurant?"

"I like to eat." She smiled. She hoped that this would not be a difficult conversation.

She didn't want to babysit Will for an hour.

"When do you go back to America?"

"Tomorrow afternoon. I'm glad to go home."

"You don't like London?" he asked.

"No, I love it. I've just been away in the Canaries for a week, and I want to get on back home."

He looked at her, "Traveling takes a lot of you."

"It does indeed."

She wondered, "Have you ordered?"

"Don't get the pork."

"I don't eat pork."

"I'm just warning you."

"Is it that bad?"

"No, it just not that good. Try this and this." He pointed to a couple of things on the menu. He also pointed to something else, "I'm having that. I'll let you taste it."

Their conversation was civil until they got their food. When they started to eat it became a symphony of chopsticks as they moved back and forth across the table sharing thing with each other. The sauces dripped from their chin. They laughed. They made jokes.

"Will, you're quite a fun guy!"

"I try to be that way."

"Are you from London?"

"I've lived here for ten years. But I'm originally from Nottingham."

"You don't have much of an accent."

"You've got a good ear. How long did you say that you lived in London?"

She teasingly replied, "Too long."

"I've got a remedy for that."

"What are you going to do? Take me on a secret tour."

"Nothing of the kind."

"I know a great place to take you."

He knew about this bar a ways from Soho. But they still walked. As he took her down the narrow streets, she started to wonder about his intentions.

"Will, where is this place?"

"It's just up ahead."

They darted through an ally way and then they were inside.

"They have live performances here. Sort of a cabaret thing."

“Do you perform?”

“I read poetry and play the piano. My services come in handy.”

“Why don’t you play for us now?”

“The last time that I played at a place uninvited, they asked me to leave. Tonight’s a quiet night.”

“So Will, you teach and play the piano. Is there anything else that you do?”

He had a twinkle in his eye.

“I’ve got a few magic tricks up my sleeve. But the night is still young.”

“And my carriage is going to turn in to a pumpkin soon.”

“We’re on foot. We don’t have to worry about carriages.”

This was a far cry from Tony who’d have them whisked away in his car. Will ordered after dinner liqueurs for them. They took them in a corner booth. There was a small crowd at the bar. Here it was secluded.

“So what’s your story, Helena?”

“I thought that I already told you everything that there is to know.”

“You’ve told me a grand total of nothing. You’re a mystery woman who’s walked in to my life. I still don’t even know your purpose.”

Will seemed like a simple man. A creative streak. But otherwise satisfied with the basic pleasures. She found a strength in his directness.

His clothes were neat but worn. He was not a wealthy man. But he found a way to survive. She wondered if she could lose herself in his world. The pace seemed so much slower to what she was used to. He could appreciate her artistic side. But he could never push her to the same heights. She could be his mystery girl, but he would never present her a mystery. Had she become too cynical with age?

He tried to do some trick with the salt shaker. It got both of them laughing.

“My dear, you have a great smile!”

She tried to remember if Tony had ever complimented her. Will was softening her up. She already knew where this was headed. His firm body could awaken those passions that she had seen celebrated in art earlier that day.

They were both tipsy when they left the bar. He leaned over to kiss her on the cheek. They tried to stay standing up as they made it out of the alleyway. They were still on an empty street. He pulled her towards him for a passionate embrace. She let off a sigh of relief as he pulled his body towards his. She liked the feel of his warmth next to her. There was a slight chill in the air and he made it easier to take.

She continued to give in to him as they swayed together on against the side of a building. But this wasn’t her. It was too haphazard. It just seemed as if he had perfected his technique by doing this sort of thing before. She had been distracted. That had been sufficient for her to get her focus back.

“I better catch a cab.”

The fresh air helped her sober up.

“Helena, we could get some drinks at my place.”

“I want to do a few things in the morning. I’ve really had a good time.”

They made it over to the main street where she hailed a cab. He was left speechless. His

charms had always worked so well before. She was a strange bird.

She recognized that Will had an artistic bent. But he was used to being the performer. The girls that he met were meant as his audience. He would never appreciate a more assertive woman like Helena.

Once inside the cab, she took a deep breath. As the driver sped back, London's lights flashed before her. She was back on her own path. She had been distracted. And the distraction was a welcome relief. But she couldn't meander any longer.

Before she knew it, she was back at the hotel. She felt it anti-climactic to turn in so early. But she was blitzed from her adventure. She changed quickly so she wouldn't pass out in her clothes. Before she knew it, she was awakened by the morning sun.

She was still groggy from the night before. It took her a while to orient herself. She wasn't really hung over. She just felt like she hadn't slept. She needed to shake the cobwebs from her head.

She packed her bags quickly. She wanted to have a light lunch before she headed for the plane. She relished this moment. She wasn't on a treadmill. Time stopped and took a breath. She needed the rest before everything sped up again. There would be enough to deal with when she headed for the airport.

She had a glass of wine with her lunch. It quieted her down after her little escapade of the night before. The park was across from the restaurant. She watched two squirrels chasing each other. She was perfectly calm; they were immersed in the chase. She was taking time back for herself. A light breeze blew through the trees. She ran her fingers through her hair.

Each time that she left London, she felt that something momentous had just happened in her life. On this occasion, she could feel a chapter slowly closing. She could never come back here with the same sense of purpose. What she had lived here had made her what she was. But she could not look backwards any more. Bessborough Gardens was indeed in her mind. And that memory would forever stay with her.

She ordered another glass of wine. She wanted to savor her memories, to let time roll over her and refresh herself in its wash. Amidst all the calm, a certain restlessness was affecting her. She had come here for an adventure. Nothing had really taken hold. She didn't want to throw herself into a bad situation just to pretend that something was going on. But she felt isolated from the world.

The Wills and Tonys of the world couldn't rule her. She needed her independence. She knew somewhere beyond all the distractions, that she could find something substantial. She was losing herself in another romantic dream?

She looked at her watch. It seemed almost time to head down to Victoria station. As the cab drove through the city, each street corner took on a special life. She was a witness to the pulse that beat around her. Every one seemed absorbed in getting somewhere.

Each day travelers would come to the city in the hope of finding what was so real to her. They would try to make the map come alive. They would look into the eyes of the Londoners for that thing absent in their home country. For some, they would make it their new home. Meanwhile, there were loads of Londoners who wanted to escape the madness that sent cars circling around roundabouts where each new direction was only a variation of the circle. The merry-go-round made the riders dizzy. They longed to get off. Helena had sampled both worlds.

She had entered as a visitor, and she was leaving with the wisdom of a resident. Only the residents would all get pulled back into the maze. She was making her escape.

She held on tight to her bags. It was her one assurance that she was really getting away from the city. She knew that she couldn't get sucked back into the maze. But she had a close call. She didn't want to look back.

She had time. Time to spare. But she felt the push to go. The longer that she hesitated, the more likely that some catastrophe might stand in her way. On the Gatwick Express, she felt herself counting down. The voice on the train loudspeaker welcomed the passenger. She was almost free. Could she hold her breath for the whole journey. She pretended that she could.

Her face had a glow from her time in the Canaries. She was physically refreshed. The vacation had been worth her while. But something still seemed unsettled. What had she really resolved by coming back. A door had closed. But she couldn't reopen it.

The train sped across the countryside. She felt a sigh of relief as she made the airport. As she pulled her luggage from the train, her panic dissipated. It had no cause. But she was in a state of wonder for over an hour.

Circumstances often had a way of resolving deeper questions that have gone unanswered for years. Helena would undergo this type revelation with regards to Tony. As she was passing through Gatwick, she noticed Tony arm in arm with a shapely student that he had probably plucked off the grounds of her Uni. She no doubt dreamed of palaces and princes. Her legs were tanned. She was in a pink and white dress, and her hair was dyed blonde. She was the perfect star for his latest drama.

Suddenly, it all made sense to Helena. Tony had planned for all of this to happen. Every bit of it. He knew that Helena would stew in the sauce of her own emotions. He could tell this from the first time that he saw her. She was his perfect victim. Once she had accepted the marinade, he could get her ready for the oven. And he would bake her until she was indeed crisp and ready for the eating.

Helena had got it all wrong. Luisa would not have been tactically inept to have left the letter from lying around. She would have destroyed it. Besides, the chronology never made sense anyway. Since he had contacted Helena years after Andrew's christening, the letter had always been in his possession.

It was all so obvious. He had left strict instructions with Bertie. She never would have taken any initiative on her own. She worshiped Tony and would have gone to hell and back to do his bidding. Tony's vacillation that day had been a convenient excuse so he could hatch the master plan of a life time. It was a technique that he had perfected at an early age.

He was part of a witch's brood. In the womb, Luisa had shared her venomous blood with him. But he had come out even more perfect in his dark heart. He could destroy his own mother in the process of getting what he wanted. He was no fool. Years ago, he had made sure that his mother would discover his diary and lay the blame for the wild party on the innocent Helena. This would only pique her curiosity and make her want him more. From then on, it would all be easy. She was easy prey in Corfu. Still wide-eyed and innocent, she carried a torch for him from her teens. He could oblige her just enough to set in motion the devil's plan. There was nothing that he left out to put it all in motion.

Every sentimental girl had a Bessborough Gardens. It was not hard for him to disengage

this secret from her. This was the centerpiece in his design. And he also had known about the haunting. This dark seed would work its way through her brain until she was indeed possessed. She would spend years trying to cast out the betrayal. At this late date, she would no longer have any suspicions about him. More than ever she would be susceptible to the last piece of the puzzle, his surprise letter to her in New York.

He had to wait for the right moment, one when he had tired of the delights that surrounded him. He could take time off from one of his mistresses to again work his seduction on Helena. Now, she had done all the work for him. Those restless days of wandering Bessborough Gardens. She turned inward and had made no effort to find him. She thought only a miracle could rescue her. She had set up the premises of the miracle. She had answered the note that Bertie delivered. And her reply went directly to his hands. And he saved his treasure until the time that it had sufficiently gained in value. And then he sprung his reply on her. He had ample parties to blame for the offense against her. His mother was a prime candidate. Bertie had delivered the death blow. Even Vanessa was not above reproach. Perhaps, he would even sacrifice poor Andrew if he had cause.

At the same time, he knew that his marriage with Vanessa could guarantee his leisure until his final years. When her branch of his dynasty also proved fruitless, she would be cut loose like all his other lovers. Everyone was dispensable.

Helena only had to look at Tony to fulfill her mission. She had believed that she was rescuing him from a loveless marriage. She never really meant any ill will towards Vanessa. It's just that Helena felt that she had prior claim on him from the days of the diary incident. Helena would not have let go of her sacred right without a struggle.

So she walked right into the trap. And he had baited the same trap over and over again. It shocked her the ease at which she fell for his ruse. She never thought of herself as gullible. He had planned things out so well. He was the perfect con artist. He had sketched the game hundreds of moves in advance. And he waited for his mark, Helena, to do the worst to herself. It was a consummate plan by a master. He had so many other games going simultaneously. Like the juggler in the circus, he could balance a countless number of plates. Each dish revolved in its own orbit, and he kept watch on them all. Why would no calamity befall him.

He would never feel any remorse. These were all his subjects paying their loyalty to the master. She just had to look at him to know he was a sociopath. She had looked into the eyes of a killer.

Tony had never noticed her in the airport. But she had observed everything. She had etched the sight deeply onto her brain. She had already closed that book for herself. But now it was to engage some serious rewriting. The author had been exposed and his infallibility was finally challenged. The red pen was ready to do its deeds.

It really made little difference what he told this new thing. She was expendable. He had already done his masterworks. He was only engaging a few baroque flourishes. In the end, on one would blame him. Each woman would be too busy heaping the condemnation on herself. The poor girls!

It was never really their faults. He kept so much from them. Even what he did show them was only enough to enhance their fantasies. A dutiful kiss would make it all seem real. As she headed up the ramp way for the plane, she had no regrets about continuing on. She had

nothing to say to him. His network of betrayal would finally close in around him, and he would be a sorry folk. Helena had no illusion about herself a avenger. She needed to unravel the layers of propaganda that he had wound around her.

Her few sips of wine were nothing compared to the stiff drinks that would carry her home. She would be floating on a serious alcohol cloud as the plane touched down. It would be a while before she could again look in the mirror and know who was looking back. She had become this tiny creature for him. She needed to break down all these masks just to get herself back.

“What a scoundrel!”

Stephanie wanted to see him hang from the tower of Big Ben.

“Don’t they cut the heads off heretics there?” Stephanie wondered.

“Something like that.”

She was only too ready to start his persecution.

“He doesn’t even deserve a trial, except a trial by fire. He needs to be boiled in oil.”

She thought the venomous heart’s needed to be cut out of the body.

“Or you could drive a stake through it!”

She would have never let him leave the terminal.

“They have security everywhere.”

“After I was finished, they would have finished the work for me.”

But Helena’s agenda was far different than that. She had to figure out why she had been such a dupe for his scheme. Tony only captured a flame that already burned in her.

For while, she thought that he had taken advantage of her dream of romantic love. She had turned down so many men because none fit the ideal of the fairy tale. That seemed too silly. She was sophisticated. She appreciated mature art. But she fell for a child’s nursery story.

Tony’s disgrace only made it to easy to dispel his memory from her past. But there was still the passion that had overwhelmed her for years. She could not let go of that feeling. How could she ever root it in her present. She refused to give him any credit for awakening a magic in her.

“I knew myself from the moment that I walked the National Gallery with my fellow students.” Particularly in those grandiose landscapes, she had a scope that exceeded the narrow pursuits of such a blackguard. She needed to find a deeper strain to express her isolation. He was clumsy. He could play a mean game. But he had ignored the ultimate prize.

The next few months would prove the source of her liberation. It was no longer her work. She needed to discover that sylph that had inspired her in her Gardens. He could not take that from her.