**Confessions in Birdsong: Part One**

**\*Portions in single space were previously offered. Thank you for suggestions, praise and questions.**

**Confessions in Birdsong**

When Father Joseph Kaczmerak began spouting fragmented whispers from the old St. Casimir’s Parish confessional, the words sounded like the chirps of the birds in the small garden sheltered between the church and the rectory. He’d been sure that he’d silently thought every momentous tidbit without uttering one word. He actually had no idea that the words were spewing right and left like birdseed that germinated and spread like weeds.

The new pastor had tried to stem the tide of truth with gentle chiding, but secrets pooled in the old priest’s throat and slowly overflowed into blunt utterances that hurt. The silent pain he’d held between his lips and pressed back in his throat like the melting host after communion for over fifty years liquefied into sound. He often sat in the church and stared at the confessional alcoves horrified by glimpses of partial memories—a shocked face, the quick suck of distressed breath or the quiet sob. Those who’d been wronged were often angry—angry with him for opening his mouth. Father Joseph looked down at the brown patches that age left on his hands and rubbed them. He’d much prefer to return to silence and continual goodwill. How many days had this compulsion to speak reigned? Two? Three? He couldn’t remember.

He did recall the moment a homily from the past had left his lips in the old waterfront bar last week. The urge to pray coincided with a greeting from a girl who reminded him of long-dead Kate Walsh. Like his beautiful Kate, the girl had gray-blue eyes and honey-streaked hair roped into a twisted, long ponytail.

The girl had smiled and had sat next to him. With a slight nod of her head, she said, “Evening, Padre.” Her friendliness tricked him into panic. *Where was Kate’s little girl?* He began to pray for all their souls, but the blessing tripped his tongue into a warp, and scripture leaked out of his mouth.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit . . .” That moment had started the Lord’s Sermon. He blessed the girl who was not Kate and the crowded bar; Father Joe blessed Vincenzo as he stood wiping the same glass over and over as he listened. Joe finished the Beatitudes and then garbled something odd about goddesses and songbirds and felt the first tears follow the folded wrinkles down his cheeks. Then the old homily stuttered in his tear-drenched voice, “Blessed are those who love, love, love.”

Finally Father Joe began the same sermon again because he wanted to heartily bless poor, cursed Luis Fuerza. He prayed for Luis, as the young man hushed him and walked him back to the rectory. The younger man held the old man’s arm, as he stumbled over uneven sidewalks, negotiated each curb, and crossed the brick cobbled streets with tears streaming down his face. They paused under the last street lamp before mounting the rectory steps and faced each other. Luis wiped at the old man’s face with his own handkerchief, worried that the pastor might think Kaczmerak had been drinking.

Father Joe gave his first of many confessions. “There are secrets told by songbirds. I loved once so I understand. You can’t marry Athena, Luis. Please stay away from her.” He clamped his lips tight after that; he remembered swallowing the rest of his thoughts.

The younger man, eyes shying away, had shaken his head at the warning and the inane urge to feel compassionate toward this lost, shriveled, old man in the priest’s clothes. Luis Fuerza no longer attended church, but the old man wearing the stiff priest’s collar had touched a deep well of respect inside him for tradition. Luis had soothed, “I don’t think a goddess would give me the time of day, Father. Let’s get you home.” He’d led the old priest up the stairs of the rectory and pressed the doorbell. When Pastor Stallings opened the thick door in a plaid robe and his pajamas, Luis had the surprised look on his face that most people did when it occurred that their priests and teachers were, after all, human under the collar or outside the classroom.

Father Joseph leaned in the doorway and watched the young man walk back toward the bar. He sighed over upending all their lives in his old age. He saw it all with startling clarity for about thirty seconds and experienced a choking wave of regret. Then his vision clouded, he just felt tired. When he finally rested his head on the old, flattened pillow, he reminded himself to warn Athena when he saw her. He fell asleep and dreamed of angels singing, birds filling the yard and scattering when they laughed, Athena dancing with Luis, and a large dark man waiting in a doorway for his Kate. Joseph felt all the tears of the world captured in his age-hollowed chest.

Self-Indulgence of Birdsong

The day after her utter humiliation, Eleanor B. Bramble gave her reflection a harsh examination during her normal waking wash and creaming. She had good skin that tended to blushes and a rosy shine when un-powdered. Her eyes were fringed by dark lashes that mimicked the brows and brown-black hair which was newly cropped in loose, natural curls which tended to frizz.

She squinted at the person who had received a belittling diatribe at work yesterday and rehearsed a shrug of uncaring dismissal to use on anyone who mentioned it. She tried to smile at herself, but her expressions looked brittle and forced. She applied a little shadow to her eyelids, touched mascara to her lashes briefly and dusted her nose with the brush. *Enough*, the grouchy voice in her head urged her. Gone was the need to buff, pluck and polish before leaving the house and catching the shuttle to the other side of town.

On second thought, she decided to drive into work for the day, to leave uncharacteristically early, and to take the car out for a drive to the coast. Eleanor imagined walking the boardwalk along the ocean or wandering through the old resort and window shopping for nothing. She could get through this first, uncomfortable day without any illusions by daydreaming about the drive and where she might ramble. She grinned at a silly idea that a *Bramble might gamble on an aimless ramble*. The rhyme sang itself in the old crone’s voice. She shook her head and squashed her more imaginative nature.

She’d been at work for over an hour and was knee deep in correspondence when a voice just behind her began, “Hey, Bird! No hard feelings about yesterday. Right? I didn’t mean to say half of that. I did try to call you last night.” Eleanor didn’t even need to look up to know that his eyes were a stormy sky gray. The man couldn’t be held accountable for his peerless eyes, which were all a trick of heredity, along with a square-shaped, appealing face and the hint of blond whiskers, though it was barely ten o’clock.

*Good genes*, Eleanor thought and nearly nodded in agreement which might have been mistaken for talking under her breath yet again. That had been one of the charges yesterday, as well as mooning over him, simpering when answering questions and “acting like an all around ditz” when it came to actually doing her job. The accusations had been the sum total of foolishness, but Eleanor heard sniggers from the hallway eavesdroppers, so she hadn’t said a thing to counter the mean compilation of normal errors and minor mistakes.

Eleanor glanced back, focused on his tie and replied, “Yes. Sure. I’ll have the report done in ten minutes. When would you like this morning’s work?” She held her breath after those words escaped from her newly sobered voice. She even sounded different to her own ears; her mind flew to the Garden of Eden and the moment Eve knew. Knowledge sometimes bred understanding, other times, bitterness. Her heart ached with compassion; he probably hadn’t wanted to be so harsh and firm with her, but she had been too blithely ignorant before yesterday to understand his opinion. *Well, it’s clear now*, Eleanor thought with growing dismay. Her cheeks tinged pink, but her fingers resumed their flight through the letter she’d started while he waited for further response and fiddled with the mail.

She heard half a male sigh as he tossed envelopes into the bin just over her shoulder. “Come in when you’re done, and we’ll review the report. We need to be ready to leave by 11:30 for the board meeting.”

Eleanor ignored his study of her hair shorn to six-inch curls or the faint blush that was fading along her exposed, averted jaw. He hesitated to continue speaking after the explosive outpouring of frustration that, just yesterday, had burned their rapport into smoldering embers and ash. *He had hurt her*. As young and fragile as the small feathered thing buried in the middle of her name, Eleanor had been eager with innocent affection. He was a bit older, world-weary and too selfish to take what she offered over and over like a tantalizing treat. He might want to coax back her previous warmth, but he stepped back into his own office when she resisted eye contact. A few minutes later, she found him staring out the window.

The Self-Indulgence of Regret

Judith Lawson opened her shop just after nine. Her father called it “banker’s hours” though Judith might laugh because all the little shop did these days was drain her bank account. Regardless, she wrestled the sandwich board out the door, positioned it on the sidewalk for best visibility and waved to the other shopkeepers in her periphery. How her grandfather had managed to make a living for forty years by selling instrument strings, sheet music and assorted rare recordings was a mystery. She peered out on the uneven brick sidewalk that might look quaint if the viewer was a romantic, but she imagined the jumbled inventory behind her in the small store growing more mountainous, dusty and confused by the minute.

She let her eyes wander all the way down the street and rest on the corner below the sign for the Shamrock Pub. Though too early for deliveries, the morning was not so new that one of the Fuerza men could be sweeping the pavement or opening for early coffee with neighbors. This morning, the impatient, dark-haired Luis Fuerza swept the sidewalk and carefully tucked the refuse he could pick up into a can but lazily pushed the rest of the trash into the drainage grate in the gutter.

She sighed over him as her perfect man, flaws and all—tall enough for her but not towering over six feet; dark-skinned in a soft tan olive hue; glistening black hair that she’d once touched and found silky; a muscular, proud carriage and intense green eyes. Beyond the physical, Luis was gentle and usually soft-spoken; she’d noticed he was especially kind with little children, their elderly neighbors and the lost souls who wandered into the corner bar. Judith concentrated on the better memories, so her mouth formed a slight smile, as she opened her shop an hour early. She had let a huge childhood crush on the boy develop into true infatuation with the man.

During his college years, he had visited home with a series of girls on his arm; he had even taken Judith out for one long winter break—a spell of twelve days that eviscerated her heart. She couldn’t hold the eventual rejection against him because she’d been clingy then with a wedding ring on her mind. Judith had made the ultimate mistake of dreaming of a wedding and a little child to follow. The witch must have warned him; his mother Mira Fuerza might very well be enchanted with her sharp, green eyes and a veil of jet black hair, still dark even into her sixties.

Judith had limped away when Luis escorted his young friend, Ellie Bramble, to the next church dinner and then out for dancing the weekend after he’d told Judith that she was too serious for him. Though it was difficult to dislike sweet, plain-faced Eleanor, the thought of a love curse on the dark-haired woman had been considered. Judith knew Eleanor did not take Luis seriously, or Judith might have intervened when feeling particularly emotional. Eleanor must have forgotten her family, Luis, and the old neighborhood because she hadn’t been seen much for the last two years. Judith hoped she was in love with some stranger far, far away.

As she clipped her thick hair back before starting the usual, hurried cleaning, Judith watched Luis greet another man on the sidewalk. The habitual handshake and backslapping between these men amused her. Why didn’t men and women greet each other like that? Any touching was easily mistaken for attraction. Ten years after her heart had been broken and slowly mended, Judith watched Luis and wished he would glance her way, take a second look and just wave. She’d have been satisfied with a simple handshake if he remembered her name.

The Temptation of Birdsong

Eleanor straightened the crease in the bottom edge of her suit jacket after leaving the car. The questions Greg offered for conversation during the drive hadn’t segued into the rambling, light interchanges that were normal before his terse lecture late yesterday afternoon. Her mouth felt parched and that led to the faintest tingle in her throat after the silence stretched beyond twenty minutes. The space between them was too narrow; the air inside the car was stifling, but she didn’t want to crack open the window or fiddle with the air conditioning like she might have. Eleanor glanced out the window and listened to what she might have said to fill in the uncomfortable gaps: tidbits from the daily news, an observation from her evening activities, little hints of her plans for the weekend that begged him to join her.

She trampled every desire to ease the gulf between them by reviewing his sharp words that still spewed out of his mouth onto her indelible memory. She needed to feel the pain of rejection and humiliation over and over again in order to keep her spirit in check. Her own mother had once chided that Eleanor was too forgiving.

Eleanor clamped her hands together to control the impulse to excuse his clumsy effort to end her infatuation with him, but she let the words escape her anyway before she could stop them. “So noisy and vapid,” she whispered.

He’d been watching the oncoming traffic before the turn into the corporate offices, so he glanced over and said, “What?” Greg blinked at her averted profile and realized the crystalline silence she’d broken with something nearly whispered—a list of some sort that ended with noise.

*Oh! She’d spoken aloud!* “Oh, nothing,” Eleanor muttered as she prepared to exit the car while he parked. She ignored his sharp look in her direction once he switched off the engine and took a breath to speak. She was out of the stifling car and striding across the parking lot before Greg picked up his briefcase from the trunk.

With a portfolio of reports in hand and her purse slung over the other shoulder, Eleanor Birdsong Bramble introduced herself to the stranger holding the security door. The stranger introduced himself as the new director of public relations but garbled his name. Eleanor raised a brow and gestured toward her boss, “This is Gregory Champion, the southeast division manager.” Again her eyes fell before they traveled past the tie pin holding the blue cloth in place. *Ties are such a holdover from the armor of the old days*, she thought in the old woman’s voice, *when you had to wear your colors and protect your neck in company*.

Purgatory

She swept on ahead of both of them, as they shook hands in the lobby. Greg watched the other man glance at Bird’s figure—she did have fine legs and a long, slender frame, but her face was plain, familiar and open. She would never be a sultry beauty like Josie from the next office. His flirtation with Josie had sputtered and fizzled after they’d been caught by Bird yesterday. Kissing a woman in his office had been impetuous and inappropriate. Yesterday, both women had flown away in a scattering of ruffled feathers and excited shock.

He’d heard Josie stop at Bird’s desk to utter a half-whispered, “I’m so sorry, Bird! I never meant to do anything to hurt . . .”

The hiss of Bird’s hushing stopped the rest. Silence had fallen, as Bird stared into her computer monitor that had gone to screensaver. She hadn’t done more than nod at his requests for the rest of the afternoon, but she hadn’t stormed away or cried at her desk. Josie had clocked out early when he hazarded a call to her office just after four.

He had crushed more than Bird’s illusions; his frown deepened as some other hovering man held her usual chair at the conference table. His Bird looked up to the other man and made some simple conversation out of politeness. Then she closed her mouth, looked down and opened up the reports, set up her notebook and arranged a pen beside it.

Gone were the habitual, colored highlighters and memo notes that had other project managers snickering over her fussy seriousness two years ago when she had been the newcomer at the conference table. Gone were the bright eye contact and optimistic enthusiasm. Greg swallowed regret and took his seat perched beside her. She did not let her periphery extend beyond his shoulder; anyone could feel her avoidance. He had become the only thing in the room that she would not study or admire.

Ralph Catch, the new public relations director, watched the proceedings and made notes on each of the division managers and their respective division assistants. The last pair to arrive snatched his attention; the discomfort between them was palpable. He stroked his chin wondering if they had fought over something during the hour drive from their plant nestled in a former cornfield outside a small town. He’d read the brief history of the plant, studied a few years of productivity reports and skimmed a few articles from the local paper about community outreach this manager had sponsored. The young woman seated beside her supervisor had been visible in every picture for the last two years; sometimes she was quoted in the local interviews or chaired committees using her company title. *The slight, brown-haired maiden*, he thought, *was always gazing at the man seated beside her with admiring eyes*. Sienna brown eyes that held darkness in a charcoal lining and deep thought under the down swept lids. He suddenly recognized the shape of her eyes and sat up straighter. He tapped on his notes trying to catch her eye again.

The board chairman addressed her as “Miss Bramble,” yet the young manager to her left had said, “Well done, Bird,” after her presentation of a project she’d completed in her boss’ absence the previous week. Ralph Catch saw the young woman flinch when the man beside her leaned toward her ear. He watched her features freeze into polite distance, so he caught the eye of the frowning man. *A lover’s quarrel?* He examined the forced neutrality between them; it was more likely difference of opinion, he concluded. Ralph wondered how inappropriate it might be to approach the Bird in question for more careful examination. He’d need a new project assistant soon. Sometimes a truly creative pairing needed rejuvenation, and other times, blunt separation. He decided to speak to her during the luncheon.

The Call to Action

Eleanor took notes though her fingers twitched with the desire to take out her habitual highlighter and outline to make the notes easier to organize later. The lack of small talk with Greg would leave her with acres of time. How obtuse and silly she must have been to ignore all Greg’s polite rebuffs in the past months. She let her mind wander during the meeting trying to interpret his previous behavior. *Had he been dismissive of her precipitating yesterday’s explosion?* *Had she missed signals?* She let her eyes narrow, as she reviewed scene after scene; filling the project manager’s position last year had been a daunting challenge that resulted in constant contact with Greg Champion. Of course she daydreamed about him: he was handsome and charismatic, he was usually an even-tempered man, and he seemed appreciative of her efficiency and creative ideas. *Or had he been pretending?*

Before he’d been rushed to emergency surgery last year, he’d flirted with her, he’d kissed her from time to time—little kisses on the cheek, at her temple—and had actually held her hand at one of the charity functions the company sponsored to keep good will growing in town. *Nothing too inappropriate.* *She must have built all those personal moments up in her mind*, she reasoned. *But she hadn’t said anything or hinted at a more personal connection between them, had she?* Eleanor grimaced over miscommunication and hoped she hadn’t really been all that obvious.

Perhaps during the long illness last year, he’d lost the little bit of polite interest in her, and she hadn’t noticed while she imagined them growing closer. She had actually bragged about her sympathetic relationship with her immediate supervisor to her parents during a short visit home at Christmas. Eleanor fought the urge to roll her eyes at herself because she knew someone would notice and cluck over “Champion’s odd, little assistant.”

They’d named her project manager last year after his emergency appendectomy when she’d coordinated information from his subdivision managers on her own for nearly two months*. Had his affection for her cooled then?* *Had she just been a bit too full of herself?* Eleanor bit her lip and sat back at the conference table with her mind in jumbled confusion.

After yesterday’s blow-up, she’d scuttled back into menial compliance. Eleanor wondered if she even adequately fit the position which assisted the plant manager or had she overstepped her limits? Based on the giggles in the outer offices yesterday, she’d made herself the object of amusement and a bit of scorn among the other executives and their secretaries. She released a held breath and looked up to find the new public relations director walking toward her. Cheeks flushing with heat, Eleanor swallowed the desire to run and stood still hoping he had focused on someone behind her. *What was his name again? Catch? What kind of name was that when you were a bird in their midst?* *His name suited his role among a pack of jackals, wolves and ferrets in business suits.* The sudden, humorous comparison made Eleanor smile which Ralph misunderstood for welcome, and the rest of those assembled might cast as bold flirtation.

“Miss Bramble! What delightful thought has made you smile like that?” Ralph grinned down at her. Up close again after her polished report to the board without any obvious nerves, she was clear-eyed, fine-featured and attractive. The tousled, dark curls framed her narrow face, accentuated her eyes, the long, straight nose and full lips. Eleanor looked exotic with her large, almond-shaped eyes yet classic features like a statue come to life.

Eleanor let the smile melt into a grimace. She forced her voice into humor, “I was thinking about appearances. How are you enjoying the transition from publishing, Mr. Catch? I understand you’re interested in improving public relations for the company?” Her lips took on a grin again over saying his name because he truly resembled a quick fox with the graying, ruddy-colored hair, dark eyes and tendency to grin in that laughing, canine way. Eleanor could tell he was looking to gobble something right up.

Ralph beamed with beneficence. He glowed with confidence; his discerning eye for quality had focused on this young woman. “I’ve settled well enough. I’ve noticed you do your share of goodwill projects in Middletown. I’ll need a new assistant director soon. Sarah will be leaving me next month to have that child,” he gestured toward the pretty woman with an obvious belly, standing at the buffet table and picking at the offerings, “But she has made my transition a smooth one. I’m sure her position pays more than yours.” He winked at Eleanor.

The previous week, Eleanor might have blushed and denied any interest in moving to Wilmington or working for another, more powerful man. Owing no one loyalty or compliant obedience anymore, she nodded. “Thank you. I’ll consider it, Mr. Catch.” She took a half-step back and nearly tromped on Greg’s foot which made her gasp. She hadn’t been paying any attention to his movement through the room, whereas last week, her eyes had shadowed him. *Stupid, obvious fool!*

“Champion! I was just offering Miss Bramble a position working with me in the main office. Don’t look like that!” Without looking up, Eleanor knew Greg was bristling indignantly. Catch hurried on, “I’m sure you’ll be inundated with candidates for her position by tomorrow. I might be new to the company, but I understand the power of scuttlebutt in the office.” He grinned again in that toothy, fox smile.

Eleanor felt dismayed embarrassment again just as strongly as yesterday when Greg had railed at her, “You’re a silly, simpering fool to wear your crush on me like a badge. It’s no honor to be the object of your affection, Bird. It’s embarrassing to be catered to and drooled over like some prize*.*” *How many people had overheard and laughed?* The office had been filled with returning personnel after lunch break. Even now, her face grew rosy with the memory of the silence behind Greg’s raised voice booming through the office and out the half-closed door. He’d continued though they all heard coughing from one of the middle managers as a warning, “And the chattering all the time over nothing. So vapid and noisy about the least little thing! I can’t think for the noise. Get out of here and let me take my lunch*.”*

How many more coworkers had felt a little sorry for uppity, little Bird who had been so sure of her supervisor’s affection? She had only walked in on him kissing Josie from the next office; everyone had known about their couple of dates. He’d been ridiculously angry as he exploded. *What was his problem? And for the record, she’d had no plans to throw herself at his feet. What a supposing creature! And he’d said she was a simpering idiot!*

Eleanor found herself glaring at the carpet at her feet. She looked up to measure both men with harder eyes. Ralph had stopped smiling because the adversarial stance Greg Champion adopted hadn’t been considered when he started the conversation. Turning back to Eleanor for appeasement, he took a quick breath, “I didn’t mean to offend.” He splayed his hands in entreaty, “I do want to know why Champion calls you ‘Bird,’ Miss Bramble.” He smiled in a kinder way. Eleanor noticed that he was a quite a bit older than Greg and was probably wiser in the ways of human beings.

Eleanor tried to relax tense shoulders but let her irritation erupt, “It’s a part of my middle name—it’s all nonsense like his pretended insult just now. I think a change of offices would be healthy.” She sighed at Greg’s half-taken breath to protest, “My parents were hippies back in the sixties, Mr. Catch. They are also devoted birdwatchers. My full name is Eleanor Birdsong Bramble. Silly name, really. Friends call me Eleanor or Ellie. At work, Miss Bramble or Eleanor is just fine. Excuse me,” her eyes had filled with tears because a flush of abject humiliation was back in her un-powdered cheeks and quivering lips. She marveled over her clear, calm voice.

She took herself off to the restroom, paced in the hallway and made a call to her father’s office about a visit for the weekend. She calmed during a quick walk through the overgrown, courtyard garden before returning to finish the meeting.

At the end of the day, she left her desk at five like all the other project managers with her work half-done. Eleanor rubbed a little aching place between her brows before starting the car and missed his shouted “Bird!” in the turning of the key and the sudden roar of the engine in the parking garage. She pulled out and drove through the few layers of twilight-lit vehicles and wondered how bad the ache might become if left untreated. She prayed for a migraine, a tumor or some other devastating disease so that she didn’t have to go back to work in the morning.

Imperfect Acts of Contrition

Eleanor Birdsong Bramble took a long, slow drag on the sloppy cigarette she’d made with the tea leaf-like collection found in the old jam jar behind the coffee. She closed her eyes on the cross-hatched shadow and light above the hammock where she lay prone and rocking slightly. The sweet, tangy smoke eased down her throat; the dappled light from the lattice and the huge fig leaves reached like a canopy beside her and lulled her into relaxation. Nothing was like a hit of Dad’s stash, a quiet afternoon in their empty house, and the sun reappearing after a solid week of rain. She ignored the sounds of intermittent traffic in the street or the footfalls of neighbors and strangers passing in the alleyway, the vague stench of old garbage wafting from the alley, the sour egg odor of natural gas leaking from the pipes and the gamey reek of the dog resting at her feet. She stared up into the blue diamonds of sky, so blue it leaked into consciousness, and took another longer, deeper inhalation of the smoldering joint.

Her mother might be amused if she caught Eleanor smoking in the hammock in the middle of a Friday afternoon. Her father would worry; Martin Bramble had sounded concerned during the strange phone call Eleanor made to calm herself during the meeting on Tuesday. She had just wanted to speak to someone who hadn’t truly known she’d fallen for Greg Champion, or how she had been thrust out of orbiting his person with devotion in her eyes.

Her father had taken half a breath and asked, “What’s wrong, Ellie Bird? You do know that your mother and I love you?” Ah, the use of her pet name had made her eyes fill again. He said the words of love like a rhyme you use to soothe an upset child; it was automatic and somewhat false.

Sometimes she felt like a stranger in her parents’ tight, little life sandwiched into the narrow rowhouse that stretched two, tall floors but was barely twenty-five feet wide. Hallway skylights and transoms over each doorway allowed sunlight and fresh air to cascade down in fair weather and drift through the galley-like house tucked mid-street. Eleanor had often felt too dark, too tall, and too practical for her pair of bright bohemian parents who dashed off most weekends on birding or antiquing trips. She took another, deeper drag and hoped she hadn’t disrupted their plans with this impromptu trip home.

Eleanor tried to imagine working for Catch at the corporate office in Wilmington and squirmed unconsciously in the hammock. That would still put her in a weekly collision course with Greg Champion, and Ralph Catch’s bright eyes made her nervous. For the rest of the week, everything had made her nervous. Eleanor imagined the hammock was a pod that insulated her from the rest of the world; she admitted glumly that she’d been isolated for most of her life. This last episode with Greg Champion proved that her perception of belonging anywhere was warped.

She couldn’t even look at Greg now. She lay there conjuring the sum total of glimpses of him from this week: the ties, one of which she’d given him, the collar of his habitually striped shirts, the top button of his suit jacket, finally, on Thursday when she’d told him that she was taking Friday for a personal day, his bristly chin at two in the afternoon. She’d timed it well: he was about to leave for an executive-only meeting that would extend into dinner, and she had finished all her work. He barely had time to blink before she ushered him out the door with a new report on profitability from a troubled department.

Then she had taken her time finishing the weekly report and cleaning out her office. On Tuesday, she had begun taking a few personal items home from her desk in her purse. She left the building as early as possible each day with something tangible: a framed picture of her parents dressed up for a wedding, a snapshot of her brother and his little girls at the playground, a pastel-painted mug one of her nieces had made in a ceramics class, her favorite fountain-tipped pens and highlighters to idle at home, an extra scarf and black jacket she kept for impromptu lunch or dinner invitations that might never happen again, and spare earrings she’d discarded over time when she stayed late and finished projects.

On Thursday, Eleanor had glanced around her postage stamp office and fingered the desk clock and blotter he’d given her last year. She’d left them like the files and the notebooks filled with her recordings of each tedious meeting for two years of following him like a kite. If she didn’t come back, his face would fade away with time. She smiled and fantasized that Champion might miss her, but he wasn’t likely to do that at all. She fought the desire to make him into a monster or a fool.

Eleanor squinted up at the stained lattice caging her in from the bright sky and thought about staying in Baltimore with her parents, Martin and Millicent Bramble, in their tiny rowhouse just a few blocks off of Eastern Avenue. They’d kept both her room and her brother’s in the front of the narrow house set up for guests. They preferred the darker, large bedroom that ran the length of the back of the house. If Eleanor stayed, she might move into her brother’s smaller room given the second child to leave room for Ephran and his family in the large, brighter front room for visits.

She puzzled over starting again in the house where she’d dreamed and grown up to find the dreams waning. She remembered feeling out of tune at home just like she did in the office this week. Another job might give her back some temporary hope. The city was large and rambling once you walked to the corner and considered tramping down to the market or up the avenue to shop. Opportunity appeared endless in the city after the quiet hemming in from small town life in Delaware. *Where would she find a spot to fit?*

She’d enjoyed the slower, rural pace for the first few years out of a college which had also been urban and large, but now, tiny Middletown felt stifling. She could walk through the town in a half hour, pass most of the people she worked with daily and see farmland in another ten minutes. She shared half a house with a secretary at the plant. The house was a post Civil War, brick front salt box with clapboard on the sides and back. A narrow planked porch ran the length of the back of the house and made light conversation and some shared meals with the other woman easy. The house, like the rest of the buildings in town, had weathered lean times; the floors in her kitchen angled crookedly, and the windows were drafty in the winter. Despite its oddities, Eleanor had recently considered buying the house from the elderly owner.

She knew everyone on her street and the next, all the business owners in the small shopping district, and she was on a first name basis with most of them. Eleanor squinted into the dark green leaves and wondered if she fit into the little neighborhood; she had never quite fit into her own family. Had she tried to make her own sort of family in Middletown and inadvertently forced Greg into a role he didn’t fit?

In her parents’ city, she might know twenty families in the immediate vicinity, but less than five minutes from the front stoop; she was a stranger in a foreign land. Perhaps she was better at being a stranger.

Not that Baltimore was an unfriendly city; people nodded as you passed, met your eye at street corners and engaged in light conversation that connected in wildly divergent vertices. Earlier on her way back from the bookstore near Mount Vernon, Eleanor had asked a man with a cello if the old music store on Aliceanna Street was still in business. *Yes, but old Andrew died last year, and now his granddaughter ran the place carelessly*. Another few blocks later, a young woman with dreads threaded with jewel-colored beads had asked Eleanor to hold her squirming baby while she dashed into the liquor store for her father. *The old man needs his juice, you know?*  After another two blocks, she’d been propositioned by a man with no visible teeth, and then finally, Eleanor was offered an excellent price for “quality smack” by a truly handsome, ebony-skinned man. She’d given herself away and giggled over that one as she waited for the light to change. A woman listening to their conversation from the second floor of the house, where he lounged on the front steps, yelled out a window, “Calvin! Stop bothering that girl.”

She had wandered back into the more familiar neighborhood and decided to stop and enter the large stone church that defined the southern edge of the area by straddling two, full streets. She wanted to light a candle and extinguish her aching heart. Eleanor tried to pray for direction but was distracted by the presence of the old priest hunched over a photograph near the confessionals. She spoke to him for a few minutes and wondered if their exchange constituted the sacrament. His answering words of advice had been fierce, but he had held her hand the entire time they talked. She had enjoyed the feathery silk of his thin fingertips touching her warm palm. He had remembered her name and had nearly made her cry when he began to tremble and talk about her parents.

She shivered when he became confused and spoke of a goddess and birds, so she made excuses and rushed out the side exit. Back on the street, she had glanced back in a fit of memory over imagining another exit with a garden, an angel and a man who looked like the priest might have years ago. *Why had he spoken of the goddess and the birds? Why the bone-chilling warning about death? Why had he given her worry instead of the solace of forgiveness?* Eleanor shook her head at the drift of inner voices, memories that she didn’t have and her fanciful imagination.

Eleanor had joined a family group to walk past a series of battered, marble steps with young men slouched there with glassy, glistening eyes and running noses; it was awfully early in the day to be that high, but perversely Eleanor wondered if her father still kept the stash in the same spot downstairs. He had. Eleanor smiled at the leaves, the shadows and the light above her, as she marveled at the dependability of her parents who loved her no matter the crime or foolishness. She closed her eyes.

At a vibration twanging at her hip, the heat-decayed tip of the sloppily rolled cigarette dropped from her hand and shamefully put itself completely out on the concrete. Eleanor fumbled for the phone tucked in her front pocket and sat up in crazy confusion at finding herself in the hammock. A dream had taken her to a yard with hanging laundry, an angel who cried and birds chirping in fruit trees.

As she swung her feet to the damp concrete, the dream shredded. The smells from the garbage in the alley, the damp, cotton webbing and the sleeping dog made her stomach roil momentarily. She shivered and yanked the phone out of a pocket, “Yes?” Her head hurt intolerably.

“Bird? Where are you?” his voice boomed through the line making her jerk back. He might have continued speaking, but she was holding the phone in front of her eyes trying to focus on the number. He’d used his cell, not the office number. She placed it back at her ear to hear the tail end of his speech, “Your car is parked right in front of the house. You must be in there.” Again Eleanor looked at the face of the phone and frowned despite the sharp lance of headache caused by such movement.

“Why are you here?” she didn’t dare shake her head in derision. Simultaneously, Eleanor winced and snapped back from being Bird, as she heard the key turn in the lock at the front of the house and let her shoulders fall with relief. The call must have been one of those waking nightmares sent to exhausted, young women who didn’t usually smoke marijuana. She hoisted herself out of the hammock, crossed the small yard and up the four steps to the narrow back door. She was outlined in the bright light from the backyard, as she squinted into the interior darkness trying to acclimate to wakefulness.

Her mother tossed a briefcase and a satchel full of produce into the nearest chair and ran through the house yelling, “Ellie! Oh, Ellie. I can’t believe you’re here!” Eleanor hugged her mother in return and waited for the dream to burst away like the headache into fragments. She rested her head against her mother’s for a moment to enjoy Millie’s unquestioning warmth. Her mother was soft and fragile like the birds she loved: light, delicately-boned and diminutive in height—so precious and graceful with open affection for her changeling children. Both of the Bramble’s children exceeded their parents’ height by a head, but Ephran had the blond hair and the light blue eyes of his father.

Eleanor promised herself never to smoke pot again without lots of fluids and a real meal in her belly to ward off bad dreams. Then the nightmare came true as Greg Champion shut the outside door, entered the narrow living room, and folded his arms in front of himself like a traffic cop. Bird stared at him over her mother’s shoulder and squeezed the woman just a bit too hard. Her mother must have been talking the whole time, but finally her words registered, “Ellie, what a surprise, a wonderful surprise. It is so good to meet your young man! We were just trying the front door at the same time!”

Eleanor Birdsong Bramble looked right into her mother’s eyes, the trusted, earthy mother who was below eye level now that she’d shrunken at sixty though Millicent stood in heels and Ellie loomed barefoot. Eleanor grumbled, “That man is not mine, and he is not welcome here. “ She glanced up to his amused face and stated, “I’m off from work—I took a personal day.” She did not add, “Get out,” though that was insinuated.

Greg Champion forced the boyish smile that had usually charmed her into staying an extra hour, revising a report for the fourth time or picking up his laundry. He leaned on the door molding and offered, “Bird, we need to clear the air.”

Eleanor fought the urge to fly into the rage due a wronged child. She was not prone to tantrums, but she was ready to throw one. She growled, “Outside!” She meant out onto the sidewalk, but her mother stepped aside and ushered them toward the small backyard with the huge fig tree, the rectangle of grass and two tall, cinder block walls for privacy with the lattice screen a partial roof for the hammock. The Bramble backyard was an oasis of green and earth tones like a jewel in the middle of North Elwood. Greg ambled through the living room, slid past the two women in the dining room and angled along the galley kitchen for the open back door. Eleanor followed making protesting sounds that aggravated her headache.

As she rushed down the back steps, he surveyed their haven, and Eleanor’s mother began to squawk, “Ellie! Have you been into your father’s stash? How do you feel?” She was shaking the pot container which had started life as an apricot jam jar.

Ellie whirled around with her mouth agape. Greg stooped to pick up the extinguished evidence with a sloppy smile. “Seems she has. Jeez, Bird! I’d have never pegged you for a smoker!”

“I’m not!” her exasperated cry mingled with her mother’s guffaw—“Hardly!” Ellie’s mother laughed out loud. Eleanor groaned.

Greg sniffed the crumpled thing, raised an eyebrow and gestured toward the settee angled under the deepest portion of shade. “You might want to sit down, Eleanor.” She obeyed because he used her real name for the first time since she’d explained the “B” for her middle name on the application. He glanced up to her mother hovering in the doorway, “What was it laced with, Millie?”

Eleanor rolled her eyes. Of course he was on a first name basis with her mother. Millie Bramble flushed red all the way down to her navel though they couldn’t see it, “An opiate her father is trying. Perhaps I should make some dinner and bring you iced teas.” Eleanor squinted at the picture her mother and Greg made in the garden; he was a tall man with golden hair like her mother’s and a long, rangy build; they exhibited a dual habit of fidgeting while she stared at them. A whisper in Eleanor’s mind questioned this pattern of uncanny resemblance among the Aryan strains of German ancestry. Against the gold of their shining figures in the yard and on the step, she felt large, dark and misshapen. She shook her head against such comparisons and cast off the observation to the rank smoke she’d ingested. Her head throbbed.

Greg frowned like he had in the office the day he told her exactly what he thought of her hero worship and adoration. She had just caught him kissing the secretary he was dating who worked in the next office. Eleanor knew she had looked shocked, but his scathing tirade hadn’t been necessary—any illusions about him had blown away like smoke.

Eleanor sank onto the settee but drew her feet up to protect herself. He sat down and pulled her feet onto his lap. Greg began to knead her slightly dirty feet on reflex. He closed his eyes and inhaled the vague scent of pot, the sweetness of the ripening figs and Bird’s sweat mixed with citrus perfume. In the dappled shade of the fig tree, Ellie felt her headache recede, as she examined this new being who ran his fingers over the bones of her ankles, up her calves and back down to her feet, attended to the insteps and then pulled gently on each of her toes.

*Who was this stranger? Hadn’t he been another man yesterday in the office? Hadn’t he been a different man when she’d listened to his disgust so eloquently summarized in a diatribe about her stupid crush? What she’d have given for this consideration before witnessing the kiss in his office!* The grouchy voice in her head reminded her of the embrace that she’d rudely interrupted with a file folder and a cup of coffee. Ellie narrowed her eyes and examined this pretender in Greg Champion’s body. *What did he want now?*

“You took everything from your office, Eleanor Birdsong Bramble.” His voice was chiding, but vaguely hurt and low as if he didn’t want her mother to know the real reason for this visit. He cupped his hand around one ankle and slid the other hand to mid-calf. His fingers were warm and rough-tipped for a man who worked in an office. Eleanor felt the compliant Bird returning under the spell of his deep voice. He was keeping her from rash action; between his voice and the kneading hands, Bird was stilled, mesmerized. She nodded. She fought the desire to argue point-by-point the charges he’d thrown on her after she walked in on the kiss.

Under the shade of the fig leaves and the lattice, Bird could not even remember the woman’s name, but she could still see the loosened blouse, the hint of a lace camisole and the other woman’s wet lips that curved into a smirk, as she straightened up behind his harsh words. Bird had stayed there frozen, as he began to berate his subordinate. *That’s right*, Bird thought, *his underling*; *she wasn’t really his partner or his friend*.

Eleanor blinked wide awake and pulled her feet from his lap. She sat forward and rested her forehead on her palms with her elbows on her knees. “Leave me alone, Greg Champion. I’m entitled to my weekends.” She spoke to the ground, “And I don’t usually smoke, but it did relax me enough to see the world a bit more clearly.”

Greg gave a derisive laugh, “Probably quite the opposite. Bird . . . Eleanor,” he corrected himself. He swallowed the disappointment of not being able to reach the person she’d been the moment before she’d burst through the door to his office with file folders and coffee that she’d promptly splashed on the carpet, her legs and her shoes. She’d looked down at the brown wet staining her stockings and soaking into the ivory carpet, and she hadn’t looked up again. Now she was covering her eyes. He had lost this first round in the contest to lure his Bird back.

Contemplation

On Saturday night, Eleanor agreed to a pub crawl with the few high school friends who still lived in town. She could count the good friends from those days on one hand excluding the thumb and little finger just like old Sister Caroline had warned them during seventh grade. She merely sipped at a beer in the second bar that was pulsating from the thumping music piped in from overhead speakers. Everyone was trying too hard: the bar was too loud and happy; the Saturday night crowd too glitzed up and young; her friends, Lindsey and Candace were having a tough time going beyond glib jokes and little bits of news about their lives. Eleanor looked around the renovated bar she remembered as a cozy neighborhood dive, sipped again at her beer and wondered what she was doing.

She’d tossed Greg Champion out of the house on Friday, but she’d promised to return to work on Monday. He’d made some excuse for his trip to Baltimore about seeing his mother and father. Evidently his parents lived in the suburbs not a half hour from her parent’s small rowhome. She had rolled her eyes and stood behind the painted door screen and watched him drive away with a scowl on her face. Then she’d gone back into the shadowy recesses of the house to explain his visit to her mother. Was she kidding herself? There was no real explanation for his visit to her parents’ home. Millie had been much more interested in Eleanor’s impulsive raid on her father’s marijuana. Smoking was clearly out of character.

Lindsey tapped her glass and broke Eleanor out of self-absorption. “Drink up, sweetie. You’ll like the next place better. Remember Luis Fuerza? He owns the place with his uncle. They have live music almost every weekend night.”

Eleanor tossed back the beer and resisted the urge to belch. She erupted into a coughing fit when she looked in the mirror over the bar and met the eye of the amused man standing just behind her. Greg Champion grinned like he’d won some sweet contract. He put one, warm palm on her shoulder and squeezed, “Hey, Bird! I thought that was you! Graduate to beer tonight?” His eyes danced with humor.

Eleanor shook her head, but her eyes widened when the company he was with moved closer. A pretty blond with bright blue eyes set in a small face blinked up at Greg. An older man and woman who looked suspiciously like the little blond crowded around them. She croaked all she could manage, “Night out with the girls,” she gestured to the two women sitting to her left, “My friends Lindsey and Candace.” She turned so that Greg had to drop his hand.

“We’re waiting on a table at the Waterfront. My parents--Eve and Bill Champion. My sister Adelaide. This is my assistant, Bird . . .” he stopped himself, “actually it’s Eleanor Birdsong Bramble.”

Candace giggled at him and stage whispered, “She’s Ellie to her friends. You call her ‘Bird’? How odd!” Candace actually giggled in a flirty way that made Eleanor roll her eyes.

Eleanor fell into her role for work and shook all their hands though she was feeling the effects of the previous beer. “Good to meet you.” She yanked a twenty out of her purse and gestured to the bartender, “Cocktails on me.” She leaned forward and brushed her lips on Greg’s cheek in a deliberately flirty gesture, “Have a fine evening!” Then she catapulted herself through the crowd with her friends rushing to keep up. She knew she had the devil at her heels.

When they approached the next pub, Eleanor laughed out loud, “Luis and his uncle bought the old Irish bar?” She gazed up at the hokey shamrocks and leprechaun on the hanging sign that had weathered over forty years on this shadowed end of the block of bars, little shops and restaurants in the old port area. The yuppies had targeted the area for renovation twenty years earlier which left the whole neighborhood wearing a shabby, retro look. The worn cobblestone streets were lined with sunken railroad tracks from the cargo trains that had once picked up merchandise at the piers. Another thin line of rail traced the path of absent streetcars that had been abandoned during the forties. Now women in killer heels teetered over the glinting metal, and cars crept along to save their suspension. Luis Fuerza, a man whose family spoke nothing but Spanish from the doorstep to back gate, owned the most flagrantly Irish place in the area.

As they entered, Eleanor approached the bar like she had in the two other places they’d stopped, but Candace took her elbow and pulled her right out onto the dance floor for an Irish jig set to a punk cover of a traditional tune. Lindsey laughed when a big, lumberjack-type swung her away for a two-step frolic right up to the band. Eleanor found herself matching Candace’s steps and avoiding the sly eyes of the guys who seemed to surround them. She wasn’t even shocked to feel a hand at her back that threatened to slide down to her bottom. She looked sideways and found Luis Fuerza’s eyes meeting hers—green to brown in a crazy game of recognition, and slightly, of daring. He let his palm press her closer, as he bent to say, “Welcome home, Ellie Bird!” and then he kissed her right on the mouth.

Stepping back to see her properly, he grinned down at her and gave Candace a little wave. *Ellie Bird!* Maybe the beer was making her silly, but she giggled over his sly intonation making the three syllables a carmelization of her pet name. Even as a boy, a doe-eyed, beautifully olive-skinned child, he’d had that sweet, slow cadence in his voice that sounded like chocolate tasted. Very good, warm chocolate that made the knots in her neck uncurl. As a man, his voice had deepened and become seductive and calming though the band blared, and they were jostled by the other dancers.

Eleanor glanced around and raised an eyebrow. “I like your place, Luis! How many flags are you flying in here?” He laughed and guided her toward the back where the bar curved around to the wall and a door to some backroom was apparent. He gestured to the collection hanging from the ceiling. “One for every type of music we offer and place in the world we represent: Ireland of course, Mexico and Ecuador,” he gestured to the one hanging over the cash register, “Greece and Poland because, believe it or not, my Uncle Vince recently married Caroline. Remember that little blond waitress he always hung out with?” He smiled at Eleanor as if he knew a secret.”They’ve just had a baby!”

Eleanor waved at the big man behind the bar whom she recognized as Vincenzo Fuerza from the neighborhood. Vince, as he was known to her parents, lived three doors down on the corner and had run a luncheonette on Wolfe and Fayette Street after his father retired. Eleanor had worked tables first and then the grill there for a few years before leaving home for college.

Vince slid two tall waters over to them and barked over the music, “Staying for long, Ellie?” He smiled and rolled his eyes at her frown. “Heard that guy you work for came to get you back.”

“Jeez! I guess it’s all over the neighborhood. Yes, he came to make sure I wasn’t going to up and quit.” She rolled her eyes back. She turned to Luis, “Tell me what you’ve been doing since college.”

“How long do you have? All night?” Luis was suddenly serious.

“You’re busy right now. How about breakfast at our place? I don’t have to leave until afternoon.” Ellie caught him looking at her mouth and angling his head as if he contemplated a kiss. He had been her first kiss—the boy she’d experimented with during walks home when they’d worked shifts together. They’d never dated seriously, but Luis was often her partner at dances they attended in a large, intermingled group from the neighborhood. He was four years older which made her parents hesitant when she was sixteen, then seventeen and eighteen while Luis grew into being a man. Vincenzo was only fifteen years older than Luis, but it seemed like he’d always been a man with adult responsibilities. Eleanor knew that Vincenzo and Luis were more like brothers which had probably made this business easier to manage.

Luis took Eleanor’s hand and tugged her back to the dance floor for a slower ballad. “Yes, my dear. I would like to have breakfast with you tomorrow.” His mouth cruised over her cheek and settled on her mouth the moment Greg Champion found his quarry, as he scanned the place from the front of the bar.

Champion’s eyes tracked her, watching as she allowed the dark-haired man to hold her close and kiss her gently. Greg ordered a drink absently while concluding they were old friends because their fingers slid and laced after a second, followed by a lighter rub of lips to lips, cheeks and temple. Greg sighed and noted that man holding her knew the right approach with Bird. This other man had some experience in sweet seduction, yet he did not do anything objectionable that allowed Greg to cross the floor and break them apart. He shivered; he had no right at all; he had hurt her, his fragile Bird.

Greg looked toward the bar, as the large man who tended it wiped the bar rag too close to his hand. He resisted the urge to flinch and looked up into the face of a serious man who took customer orders with a minute growl. The large man raised an eyebrow, “This is my place. Do not glare at my nephew or his lady. She is not your property.”

Greg nodded and raised both palms, “Fair enough. I don’t mean any harm.”Greg knew enough about negotiations that he could lose this argument; the large man behind the bar menaced without effort—all dark eyes hooded with deliberate concern, wide, muscular shoulders and forearms that revealed his strength with the cuffs of a white shirt rolled just two turns. Greg glanced at the mirror behind the bar and found the couple dancing together; the younger man’s hair was the thick, oily richness of black satin like the bartender’s. Bird’s hair shone, too, with similar, curly deep brown touched with fiery highlights that were not entirely from the small lights on the dance floor. Bird and this man who held her matched in some volatile darkness that appealed to his eye. He saw himself in the mirror and grimaced at the thin, white face set with eyes the color of a stormy sky, the graying blond hair and tired frown. Greg felt insubstantial beside a girl as full of life as his Bird.

Breaking into his study of dancers in the mirror, the bartender shook his head, “You followed her here. Ellie is mourning something. Is it you?” Again, there was bristling antagonism. *Round two lost*, Greg concluded. Greg grimaced and nearly nodded. He pulled a ten out of his wallet and placed it on the bar, “She’ll come around in good time. I’ll leave her be then.” He slid from his coveted spot in full view of the dance floor.

Luis held his uncle’s eye for a moment over Eleanor’s head. She’d finally relaxed into slightly leaning on him. Luis Fuerza touched his cheek to her soft hair and nearly hummed at her fit against him. He quivered with satisfaction over holding this woman on a busy Saturday night while his uncle stood watch and frightened off strangers in a bar that they owned. There was comfort in this bond of friendship and family.

Luis wondered later if he imagined seeing old Father Kaczmerak stare into the doorway while he danced with Eleanor. As he drove Ellie back to her parent’s home, he let the old priest’s warning resound in his head.

Secrets in Birdsong

Eleanor woke early while it was still dark—unnaturally dark because the glaring street lights dictated blackout shades on each of her bedroom windows. They’d turned the air conditioning on while she was out with Lindsey and Candace, so Eleanor woke to pitch black with a heavy comforter pressing her down in the bed. She rested for a few more moments fantasizing about the weight of a man instead of the heavy, old comforter that smelled faintly of lavender and moth balls. She smiled to conjure up the smell of a man until she realized that the scent she immediately imagined was the combination of body heat, cologne with faint musk undertone mixed with peppermint and coffee that Greg carried with him late each day. She avoided contact with him earlier in the day when she had more willpower.

Eleanor groaned and pushed the comforter off herself, stood by the bed, flicked open the shades and felt immediate surprise at the dim, soft glow from the lights on the next street. The hazy aura of light from the avenue brightly washed the scene like an amber-colored day, but quiet still enveloped predawn life in the city. As a jittery sense filled her, she assembled a simple outfit of jeans, a tee shirt, sandals and a sweater wondering if the morning air was cool. She dragged a hand through her short curls and remembered the urge to snip off her long locks one by one the evening Greg told her the truth. She had felt so desperate to tear away the embarrassment of finding out that she was so unattractive he had to broadcast his revulsion to the entire office, she snipped at her wildly curly hair to rid herself of her younger, adoring persona. *Who was that pitiful person?*

Luis thought she was attractive. In fact, Luis had tried to take her to his apartment, had tried to seduce her in the car when she refused, and then had pushed her up against the wall in the vestibule downstairs and tried to convince her to sneak him upstairs to her room. That thought had broken the spell between them because Eleanor had laughed. She had cradled his earnest face in her hands and kissed him gently like she kissed her parents’ dog. “No. I like kissing you, Luis, but I will not become one of your ladies,” she had whispered gently.

He’d backed off slightly and pretended to be insulted. “You will never be one of my ladies. Sometimes I think you are the one woman I should take home and keep.”

She had looked into his sly, green eyes and found the slick master of persuasion so like Greg Champion during negotiations. *Did she respond so similarly to these two, very different men because of their charisma? What a thought!* Bird had shaken her head and soothed, “Luis, we would drive each other crazy. How many women have you had in this position just in the past month? The last year?”

He sobered and cast his eyes down at their bodies pressed close. If he wanted, she would capitulate and have few regrets.

Luis had left after one more, angry kiss. He had mumbled, “We’ll talk about this at breakfast when neither of us has been drinking. You’ve hurt me, Ellie.” He hugged her gently and buried his face against her neck, “I like your hair short, my love. It frames your beautiful face and makes it easier to kiss that elegant neck.” Then he bit her less gently and ran his tongue over the spot in one last effort to get her to let him inside. He stopped when she started to squirm away.

In the dim bedroom light, Eleanor squinted into the dresser mirror at the place where Luis had given her the faintest bruise and rolled her eyes; men were such children sometimes. *No*, the old lady voice in her head growled, *they are more like dogs leaving their mark to ward off other dogs*. The wry warnings in the crackling leaf voice made her smile and loop a scarf around her neck.

Eleanor Birdsong Bramble walked toward the lights of Eastern Avenue at first, but she slowed and changed directions after crossing the path of two drunks leaning on each other as they staggered home. That they were women had relaxed her guard for a moment, but one of them had rasped, “Look at the girly all on her own! Pretty one, come here!” The woman’s voice was garbled with gravel and exhaustion. Bird had skittered away from them before anything else could be uttered. They reminded her of witches from a book of fairytales. *Better not to tempt a witch with a reply*.

So she turned back and made her way through the relative safety of the little neighborhood that surrounded an old Methodist church that stood vacant and sad as it waited to begin a new life. Eleanor imagined it might do as a shelter or a soup kitchen. Years ago, she might have wanted to make it into a bookstore, a gymnasium for children with a daycare or a concert hall for performing arts; she had chaired the committee that had converted an abandoned warehouse in Middletown into a community center with a daycare and an art studio. She squinted and saw the landscape as pictures that she’d scribble into notebooks later. She was good at sketching from memory and smiled thinking of old Wordsworth writing his lines from scenes in his memory that he enhanced beyond reality. She wandered a bit further into the next neighborhood that had become so popular when she was a child that the real estate prices had skyrocketed.

There was old St. Casimir’s straddling two full blocks with houses framing either side way down the street. Oddly, there was plenty of foot traffic on the sidewalk, near the steps to the towering church and spilling out into the street. Bird hesitated again because it was tempting to walk the few blocks and join the gathering crowd for services.

She hadn’t attended mass regularly after she took the part-time job at the Fuerza’s luncheonette when she was fourteen. Neither her mother nor father had ever made an issue of it. As an adult, that puzzled her. *If she had a daughter*, Eleanor thought, *she might take a stronger guiding hand to her*. Eleanor grimaced as she pictured her willy-nilly release from the nest to flop around on her own far too soon. She frowned over the image of her golden parents—both were light-skinned and gilded with blond highlights. *Where had she gotten her dark looks?*

Out of habit, Eleanor Birdsong Bramble turned and made her way toward the Wolfe Street luncheonette with little expectation that it would be open. Now that Luis and Vincenzo owned the busy place in Fells Point, she expected that the luncheonette, which drew clientele only from their small neighborhood, might be a second thought or run by employees. Rounding the corner as dawn pinked the sky, Eleanor smiled at the picture Vincenzo made holding a baby at one shoulder and pulling out the signs for the daily specials. *Did the man ever sleep?* Her smile grew larger as a woman’s figure joined him with a broom in hand to sweep the area around the entrance all the way to the street. In the new light, the woman’s long skirt made her seem ethereal and light like she didn’t quite touch the sidewalk when she moved. The sway in her hips and tilt of her chin revealed her over-brimming happiness though she was doing nothing more than sweeping away the previous day’s debris.

Eleanor hurried toward them, “Vincenzo and Caroline! Good morning!”

Caroline laughed at the sudden reappearance of long lost Eleanor Birdsong in their little part of the city; she opened her arms to hug Eleanor and tousle her hair, “Welcome home, Ellie Bird! I love your hair cut like that! Do you have telepathy?” Her eyes danced toward her husband’s groan.

Vince leaned forward to kiss Eleanor’s cheek, “Good morning, Ellie. Ignore my wife. She is about to shanghai you into working the grill this morning. There’s a bit of turmoil in the neighborhood that’s stolen away our cook and two of the waitresses until noon.” He deftly angled the child in his arms, so Ellie could see the sleeping face that looked like the cross between a walnut and a pumpkin. Bird felt an odd flutter in her belly, as she watched the child open her mouth minutely and nestle back into Vincenzo’s shoulder. Even in newborn miniaturization, the baby featured her father’s distinctively darker, Ecuadorian skin, her mother’s round face, and though the color of her hair under the cap was a mystery, her lashes were fine and golden red. Vincenzo’s voice was warm, melted gruffness, “This little changeling is Amelia Maria Fuerza; she is a colicky baby.”

Caroline rolled her eyes at Vincenzo, “Your Aunt Mira says it’s the air. It makes me think Amelia is gulping in huge gasps of this polluted air and turning it into a belly full of gas.” She laughed as Vince barked out a subduing sound. Other people were still asleep.

Eleanor smiled at the two people who’d made a job for her when she was fourteen, tall and awkward. Here she was on the sidewalk at twenty-six, feeling a bit lost, heartsick and still most comfortable with them. Now they had a ring and a child to unite them as a couple, but they had always been together in her mind even when he’d simply been the uncle of a boy she flirted with every day at work, and Caroline was the pretty waitress with the big eyes, good advice and gentle humor. Eleanor patted the little baby’s back and looked up to Vince, “I’ll work the grill if you go over changes to the menu. I’d enjoy helping out this morning,” she slid her eyes over to Caroline who nodded and smirked like a goddess who gently ruled her part of the world and usually got her way.

They were halfway through the second onslaught of breakfast orders at eleven after the delayed release of the eight o’clock mass when Vincenzo rested a hand on Bird’s hip and gestured to the other cook who’d come in with storms in her eyes only a half hour before whispering a spate of quick Spanish into his ear. “Let Arnissa cook for a while. The cat is out of the bag, Ellie Bird!” His accent was comically stronger when he forced American idioms.

Vincenzo led Eleanor out of the kitchen and into the small office that doubled as a storeroom. Ellie looked at the same desk that years ago, she’d caught Vincenzo leaning Caroline onto for scene that became the model for a romance in Ellie’s head from that day forward. They’d broken apart when she’d giggled and said, “You’re better than Darcy and Elizabeth. No, you two rival Bogart and Bacall.” She had been sixteen and full of dreams. Eleanor had tried to recreate the moment with Luis that same evening. It had made him swear when she burst into giggles.

The desk still made her blush. *Was her verve toward the romantic getting in the way of growing up completely? Was that the reason Greg exploded on her so fiercely and then followed her here to moon over her like a hound*? *Would she giggle if Greg bent her over his desk some evening on the way to loosening his tie or unbuttoning her blouse?* She tried to rein in her busy mind; she sobered while examining Vincenzo’ very serious face.

Vincenzo Fuerza might have become an adult on this street, but his richly deep, accented voice and thick build leant him the exotic darkness of his early years in an Ecuadorian village on a narrow, jeep path from the jungle. To a stranger, he looked fierce when he was unsettled; a hard look grew out of a frowning mustache and narrowed, dark eyes. He placed his large hands flat on the desktop and gestured for her to sit in a chair crowded into a corner by a few stacked olive oil boxes marked “Pompeian.” He slowly sat in the cushioned, swivel chair that might have been the same one from the time she’d worked here during high school. She kept finding that change contrasted stalwart lack of change wherever she looked. The things that fell away had never supported anything important, so transience blossomed, wilted and blew away. She swallowed.

Change was arriving like the morning was growing old. She had phoned her parents and left a message that she was at the luncheonette with Vince and Caroline just like the old days. She’d left a similar message on Luis’ answering service. So much for a late, lazy breakfast with her parents and Luis in the backyard under the fig leaves and the cage-like lattice—it was nearly time to hop into the car and drive home. *Home.*

Vincenzo tried to find the right way to begin, “You went to see the priest on Friday?” He looked at the calendar on the wall behind her. He had made a few phone calls while she finished the first of many rounds of orders. He’d been shocked to see Luis come in and don an apron without one word to take orders and bus tables. His fingers had twitched when Andros Kirkas nodded at him from the doorway and glanced toward his regular booth in the back. Eleanor’s parents were there waiting for the explosion of truth and change. Vince had finally called his Aunt Mira to take the baby, and release Caroline from her admiration of their little child because he would need to spend his full attention on their other changeling child, Eleanor Birdsong Bramble.

He snapped into focus when Ellie spoke out of amazement, “Nothing goes on here without some witness. I thought Middletown was a fishbowl! Does everyone know how foolish I’ve been?” Her cheeks grew red along with her nose. She was very close to crying. Then there grew the relief of anger, “Yes, I went to confession on Friday. I wanted to talk to someone about what an idiot I’d been over Greg—that man from last night, the one you warned away. Thank you, Vincenzo. It was kind of you.” She glanced down and let her lip quiver as she controlled tears. She did not want to cry in front of him.

Vince sat back in astonishment as it hit him. “Oh, I see. You didn’t tell Father Joseph the name of the man, did you?” He watched her shake her head. “He probably thought you were talking about Luis!” He leaned forward, “You haven’t done more than kiss my nephew, have you?” Now he was a father, a semi-irate father, and she looked at him with a bit of embarrassment tingeing her face. He smiled in relief, “I didn’t think so. You dodged that bullet.”

Bird narrowed her eyes and tried to get this big, familiar man in perspective. He was speaking in riddles. Her voice told her hesitant fear, “What exactly is everyone so upset about? I’ve acted the fool and fell in love with my boss! Women do it every day. You, in fact, are married to the best waitress that ever worked here. See? It happens all the time with both happy and disastrous endings.” She bit her lip over the ridiculousness of it, “My ending’s just sad. No one is broken beyond repair.”

Vincenzo shook his head, “Father Joseph must be in his eighties, Ellie.” He had put a soothing tone into his voice like he must use for the baby. “He’s been blurting things out lately; sometimes they are fragments from the confessional. When he says Mass, sometimes he’ll do one part over and over until the deacon or an altar boy speaks up; the pastor doesn’t quite know what to do with him.” Vincenzo rubbed the bristles on his chin and continued, “Father Joseph requested an assignment at St. Casimir’s a couple of years ago for semi-retirement according to Pastor Stallings. Father Joseph originally served the parish during the seventies and eighties, and everyone loved him. Recently he has slipped more often; he turned up one night last week at the Shamrock and began to recite the Sermon on the Mount.” He sighed in a huge release of breath.

“Poor man!” Ellie’s eyes welled for the priest who had been a constant figure from her childhood, an integral part of the large Catholic parish that dominated the old neighborhood. She looked up to Vincenzo’s eyes, “I didn’t even think about finding him sitting outside the confessional when I walked into the church. I felt so restless on Friday that I took the bus downtown and then walked all the way back from that little bookstore in Mount Vernon. I haven’t slept well since my boss told me I’d made a fool of myself. I sound so self-centered! Father Joseph was looking at a picture and sitting in the pew near the old confessional when I walked up to the altar to light a candle for Mary. I was kneeling there trying to pray when he touched my shoulder and asked me if I wanted to confess my sins. So I did. It was an impulse after being away for so long.” Eleanor broke off for a moment and then added a bit more lightly, “The last time I tried reconciliation with Fr. Joseph, I was fifteen, and I’d let Luis kiss me in the walk-in freezer until my clothes started to catch fire.” Eleanor looked at Vincenzo with comic eyes and a slight grin; she hadn’t been sorry even at fifteen enough to be relieved of her sin. The old priest had lectured at her, demanded the name of the young man, and had called her parents. Eleanor had never confessed to Father Joseph again. Ellie touched the edges of that memory and slowly frowned.

The big man shifted in slight impatience, “Exactly what did you tell him on Friday?”

Eleanor shrugged, “I confessed to desiring a man I couldn’t have. I told the priest that the man had rejected me and that I felt torn apart inside. I told him I knew my feelings were selfish and that I had to forget them. I knew I had to combat my feelings with charitable acts. I have, Vincenzo. I am so busy that I don’t even have time to think. But that’s why I needed to come home, so I could think and put it away.”

Vincenzo looked so sad, “Where is home, Ellie Bird? I am afraid you will fly away and never return. Change is inevitable and sometimes painful, you know. Pain and joy come hand in hand. Take that from an old man.” He watched her digest his words with the same gravity that she’d taken the priest’s words.

Ellie said suspiciously, “You are no old man.”

“My father told me this. We had to leave Ecuador when I was five years old. I left my mother and sisters to travel to this very street with my father and his brother. When we sent for them a year later, they were all dead from a fever. My father eventually married again to a beautiful woman who could never take my mother’s place in my heart. She did the best she could for me nonetheless. Her cousin married my uncle, and they gave me Luis to be like a little brother when I was barely fifteen. I love him like a brother.” He swallowed, “I could never bring myself to tell you, after I knew, to stay away from each other. You are attracted and repelled, aren’t you?”

Bird nodded with a sick feeling working bile up her throat. The dark, thick hair, the olive skin that distilled into a tanned and rosy complexion, the long legs and trunk of similar heritage were obvious once her eyes were open. She looked at her fingers—long like Luis’ and scalloped with the same nails—crescent mooned and round. Vincenzo cleared his throat for courage, “Ellie, the Brambles adopted you. I never knew until you were living away at college. Your father and Luis’ mother are brother and sister.” He watched her accept it without protest. He watched her squint over questions and connect the missing dots to a puzzle she’d been working all her life.

“Mira is Greek, isn’t she? Once she told me her parents were from some little island overrun by criminals. She told a few of us a story once to make us laugh while she made cookies in her kitchen. You’ve sold those Greek cookies here.” She squinted all the way back to memories that washed her. Didn’t Mira have a big, handsome brother who had popped into the kitchen and kissed his sister and then retreated to wait for her? He had Luis’ black satin hair, but a giant’s frame and a deep voice. What was his name?

Vincenzo nodded. “Father Joseph knew. On Friday, he must have thought you were talking about Luis. In his mind, if you and Luis were involved, it would be immoral.” He looked away from his study of the calendar when Eleanor snorted through an uncomfortable chuckle. He waved away his embarrassment, “Well, it would be, wouldn’t it? I think the priest’s mind snapped last week; on Sunday afternoon, he told an old couple that their daughter had an abortion. He told them in the middle of the baptism of their great-grandchild. Their daughter is fifty-three and has three grown children who are mortified. The woman hasn’t left her house all week. This morning, he’s locked in the confessional at St. Casimir’s rambling about everybody’s sins to anyone who’ll listen. What exactly did he say to you, Ellie?”

Eleanor finally let her welling tears fall. “He told me that I was not meant for love with this man. He told me that I was a goddess and destined to be alone all my life. He begged me not to take my life.” She bent her head and let the tears renew themselves. *Why would she be given away as a baby? Why given to a couple so unlike her to be raised a stranger by loving but careless people? Were her parents simply the brambles that had caught a changeling tossed away in the wind? There were fairytales about such children.*

Ellie was barely surprised when Greg Champion came through the doorway, pulled her up, and then back down into his arms to let her rest her face on his crisp Sunday suit and completely dampen it. He rocked her and hushed her, as Vincenzo watched for a moment, nodded approval and left to warn the others that he had told their little girl the truth at last.

The wild edge of grief fed her tears; all her suppositions about life had been blown away in a few short days. She might have questioned resemblances, searched her mother’s face for evidence of her own or listened to her father’s voice and wondered why she did not fit into their little nest. Her brother was tall and blond, but oddly enough, he had married a thin, dark-haired woman who resembled his sister. Was their similarity evidence of his unwitting attraction to dark beauties like his Ellie and the other girls in their largely Hispanic neighborhood? The Brambles were oddities in fringe neighborhoods like this one; they were among the token whites while the old black couple on the other corner completed their bookend role in the cloak of multi-racial diversity. Greg rocked his Bird gently, as she ended the first wave of surprised panic and lifted her head. “What . . . what are you doing here?” The incongruity of his intrusive presence was another shock.

“Your mother invited me to breakfast when I called looking for you at seven. Evidently you’d been gone before dawn. Or did you ever get home?” Greg offered her a napkin that Vincenzo had pushed into his hand before leaving. He watched her straighten up and dab at her red-cheeked face. She did not leave his lap and seemed too exhausted to do more than rest against him. “You are very pretty,” his eyes examined her flushed cheeks and quivering lips, the pulse in her throat. “I never told you I thought so. I never told you how much I enjoy working with you. It’s been awkward since I was sick last year.” He stared into her widening eyes. *What was it with this urge to purge secrets—this lure of the confessional?*

Eleanor sighed and untangled herself from trusting Greg Champion any further than letting him see her cry. She stood and raked a hand through her tousled hair, nearly surprised at its cropped length. So many changes to navigate and too many that begged for patience and grace! Eleanor took a deep, shuddery breath and blew it out to shore herself up before pushing herself to face the dining room. She looked back at him, “Yes, it has been odd. It’s even stranger that you’re here. You were honest with me on Monday. Go back to that, Greg.” Her eyes were sad, but his sensible Bird was back from hiatus.

He shook his head, “I was embarrassed, and so I lied. I was trying to protect myself.” To his credit, his voice was rough and sad. Eleanor paused at the door; once she entered the dining room, she might become immersed in the throes of the truth—a grand scraping away of lies, half-truths and poor interpretations. She nodded but met his eyes steadily. Greg Champion had become a man again. She turned away from the man and his needs; Eleanor Birdsong Bramble went out into the dining room to meet her parents.

General Confession

After a spate of introductions between Eleanor and Andros Kirkas, everyone at the table looked either at the tabletop, the mirrored wall behind the semi-circle booth or out into space. Eleanor, however, surreptitiously examined the big man who was her father; he towered over all of them even as he sat, his chest measured twice Martin Bramble’s thin, runner’s torso, and his face was wide, featuring a large nose and a big mouth that was frowning. Eleanor thought he reminded her of the bust of Neptune with the flattened nose in the art museum; Andros’ hair was combed back from his face and lay on his shoulders in haphazard curls just like the grayed marble. She found her throat dry as she asked, “Vincenzo said my mother died before the Brambles adopted me. How did my mother die?”

With tears in his eyes, Andros Kirkas told them how his wife, Kate Walsh Kirkas, had been killed in an accident just a few mornings after she discovered she was pregnant with their second child. A boy. He’d told his side: his happiness and her tears. He showed them a picture of the golden-haired, green-eyed Kate standing before a canvas that Eleanor recognized from the bookstore in Mount Vernon. The picture made her quiver: *How many intersections were possible before she ran into all the sharp edges and broke through walls? A man named Walsh managed the bookstore. Was there an entire family kept from her in this guise as a Bramble? How could they do it and sleep at night?*

Andros finished with an odd conclusion, “We agreed that you would never have to know.” He fumbled with his peppery whiskers and touched his eyes, “Father Kaczmerak promised; he said he’d take it to the grave.” He shook his great head and looked surly.

Eleanor’s mother had begun crying, and her father Martin Bramble had become angry. Millie tried to soothe him between sniffling after the sobs receded, “Martin, calm down. Don’t blame Father Joe. He’s an old man forgetting his vows and getting all mixed up. Tell him, Vincenzo.”

But Luis had slid into the booth beside Eleanor with an arm across the back of the seat. Luis sounded amazed and curious, “He tried to warn me one night last week. It was all confused between birdsong and the goddess Athena. He warned me that I couldn’t marry Athena, and I made a joke about it. He was just trying to spare us, I guess.” Luis wrapped one of Eleanor’s curls around his index finger to focus on something other than the gulf between them. He leaned in and stage whispered, “I think we should forget it, Ellie Bird. Let’s run off and forget to give them a forwarding address.”

Eleanor had laughed aloud but then she sobered, “No escaping or hiding. Once we face the truth, we can go forward.”

Martin Bramble had laughed and broken his irritation, “That’s my girl! Never doubt that you are a Bramble at heart, Ellie Bird. The bright-eyed goddess in the epic has nothing on my daughter.” With that, he slid out of the booth and leaned over Luis to kiss his daughter’s hand and urged her, “Stay another night, sweetheart. You’re welcome to share a smoke with your old Dad tonight. You’d be surprised how clear a slightly altered perspective might make this twisted tale.” He shook Andros’ hand and spoke to Vincenzo at the door for a few minutes before walking home. Millie stayed for the entire story; she was on guard to defend the treatment, care and feeding of their child.

Eleanor would remember every word, the faces and the setting with such clarity that she would dream the scene for years. They sat in the back booth that was a true half-circle with a thick laminate table shoved before them. She sat near the outer edge with her mother beside her and Luis on the end. His thigh touched hers, and sometimes he held her hand to loosen the grasp she’d knotted her own into as Andros began to speak.

Luis addressed Andros as “Uncle” in a slightly softened, husky tone that conveyed deep sorrow and sometimes disapproval. When the story became too dangerous to her composure, Bird studied the crack in the plastic seatback between a metallic blue panel and an off-white one. The beaded edge between the panels normally guided the seated to the most comfortable distance to companions. The beading was worn. Behind the seatback, the gold-veined mirrored wall reflected all the other commotion in the luncheonette.

Business was brisk; many sets of eyes studied them as customers entered, searched for a table, some whispering to Vincenzo or Caroline, and then all eyes returned to study their assembly and whisper among themselves. As Andros and her mother sparred during the account of her adoption, Bird found herself shutting off their words at one point, and examining the entire scene as if it were a film. The colors of dresses chosen for summer in the mirror, the men in dark suits and varying shades of Sunday ties and dress shirts, the horrified looks of the people who had attended an early service at St. Casimir Church and had witnessed the unveiling of secrets they’d rather not hear. Luis’ hand touching hers and bringing her back into the conversation caused her to blink through a few snapshots of the place, the people, their voices, the press of Millie and Luis other either side, and the weight of Andros’ eyes on her face. “What? I’m sorry, my mind wandered away.” She gasped it in a low tone that revealed her dazed condition.

Andros repeated with raised eyebrows, “You are cataloguing everything for later, aren’t you? I do that. Athena! Oh, I mean Eleanor; did you know that I am a photographer?”

Eleanor narrowed her gaze to his twitching fingers resting on the tabletop; they stretched and crimped back in reflex. Busy hands used to holding his instrument? “Mira told us you were an artist. She said you were an important man.” Eleanor frowned while thinking about Mira and the cookies, Luis and Vincenzo when they were younger in that big kitchen in the house just off the avenue. “She rolled her eyes when she said it.”

Andros let his lips form a sad smile, “Most of my family thinks I’m a loafer. Art school, a studio I ran for a while with some success and then neglected into ruin. A business I resurrected again when I returned here and now this last twenty years, something of fame the family can crow over. My mother used to cry when my sisters asked about me.” He shook his head. “You have led a responsible life for the child of a pair of artists. The Brambles have been excellent parents.” He nodded and blinked his eyes to dismiss the ready tears that kept blinding him.

He couldn’t stop looking at his Athena; she glowed like the little sprite she’d been as a baby with her curly hair, wide brown eyes, proud, straight nose and full lips. She was a bit too thin like he remembered Kate at the same age. He studied her chin, the graceful neck and knew her body had developed the lanky athleticism of his beautiful Kate. His heart squeezed tight as the memories of Kate Walsh returned in all versions of the woman he’d loved, hated and adored. Human beings were too complicated for one emotion, he realized. He wished that he had known that when he held her tight, when he pushed her away, and when she cried inconsolably.

“Did my mother commit suicide? The old priest . . .” Bird’s throat closed up, so she swallowed the poisonous question. It felt as though everyone in the room was listening, but this was the neighborhood’s way. She was safe between Luis and Millie. “Father Joe told me on Friday that I was destined to live my life alone. He begged me not to take my life.” Tears fell from all their eyes. A woman in the next booth began to sob into her husband’s handkerchief. So many secrets!

Millie hushed the woman with a slightly sharp hiss, “No one blames him. His mind is going. I’ll see the rector tomorrow morning.” Everyone looked at Millie in shock; the light-hearted wife of the oldest pothead in the neighborhood was determined to take charge. This was the same Millie who took charge when they found Andros bereft and considering ending his life twenty-four years ago on a morning much like this one.

Andros shook his head, “Kate took so many chances. She was impetuous and moody. She rode a bike courier route for two years when she could have worked a good job in advertising. She often wandered around the city at night by herself. She got involved with oddballs like me. She flirted with a stranger once and nearly wound up in his trailer. There were impulse buys, she painted frightening landscapes, she cut up paintings; you get the picture. But she was also generous and sweet, funny and brilliant. She lit up all the dark corners of my life. She forced me to fight prejudices that I’d held onto from childhood.”

He hesitated over answering the real question, but met his daughter’s eyes, “On her way to visit her brother in Virginia on Chincoteague Island, she pulled over on the side of the road just before sunrise on a Sunday morning. She was probably sketching or taking photographs of the sky because the vista there is dramatic. She had a love of contrasts. A trucker half-asleep from an overnight run followed her truck’s taillights off the highway and onto the shoulder. She was dead before they pried her out of the twisted metal. I pray her death was instantaneous.”

After a moment of weighty quiet in the booth, he shifted uncomfortably. He tried to explain, “She was probably clinically depressed for two years before we married. I was part of her downward spiral. She was diving back into depression when she made that last trip and refused to take you or let me come with her. She’d visited a good friend of hers who was dying the previous week, but there were hints that she was moving on with her life. She was probably leaving me, and yet she was pregnant with our second child.” He shrugged and rubbed his left hand over his brow, as a tear trickled down the right side of his face. Then he reached forward and picked up a glass to take a sip of water.

Eleanor nodded and imagined all of it. “Depression makes you do stupid things.”

Luis squeezed her hand, “The black moods. Yes, you do foolish things to avoid it.” Eleanor turned and stared at him. They were eye to eye: brown to green with matching dark eye lashes, cheek bones, lips that were prone to smiles. He looked at her lips and remembered the kisses, “I hate being your cousin, Ellie Bird.” He touched her cheek which made her realize that she’d begun crying again. They both took deep breaths to clear out the tension in a twin moment that made both of them grin at each other.

Everyone in the booth was distracted by a small commotion at a table closer to the door. The man and woman exchanged terse words and leaned toward each other. Vincenzo stepped around the waitress who had immediately moved toward the raised voices. A murmur erupted and spread through the small restaurant when “Kaczmerak” and “Father Joseph” were blurted loudly. More secrets had emerged to hurt wounded hearts and create deep rifts. Nobody liked to feel the fool. Fewer enjoyed guilt. Wasn’t that the relief of the confessional?

Eleanor Birdsong glanced back to Andros and then at her mother, “How did Father Joe get involved? Mother, you and Dad are barely Catholic, and Andros, I don’t remember you attending St. Casimir’s.” She grimaced, “He knew, didn’t he? Right from the beginning. When I went to him after kissing Luis for the first time, he blew his top. Remember he called Dad and got me grounded?”

Millie nodded, “We nearly told you then, but your brother was sick, and we were upset enough.” Eleanor remembered being grounded and much grumbling over missing a weekend expedition to some wetland bird sanctuary. Ephram had been rushed into surgery, but Eleanor remembered, not the source of his illness, but hours of angst from her father over the endangered piping plover.

Andros was back to rubbing his jaw. He was remembering Kate, Eleanor realized. He’d rub a hand over his face, feel the sharp bristles, and think of his wife. He still loved her though he’d lost her nearly twenty-five years ago. His voice was gruff, “I don’t know when they met, but Kate loved churches. I don’t think she ascribed to any one religion; her parents are Catholic, so she was bought up that way. But she loved the buildings. Once you see her art, you’ll understand. St. Casimir’s and Father Joseph were very dear to her. The building was a refuge, and though she was irreverent with him, the priest was more like a father to her than her own was. She was disappointed in her own father.”

Millie dragged her eyes back to their table after Vincenzo poured the couple at the other booth something out of a tall, amber bottle. He poured a few more and gestured toward other tables while the waitress passed out tiny aperitif glasses. He’d changed the “open” sign to “closed” just after the anger erupted at the other booth. The atmosphere was simmering and warm.

Millie reached over and patted Andros’ hand in a gentle correction. She turned to look at Eleanor and confessed, “Father Joe knew you as Athena Kirkas. He’d come to Kate’s house if she called crying. They would talk while she gardened or painted, and he held you and sang to you. He told me later, a long time after the adoption was final. When we moved here, we didn’t want to let anyone know that you weren’t our child, but the priest knew. Your father and Andros visited him together. He was the witness when we made the whole thing legal. You had been living with us as our child for a year.” Millie told this with her mouth growing crooked. “We were afraid your grandparents would try to take you. We loved you so much and then we had your brother. Adoption does that sometimes. It relaxes a couple, and they conceive.” Millie’s cheeks were brightly flushed and her lips trembled.

Andros shook his head, “Kate’s mother and father have always known that Athena was safe. She was my daughter. I insisted she was safe with you and Martin.” Eleanor raised a brow at the harder man hidden under the gentler form he’d adopted for this first real meeting. There was a threatening mystery in the repeated worry over safety.

Luis began to shift his weight in impatience, “Too complicated.” He looked right at Eleanor and pleaded, “Let’s forget this, Ellie. Stay with me, and we’ll figure out how to make everything right. I love you. I’ve loved you since you were a little girl, and you adored me. They can’t take erase that.”

Eleanor shook her head but leaned forward to brush a little kiss on Luis’ cheek. “We both know it isn’t right. Something has stopped us every time, and we certainly had many opportunities to take the attraction too far. This actually makes sense to me, Luis. Now after we marry other people, we will still have each other. No one can ever dissolve a bond of blood.” Eleanor leaned her cheek on his and closed her eyes. The fairytale of running home to Luis was disintegrating into a fragmented plot.

Murmurs filled the air about the old priest, Ellie Bird Bramble, Luis Fuerza and the old giant who’d suddenly become Eleanor’s father. Eleanor nudged Luis out of the booth and stood for a few minutes looking at Millie and Andros. As she thought it, she spoke, “I think I’ll walk to the church to see Father Joseph. Perhaps when he spoke to me on Friday, only part of the confession was a warning. Perhaps it was his confession to me. Even a priest must need to confess.”

Contemplation after Illumination

Eleanor Bramble walked the streets in a fog while she puzzled out direction. *How should she take this much scrambled information? What good would it do to return to work all in a muddle over names, genes and loss?* Eleanor paced in front of the huge, gray church that crowded out space between the two streets running down and away from the harbor. The sidewalk had been swept clean by the hundreds of church-goers who had gathered to whisper about the secrets, gossip about the old priest, and then pray for forgiveness. Eleanor rolled her eyes at the notion of penitence. How much penance could you do for lusting after your first cousin since you were fourteen? The sorrowful look on Luis’ face today had annoyed her; like she’d told Vincenzo, they had never been intimate, but the tantalizing threat of combustion had always been there when they met after long separations. To be fair; familiarity had always bred contempt—Luis had the morals of the proverbial alley cat, and Eleanor enjoyed the safety of living like a prudish maiden. It was nearly amusing to realize that Luis and her biological father had the same animal magnetism for the opposite sex. Eleanor wondered about her reticence when it came to men. *Had she chosen Greg as a love interest because he was singularly unsuitable? Perhaps.*

She squinted up into the arched façade of the old church and decided to try the doors like she had on Friday afternoon. If one old, brown-paneled door was open, it was a sign to go inside, light another candle, pray for clear sight and look for the old priest. Half of her intention was forgiveness, but another perverse desire begged for answers. Evidently, old Father Joe had known Kate Walsh well and worried over her lost, little daughter much more than the other players in this odd plot of hidden identity, illness and mischance. Had Kate been mentally ill or simply overcome by the pressures of motherhood? All the doors to the church were locked.

Eleanor paced a few times with other agitated neighbors on the sidewalk in a trek from the locked front doors of St. Casimir to the little gathering at the rectory steps. Murmurs about the secrets, the priest’s name and other worries weighted the air. A group of worried men and women who might be the parish council had left the rectory according to the gossips at the outer edge of those assembled. The council had moved to the meeting room in the old school on the other side of the two block series of church buildings. Eleanor looked up at the golden domes on the main building and felt a chill. Denied entrance and a stranger, she turned and jogged back to her shelter, her home with the Brambles.

Bird and Martin Bramble

After the confusing regurgitation of the past in the luncheonette on Fayette, Eleanor walked back to the Bramble’s in a state of utter confusion. *Name? Parents? Home?* She let herself in through the two layers of doors, ignored her father’s call from the kitchen and trudged upstairs to her old room at the front of the house and dropped the light-blocking shades. She stripped out of her shoes and unclasped her belt, but lay in bed completely dressed and ready for sudden flight. She listened to her parents speaking through muffled tones that leaked through the floor.

Eleanor closed her eyes and willed every scrap of information dumped over her head away from her conscious mind. The long morning overtook her and let her sleep and dream of the woman that belonged to the old crone’s voice in her head. The woman didn’t fit her voice which was rough with nicotine, whiskey and long-term screaming. In the dreams, she looked serene in the priest’s garden near the statue of Mary with arms outstretched but empty of the usual baby. The woman pulled weeds in the garden and spoke in riddles with an older man who wore a collar and a wolf’s head. The woman hadn’t noticed that the priest was a wolf; she imagined that he was some tamed spaniel with soft eyes and earnest thoughts. Wolves had neither. When Eleanor leaned forward to touch the woman’s paint-stained tunic, she transformed into Millie Bramble who woke Eleanor from deep sleep, “Honey, come down for some dinner. Your dad wants to speak to you.”

Eleanor slipped her sandals back onto stiff feet, picked up her purse and an overnight bag she’d automatically packed in reverse, and joined her parents at the small table in a dining room lined with birds emblazoned on every surface: fine watercolors, Audubon prints, china plates with gold rims in the cabinet and hand-drawn by their grandchildren and colored in crayon. Eleanor perched on the edge of her chair and picked at her plate with eyes darting from woman to man and back to the birds crowding the room. *What an odd name to give a child—Birdsong*.

Eleanor looked at Martin with narrowed eyes, “Why ‘Birdsong’? How did you first meet Andros and hatch this plot to take his child?”

Martin blustered, “There was no plot, Ellie. And we met you first, my sweet child. To be honest, dealing with Andros was always daunting.” He glanced away to form the right words. His eyes filled with tears, “We were sitting under a tree after a bird watching day and idly listening to a bob-white song when you ran across the yard chasing something. We forgot all about the birds and watched you instead.”

Millie had started to clear the plates, but she stopped with a clatter of china. Eleanor realized that they’d taken out the old family china with the beautiful nightingales and the blue stripe around cream edges. “Eleanor Birdsong Bramble! It’s playful and loving.” She sighed and told the part she’d practiced, “We were staying at a little inn outside of Lewes, Delaware. I was trying to forget my last miscarriage, and your father had just suggested adoption. You bounced out of the bed and breakfast with the innkeeper and delivered a pot of tea without spilling a drop. You curtsied and ran away again. My just heart broke because we’d been warned that your mother had recently died, and you were barely two.” Millie blinked away a rough thought, “Go out into the garden with your dad. I’ll bring coffee out and a few cookies—Mira Kirkas sent them over this morning with Andros and Luis when they came looking for you.”

Eleanor and Martin settled into their usual positions for deep conversation; Martin leaned back in the settee with a water pipe while Eleanor reclined in the hammock. She puzzled over what might be most important to ask before her father was too mellow to make sense. Outside their home, Martin was humored by neighbors as an old, daft addict who muttered to himself but was harmless; inside the safety of the house, he relieved the pressure of nervous tremors with his smoke and meditation in the garden or his study. Eleanor reminded herself that Martin lectured for a living at the university and published dense essays that were all gibberish the last time she’d tried to read one. He offered, and she took one shallow hit from the pipe after initial hesitation. She felt breathless from inhaling, though she tried to barely sip, “How did you get custody of me?”

Martin groaned, “Don’t even try to spare me two minutes ease, child! First, I want to say that I love you. You know that I do, but after today, I think you need to hear it out loud over and over.” He nodded until she did the same in forced agreement.

Eleanor waved away the smell from the pipe and his avoidance, “And I love you. Tell me the truth about Kate Walsh. Did she kill herself or was it an accident? Had you ever met her?”

Martin sucked in a deeper breath of the pot and opium mixture, held it and raised his eyebrows in dismay as he released that breath. “We’d never met Kate though it seems she was a friend of Father Joe. Weird that he’s been gone from St. Casimir’s for fifteen years and returned in the last year for a partial retirement.” He paused. “Strange that old age would loosen his tongue.”

Martin tapped his finger in the armrest and explained, “Meeting you on the weekend that Andros broke that innkeeper’s heart pulled us into their lives was all happenstance. Andros must have been involved with her and ended the relationship that Sunday. She’d babysat you for the day while he had an appointment. He’d simply taken you home with him after he returned and she snapped. She was a lovely, young woman—perhaps your age or younger. Losing the man must have broken her.” He stopped speaking to look over at Eleanor.

He sighed and looked up into the fig leaves and the lattice, “We returned from a long day of hiking and a late dinner in town to find the inn oddly dark and the innkeeper missing. Your mother became curious about the sound of an engine at the same time Andros pulled back up the drive in his old truck. He was the one to force the garage door open and to run into the exhaust to find her suffocated in her car. He fell apart before the fire department even answered the call. He wouldn’t leave her body even after they pronounced her. He said he’d come back to apologize.” Martin looked at his daughter’s impassive expression. “We took you with us that night. We promised to keep you safe. He insisted that he wasn’t any good for you. He said he had destroyed two women’s lives and loved you too much to sacrifice you.”

Millie spoke from Eleanor’s other side, “He told the police we were related, so we could take you home. He called us every night for the first month, a few times a week for the next. Less and less as time went on. When the adoption papers came through the priest, we were flabbergasted but grateful enough to start going to services for a while.” Millicent Bramble sat down in a side chair and leaned back to close her eyes.

Eleanor shook her head and stared up at the slowly darkening diamonds of blue sky visible through the lattice. She whispered mostly to the sky, “A man is worth killing yourself.” She glanced over to Millie with a frown, “So the suicide Father Joe spoke of wasn’t Kate. It was that innkeeper. Do you remember her name?”

Martin concluded in with sadness clogging his throat in every pause, “Yes. Susan Stillwell. Her father was a very powerful businessman. He wanted to ruin Andros at the time. We kept you out of the whole mess. We were caught up in trying to protect you and learning to adapt to parenting. We found this house and moved here from a tiny apartment in Waverly. We took you on birding weekends, introduced you to our rarified world, and you adapted like a hungry fledgling. Within a year, your mother was pregnant and then your brother came along like another blessing.” His throat had closed with thick emotion.

Eleanor stayed quiet because the drugs were beginning to ease his irritation and sorrow, “You have both been blessings wrought by birdsong. Your mother and I could not have survived this life without you.” Eleanor frowned over his lapse into poetry as the drugs kicked in. leaned back in the cushions and closed his eyes. “Please don’t leave us, Ellie Bird! You are blessed with three parents who love you. We treasure who you are. You are wise, forgiving and so patient. Open your heart and listen to those voices in the birdsong only you can hear and find your purpose, sweet girl!”

As her father wept until he slept on the settee, Eleanor felt a wave of elated belonging sweep her. She was a cog in some great mechanism that filled a void in the Bramble house, loved Luis Fuerza despite all his faults, enjoyed his Uncle Vincenzo, served the community in Middletown through all those charities, and worked well with everyone associated with the position in Greg Champion’s department. She was the blessed one, not the alienated stranger that uncertainty made her see.

Eleanor thought about old Father Joseph and worried about him becoming a stranger to himself. What had he been trying to tell her about goddesses, birdsong and gardens? Eleanor sat up and nearly threw herself out of the hammock onto the ground. She needed to run to the church.

The Forgiveness of Birdsong

Greg Champion squinted into his computer monitor and tried to edit the report to Eleanor’s standards. Everything was going too slowly without her. He closed his eyes and imagined her there at work where she was supposed to be. Instead, she was missing.

He’d called her house in Middletown first when she didn’t arrive by eight-thirty. No answer. Then he called the house on North Elwood Street in Baltimore but met the answering machine. He checked his email and phone every few minutes hoping for some message, excuse—even her resignation, so he would know his next step.

He grimaced at the thought of their usual Tuesday afternoon meeting in Wilmington without her. Her part of the reports had been left partially finished, but her absence would be tangible evidence of a failure to control his part of the company. He had lost his assistant in the blind urge to bolster his ego.

If Bird hadn’t visited Baltimore to lick her wounds, would the old priest have started divulging secrets from the confessional? If she hadn’t run away to heal the hurt he’d inflicted, would she have danced and flirted with Luis to the point of combustion? Greg sighed over the loss of her in her little cubicle of an office outside his, her glib report from the weekend that would now be silenced, and remembered the warmth of her bundled against his chest yesterday, as he’d held her though initial hysterics.

Eleanor hadn’t bargained for a week of upheaval any more than he’d professed true attraction for the flirty skirt in the next office. When Josie had come in with his lunch order and a few overt suggestions about another date, he’d capitulated easily. He couldn’t even conjure up the feeling of that other woman’s mouth now that he’d kissed Bird’s temple, her wet cheeks and brushed his mouth on hers. He had wiped away her tears and wanted to carry her out of the dingy office to some dark and quiet place. He wanted her. His frown deepened; the pitch of true panic raced to the bottom of his stomach over the thought. He wanted Eleanor Birdsong Bramble, his Bird, Athena or whatever name she donned to be his. For good.

His mother had poked fun at him after Bird left the twenty at the bar for their drinks. “That girl wants you far away from her. What did you do, Greg? Make an indecent proposal or something?”

The list of transgressions was so long, he felt the weight of them between his shoulder blades. He closed his eyes to feel the misery of guilt. And then he realized that the weight was real because Eleanor’s palm pressed onto the center of his back. She moved her hand slightly, “Greg! Wake up. We can’t let anyone find the plant manager asleep at his desk!” Her voice was tinged with humor.

He sat up, and she moved to his side and folded her hands together. “Sorry I was late. It took longer than I expected to settle things. I’ll get right on that report for tomorrow.” She glanced at his computer screen, “Email the figures to me?” He was dazed by her appearance; she was in a familiar, summer dress that she wore in a habitual rotation this time of year, but her smile was broader and easier. She wasn’t chirping away in her normal, nervous chattering to fill in the gaps. She was more comfortable now. He was tongue-tied. He nodded and straightened his tie. A few minutes later, he sent her the file she wanted and then rose to stare out the window and wake up.

The landscape was something out of a nightmare. The industrial plant was inserted onto the rolling fields just out of his periphery. The ugliness of obvious mistakes surrounded him. Just yesterday, he had sprinted from her family’s home on North Elwood to the luncheonette on the corner of Wolfe and Fayette to be greeted by stares and hesitant smiles. Greg felt a stranger to himself. *Had nothing changed from last week but his awareness?* He peeked out the door to his office and found her there with a sweater tossed about her shoulders, hair curled in a haphazard toss that grazed her uncovered neck, and fingers flying over a narrative of some sort needed for the meeting. She was not aware that he watched, or worse, she ignored his presence. He blinked once and felt dismissed. That was unsettling.

The phone rang, and she picked up after two rings per protocol. “Good morning, Mr. Champion’s office.” A pause for listening, “Yes, this is Eleanor Bramble. Thank you for taking him on such short notice. Yes, I’ll be there at 5:30 for dinner. Is he adjusting?” Her voice told worry, but her face showed little intensity of emotion. “Good. Thank you again, Father Gabriel. I think you are saving his life.” Then her voice fell off to a choked one. “Good bye.” She hunched over her computer for a moment and rubbed her eyes. When she sat up, the moment was over, and she began again. His Bird was a strong woman—no longer the slight maiden whom he had so gravely wounded.

Greg retreated to his office in an urge to focus his attention on work. His Bird was back at her post, and there was work to accomplish before they could truly speak to each other. The conversation must happen soon. While he worked, his wandering mind conjured pictures: the image of Bird dancing with her cousin Luis to an Irish ballad, the relaxed woman reclined in the hammock with the burning joint in her hand, her fine ankles resting on his lap, Bird resting her head on her palms while he watched from the cushioned settee under the lattice and fig leaves, Bird with her eyes large, shocked and hurt last Monday. *What had he lost?*

Revelation of Sin

Luis swept the sidewalk between the vacant coffee shop next to the bar and the block that wrapped around and ran along the next street. The crowd on Sunday night had been lighter than normal, but the refuse looked the same as ever: wrappers from the corner store, cigarette butts, the occasional button and bent soda cans, some glass from a broken bottle probably shoved into the gutter with a foot, and the rest of the debris of busy, careless people.

At the trill of a single bird, he glanced up once to the tiny park nestled across the side street from the bar. Since the warmer weather had arrived, bums took to loitering in it all day. Sometimes Luis felt uncomfortable if one slept on the bench while he swept. He didn’t want to break the men out of their death-like sleep, but he worried over the stillness of the prone bodies. He thought about his Uncle Andros’ revelations, sweet Ellie Bird whom he loved, and the thousand little moments he would never have again with her. He swept away a piece of green glass with some fury over the waste of Kate Walsh’s life and the devastation it wreaked. He wondered what it took to drive a person into so much despair that death seemed an option. Luis knew depression and fought it like an old foe.

Another few notes of birdsong distracted his eye. This morning in the park, a familiar face glanced up when he stopped sweeping. Judith Lawson sat with a bedraggled bundle of shrunken man who hesitantly took a cup of coffee and a package from a carrier she offered that bore the Broadway Market logo. Luis stared at the man and the woman sharing the bench.

Judith’s mouth fell into a frown when Luis propped the broom against the brick wall of the pub and crossed the street to enter the park from the side entrance. The park was no more than the space where three row homes had collapsed before the restorations efforts began back in the eighties. It was a neat, green space with three flowering trees, a jungle gym and a few benches surrounded by black wrought iron fencing. Judith looked down at the carton with the steaming coffee and sighed as he approached.

“Judith? What are you doing?” his voice cautioned her without saying, “Don’t feed the bums,” just like a parent might warn a child not to pet strange dogs. He nodded in feigned friendliness to the old man who mumbled over the sandwich and the coffee. The old man didn’t even bother to look up at the stern, unfriendly manner of the younger man.

Judith rolled her eyes at Luis’ possible interpretation of this gesture toward the old man who’d slept in her shop doorway last night and moved to the park when she’d offered a meal. He’d confided that he’d been beaten by a group of boys last night well after closing time at the Shamrock. She’d called the shelter this morning for advice after seeing blood on his face and hands but had left a message after listening to a recording. Feeding him was all she felt safe doing before opening time.

Luis silently accused her of trying to get his attention with this selfless act. Judith hid her disappointment with a brittle voice, “It’s none of your business, Luis Fuerza. Go back to sweeping the trash into the gutter.” Her voice was cracking like her heart had fallen and broken so long ago. She’d seen him dancing with Eleanor Bramble on Saturday night when she’d tried to find him for the old priest. She knew what love looked like. She conjured the vision of them dancing completely oblivious to the crowd, the music, the agitated, old priest and her jealous heart as she watched from the doorway. She had taken the priest home by herself and stayed for tea with the new deacon in the rectory kitchen. The tea and the quiet man’s kindness had comforted her.

Judith stood up without the tray holding the second coffee or the bag of pastries she often ate to make herself feel better. The old man would hoard them or share them; it was none of her concern. “You go to hell, Luis Fuerza,” she muttered it with tears clogging her throat.

Luis stared as she left the park and crossed the cobbled brick street without looking for traffic. He watched her hurry up the sidewalk then unlock her shop door with a bit of fumbling. He jumped when the old man wheezed, “Need a coffee? It might help in that cozy spot of hell where you’re standing.” The old man cackled through a laughing cough at his own joke. Luis sank down beside the old man in Judith’s place. He remembered missteps with her and cruelty that he’d never bothered to acknowledge. Regret hurt too much. He glanced at the old man and saw the crusted blood on the other man’s face. He flipped open his phone and called Vincenzo for advice.

The Transfiguration of Birdsong

A large, black-haired man sat at the conference table readying a computer attached to a projector when they entered the meeting room on Tuesday afternoon. Bird stood at the threshold like she was frozen in place with a scowl on her face. Greg tugged at her elbow and whispered, “What’s wrong, Bird?”

She looked up at him with cold distance in her eyes and scolded, “I am not your little bird, Greg Champion. My name is Eleanor, not Bird or Ellie Bird or the most inane of all--Athena. Who names a child after the goddess who sprang from her famously unfaithful father’s head? What a bunch of hippies!” She extended her hand toward the hulking man dressed in a fine grey suit that oddly matched his long, curling hair and broad face.

The large man rose from his fiddling with the computer and turned toward them with his arms extended and a huge grin on his face, “Ah, there’s your mother’s sharp tongue. Eleanor, come and help your dolt of a father set up this presentation. And I’m an artist, not a hippie. Also a Greek and proud of it, as you will be,” he winked at Ralph Catch who laughed out loud.

Eleanor shrugged, tossed her jacket, bag and report in her accustomed seat and moved toward the big man who stepped back in mocking acquiescence. She plugged the laptop into the correct projector port and flashed through one beautiful slide after another; her throat closed over the beauty of each. Andros had taken frames for each of the company plants and the surrounding community in differing seasons and times of day. How could anyone imagine a manufacturing plant as a thing of beauty? Evidently, this had been a project sponsored strictly through the executive office because she hadn’t heard a thing about photographers visiting Middletown either at the plant or in the town. Andros leaned down as if to kiss her cheek but stage whispered, “The goddess Athena embodies wisdom in love and war. She is the bright-eyed mentor of Odysseus on his long journey home.”

Greg watched father and daughter spar without words wasted. When Eleanor shook back her hair and pinned her shoulder blades together, no one looked amused because she glanced around the room thoroughly irritated. Her eyes landed on Ralph Catch whom she addressed without preamble, “Exactly how have you come to employ Andros Kirkas, Mr. Catch?”

Both Ralph and Andros smiled. Ralph demurred, “We share a long, complicated history. Talk about odysseys!” He leaned closer to Eleanor and whispered, “He has come to share the rest of the story with you. I thought I recognized you last week. Yours has been a long journey, but you deserve to know it all so that you can choose your own path with the whole story instead of fragments. Andros told me about the priest.” His eyes sparkled in that cunning fox way of his, so Eleanor stepped back.

*Did they know that she had chosen her Odysseus and installed him in a refuge nearby but far enough for protection? Would she have met Andros Kirkas today with no idea who he might be? Exactly what did these two old schemers want?* She resumed her seat beside Greg Champion and set her face back into neutrality. Better to let the older men play their hand before she began a rougher parlay and voiced something she’d regret. She had learned a little of restraint.

The presentation might amaze the supervisors who watched the old cad deliver his proposal, but Eleanor Bramble studied her father and tried to delve into his relationship with Ralph Catch through eye contact and old signals. *Were they friends? Adversaries?* Then bitterness crept over her. *Had Andros chosen the Brambles because they looked so much like his mental snapshot of the perfect couple? Or had they simply been the first couple he found when he needed to give her away?*

Eleanor’s eyes misted with tears as the image resurfaced of Kate Walsh dying in her little truck on the shoulder of Rt. 13 just outside of Pocomoke City. Eleanor had studied an internet picture snapped of Kate standing with a canvas during a community art show that last year she was alive. The large canvas was the same painting that had distracted Eleanor countless times hanging behind the register in the bookstore in Mount Vernon. Last night some torturous curiosity had taken her through police records and the few pictures she could locate of her mother online.

She tapped the tabletop thinking about leaving the room. *Another walk in the overgrown garden? Another call to Martin Bramble that started, “Daddy?”*

Ralph Catch was watching. He knew. “Don’t leave, Eleanor. Please stay.” She watched him think about soothing her urge to flee and add, “We have something for you after the meeting. Please stay.”

Eleanor nodded out of curiosity but frowned. She wondered how well he had known Kate. She worried over his mysterious connection to Andros Kirkas. She took a deep breath and calmed herself. She had no idea that she had taken Greg’s hand until he stroked her palm with his thumb. It made her jump and then blush because the caress was far too familiar for a board meeting. She pulled her hand back and clasped it with the other that had been gripped onto the chair seat.

Then her mind wandered away from the meeting and replayed the end of the long Sunday of revelation and heartbreak. The words of her father, the shape of the deep green fig leaves batting against the lattice that closed off the sky and the swing of the hammock had let the answer drop into her brain. She had acted and now she reflected on the decisions of Sunday evening. The conference room, the droning meeting, even the appearance of attention to formerly careful notes was suspended as Eleanor Birdsong Bramble puzzled over her actions.

The Goddess and the Acts of Contrition

Had she fallen into some alternate universe when she buckled the old priest into the passenger seat on Sunday evening? Her head spun connection all the warping relationships in the conference room. *The neighborhood. The confessional. The luncheonette. Was this the same, out of body dizziness that erupted Sunday night?*

She’d attributed the light-headed panic to adrenalin after speaking with her fathers, hearing voices complaining about the priest in the alley and then sprinting the few blocks to the church. A number of parishioners, about twenty, were still gathered in small, fractious groups discussing the disruptive secrets let to air. A few louder, younger people hovered at the door to the rectory where the president of the parish council was asking them to go home and pray before they spoke to the pastor. Eleanor winced at the angry tone in the voices raised in demand and distress; the atmosphere swirled about in an ugly cloud at St. Casimir’s that evening.

As Sunday evening disintegrated beyond twilight, Eleanor had merely bypassed the door to the rectory by entering the reopened church, racing up the center aisle past more people pretending to pray, through the sacristy and the vestment room, and finally down the stairs to the side entrance of the rectory. The covered passageway through the walled garden was deserted and overgrown. In the gloomy, half-light of the weedy path, she thought of ghosts but looked up for bats. The white form of Mary with her arms outstretched made her shiver and force back a memory that hovered.

She entered the rectory through the door to the kitchen, rushed past the new deacon who was boiling water for tea, jogged up the hallway and rapped hard at the pastor’s office door where the man was sitting in mediation with Father Joseph. The old priest had fumbled over dropping his rosary, but he rushed to Eleanor and knelt at her feet, “Forgive me, child, for I have sinned.”

Eleanor had planned to offer the only help she could think to give while sucking in her father’s favorite herb laced with enough opiates to inspire insight. The old priest was begging for confession. She listened to the old man’s litany of transgressions which he ended with a heartbroken, “And I loved your mother. My sweet, broken Kate! I wanted to love her as a man though I knew she needed a priest. It was the devil’s temptation. And I failed the test, Athena. Your mother took her life.” And then he collapsed into wracking sobs on the floor of the pastor’s office. Eleanor leaned over and placed one hand on his heaving shoulder but said nothing.

The deacon walked in with a tray of tea cups, a steaming blue pot and a plate of toast to find them in this tableau frozen with the girl in her wrinkled tee-shirt, battered jeans and wild, curling hair sharing a heartbroken look with Pastor Stallings whose face had fallen out of prayerful seriousness into shock. Then Eleanor Bramble turned to the young man and whispered, “You may go,” as if she was completely in charge. The pastor nodded.

Eleanor touched the old man’s warm, leather-soft head just at the crown with hesitant fingers. His crouched figure nearly touched her toes exposed by sandals. She remembered Greg touching her feet and wondered briefly if that had been his act of contrition. What penance must she demand of this old man who was tortured by guilt, age and failing faculties? “I was told that Kate’s death was accidental. And you are forgiven for loving her. Perhaps she needed your love more than prayer, Father Joe. We serve each other blindly in this life; we love the people we meet the best we can. That is a blessed life.” Eleanor found her eyes full of tears because she understood it as she said the words aloud.

The old priest had stopped crying and was kneeling before her as if he was her student. Eleanor folded her hands together and set her shoulders back with authority, “Father Joseph Kaczmerak, you know me as both Eleanor Bramble and Athena Kirkas. You must leave here and come home with me. I want to protect you.” She had wavered at that point, worried that the bravado from the day’s revelations and her father’s pot would dissipate far too quickly. This man needed rest in a place that didn’t throw flashbacks of the confessional into his addled brain every waking moment. She worried over landmines of memory in his room; she wondered about the picture in his hand on Friday when she’d found him praying.

But the Pastor Stallings had risen, clapped his hands and glanced at the water-stained ceiling in the pretense of rash decision, “We have been praying on this dilemma all afternoon. Joseph kept having visions of goddesses and birds. I supposed you are our messenger. You wouldn’t, by chance, be thinking of taking him anywhere near the Archdiocese of Wilmington, would you? One of the parishes has a fine care center for the aging religious. I have been suggesting this new placement for months,” Eleanor smiled hesitantly at the pastor and nodded. She hadn’t thought further than her spare room.

She turned back to Father Joe, “If you’d rather, you may stay with me. I have a nice room on the first floor that I use as a library. The house is in the center of town where you can walk anywhere. And the church, is it St. Katherine’s? It’s two blocks away. If you’d rather go to Wilmington instead, we will adjust.”

Father Joseph looked from one to the other and shook his head over the foolishness of old age and young women. “I suppose I ought to pack a bag?” He allowed Stallings and Eleanor to help him regain his feet. He looked into Eleanor’s eyes and remembered the wiser, calmer Kate Walsh with whom he’d laughed and shared stories over tea and toast. He glanced at the tray and the woman and felt confused again.

Father Stallings had laughed finally because Eleanor rolled her eyes. What an unlikely mentor she was with her wild hair, stained clothes from the busy, unsettling day and her overheated face from the run through the neighborhood and the church before barging into the rectory. Yet she was standing in the rectory with her eyes bright and her wisdom gentle. *You never knew the form or time the goddess might appear to offer a bit of advice*; *in these strange times, it was best to be kind to strangers*.

Eleanor Birdsong Bramble sat back at the conference table in Wilmington and thought about the old priest who had loved her mother, her pretty and fragile mother who took too many chances, and the large man who grinned at her while he presented pictures for a new company brochure. Eleanor imagined the Brambles flitting around in their airy cage of a house on North Elwood Street. She nearly smiled considering Vincenzo’s warm eyes on Caroline and the baby, or Luis’ steadfast affection. She glanced at the old fox Ralph Catch who grinned at her and over to Greg Champion who looked gray and bereft for some odd reason. Eleanor sighed and tried to listen, but her mind was tuned to the old lady’s voice which teased her. *What’s next, daughter?*

**Confessions in Birdsong: Part II**

Greg Champion and Eleanor Bramble drove homeward from the usual Wilmington meeting weighted with more than profitability spreadsheets and new company dictums from the figureheads at the central office. In the trunk of Eleanor’s car, Ralph Catch and

Andros Kirkas had deposited a cardboard box of artifacts so that Eleanor might mine them for her family history. Ralph had been rueful, “Some of it will read like fiction because it is. I worked with your mother, Eleanor. She was a friend that I wish I’d helped more, but time

gives you a strange perspective. Sometimes I think it wouldn’t have mattered what any of

us did; it would have all come out the same.” She caught his eyes watering a bit when they

moved a few smaller canvases into the back seat. He probably hadn’t seen these pieces for

twenty-five years or more.

Greg had shaken both the older men’s hands after the transfer of material was

finished. In a separate package, Andros gave Eleanor a slim sheath of paper bound with

ribbon. He said in a gruffer voice, “Read this last or first. If you are worried over the old

priest’s message about suicide then it should ease your mind. The real end is the one

Martin . . . your father told you. You’ll understand why the friend who wrote this account

might want to remember it differently. If you don’t want to get to know me after you read

it, I will understand. The truth is the reason I could not keep you with me. I have been a

very destructive influence on the people that I love. Some would call it luck. I loved you far

too much to let anything hurt you, my beautiful child.”

Eleanor had allowed the old man to hug her while he cried uncontrolled tears. He

was so large that she fit perfectly into one bearish arm. Her head only topped his

breastbone and made her feel extraordinarily fragile. She soothed him because she felt his

need for gentleness, but she also wanted to break away and drive home. She patted his arm

awkwardly and said, “I will call you by Friday. We will arrange for a time to meet again,

Andros.” She would never think of him as “father.” She shivered when he gently touched

her short hair and nervously bit his lower lip.

As they drove the back roads that day, Eleanor was still too stunned to talk about parentage. She stared at the purple streaks in a field beyond Greg’s person diverted by the

thin manuscript in his lap. She glanced at the faded blue ribbon that tied it. Greg pulled at it

and found that it had been used to bind the pages through tiny holes at the left edge.

He had begun to skim and rifle the pages. She interrupted with an abrupt order,

“Read it aloud.”

He nodded and began, “It’s a short story by a ‘Daphne Alber’ called ‘The Witch and

the Child.’ Does her name ring any bells?”

Eleanor initially shook her head but then blurted out, “Children’s book author. Uses

nature references and retools fairytales. She might be local.” She lapsed into silence as she

passed a line of trucks lumbering too slowly as her shoulders tightened.

Greg nodded. “Fits the title then.” He only paused to turn pages and glance at the

woman driving with a determined scowl on her face that said she was working a puzzle. He

tried to keep his voice even though the content choked him when the little girl who must be

Eleanor was described.

The Witch and the Child

The key in the front door shook her out of the long reverie of staring at the tousled, dark curls of the little girl sleeping barely a foot away from Susan. The child must have sensed her father’s return because her whole body shook in a sigh that signaled the descent into true sleep. She’d been difficult to coax into a nap today though she’d been exhausted nearly to tears.

Susan listened to his movements downstairs like a trusted catalogue: he shut the

door gently and locked it, dropped the keys and his wallet in the foyer table drawer, hung

his jacket in the closet with the top halves of all the rest of his suits, crossed to the kitchen

for a drink, hesitated at the sight of the reordered mess he’d left her, and crossed to make

quiet treads on the stairs seeking this room. He might glance at his watch and realize the

late hour. He was supposed to have been home two hours ago.

Susan managed the fractious child all morning and missed another appointment.

She shrugged as she picked herself gently off the bed and held the little book they read

together for a moment and placed it on the nightstand. She wondered if he knew it was her

book for children. His little girl liked it long before Susan moved into their tumultuous lives.

Susan hoped he never figured it out.

They passed each other in the doorway so that he could finish his habitual check of

his little daughter. Was she breathing or had the witch next door put her in a trance? Were

there remnants of chocolate cookies and forbidden iced cream that he’d found last time?

Was there evidence of tears from being overtired in his absence? He did not approve of

Susan as the child’s sitter but she’d become the one who managed to reorder the house, launder and leave meals in scant hours he was gone.

She was a witch even before he was a believer in fairytales like his little daughter.

Annie loved the witches, goblins, ghosts and monsters in the little collection on her table.

He glanced at it and narrowed his eyes. The author made all the frightening creatures full of

sympathy and good works. The princesses and handsome men in the tales were rotten to

the core. He gave his sleeping daughter a gentle smile and touched her damp hair; she’d

had her bath then—*good job*, *Susan*, he should say.

He listened to the witch picking up toys and discarded puzzles in the living room. If

he waited too long, she would use her key to leave the house, lock it up again and slip out of

any conversation with him. For many months, he had preferred this routine over forced

trades of little events of the morning. He’d get all that in fine, toddler detail he could not

understand later from his verbose Annie.

He let a sigh release that echoed his daughter’s just moments ago, as he heard

movement in the kitchen. She was beginning a meal. Why? Curiosity eased him out of his

sleeping child’s room to gingerly descend the back steps directly into the kitchen.

The skillet on the stove heated a sizzling mixture right out of a charm: diced red

peppers, onions, mushrooms and ham. Susan beat eggs into froth with a splash of cream

next to the bowl. There were the discarded shells of six eggs. He wanted to snap a picture

for one of his cooking magazines. He said, “Hold still a moment.” He rushed to the dining

room, selected a camera and reentered to capture the likeness of the good witch whipping

eggs into froth with the shells so haphazardly arranged beside the red bowl. Which came

first? The feature or the photos? Andros understood beauty and captured it. That was his

life’s work.

Susan gave him a bemused smile that he captured just for himself or for Annie.

Susan would not be in their lives much longer, and the child might want to remember the

odd woman some day. “You don’t have to cook.” He snapped another that showed her

disappointment, as he thrust away all of her good works.

Her voice was deeper than he’d remembered from just that morning, “It is just

frittata, you ungrateful wretch. I promised the child eggs for dinner if she’d take a rest.” She

dumped it without any grace into the skillet, stirred once and slid it into the waiting oven.

She wiped the mess off the counter in one grand sweep, placed the extra eggs and cream in

the fridge, and turned away at the sink. “Take it out in twenty minutes. Did the visit go

well?”

“I don’t want to discuss it,” He cruelly slammed the door on her concern though she

hid hurt as best she could. They called his therapy sessions “visits” so as not to frighten

Annie. He threw himself onto the couch in the living room and closed his eyes. Susan

twittered around the kitchen for the twenty minutes, removed the skillet and covered it

with a towel, checked on her sleeping loved ones and left their house.

When Andros woke a half hour later, he bolted from the couch because the aroma of

the frittata assaulted him. It cast him back to a time when Kate might be painting in the

next room; the smell of the dish mingled with the scent of oil paints, thinner and canvas. He

stood in the kitchen, noticed the skillet placed carefully on the warmer and let the room

pitch slightly. He hadn’t eaten all day. These therapy sessions were the only way to stay

even and sane while deluged with guilty misery, but the hour felt like the scraping of a raw

wound. He had to spend time talking and working on staying sane to keep Annie. He took

down a plate and ate so he could continue to be Annie’s father.

His Kate was not painting in the next room, sleeping next to their child upstairs or

visiting her brother on the island in Virginia. His Kate was gone in a twist of metal on the

side of the road sketching a sunrise on the way to Chincoteague. That’s where a sleepy

eighteen-wheeler had followed her brake lights off the highway near Pocomoke. There had

been nothing left of her sketches, books or their second child to return to him. He had her

rings, a locket she wore always and the insurance settlement.

Her patron and friend, old Callie Alber, had taken him over out of compassion. She

had offered this beautiful beach cottage where his wife had slept her last night. Callie had

given him the deed to the house and said, “You have good neighbors here, Andros. We will

get you through this if you let us help you. I loved your Kate, Andros. I loved her before

even you did. I loved her when you tossed her away.” That guilt made him nod and agree.

He had been cruel to Kate at first and had robbed them both of time they would never

recover.

The frittata melted in his mouth, and he worried over the spell Susan Stillwell was

working on his child and on him. They were bound together by loss of Katie, by the

dependence of his little daughter and through their duplicitous actions the very night

before Kate died. *Susan was a witch,* he told himself. He had to break free from her without

upsetting Annie any more than necessary.

When he slept again, he had crawled into bed with his napping daughter. He was

exhausted by the sessions. In his dreams, he exercised his raw heart. There would be Kate

looking like a goddess with her curly blond hair loose, a paint smudge on her cheek or dirt

on her blouse from gardening. Either activity gave her a rosy, excited glow and bright eyes.

Then there waltzed in blue periods of Kate sitting in the corner of her sofa, tea in hand,

staring into the unlit fireplace. Or Kate with tears on her cheeks full of regret and worry.

Kate, in near catatonia staring at the blue ceiling in the old cathedral near their home.

The baby blues had hit her hard even before Annie was born, and except for the

euphoric birth, caring for the fractious child had dumped her into renewed doubt about her

ability to love and inadequacy as an artist. Annie was a tiny Andros with china white skin,

dark brown hair and his chocolate brown eyes. Kate said the child made her feel like a

foreigner in her own home. That still hurt.

In his dreams, the hurt grew dark like a stain between them and let Susan Stillwell

grow like a mushroom. Andros knew it wasn’t fair that he was so cruel to Susan in his mind.

She had been young with her varied interests, gentle with the baby, and patient with

Andros. She acknowledged that he needed to grieve his beautiful wife.

Susan moved into their Baltimore house, the old Victorian house that they bought to

seal their partnership and marriage, the year Kate died. Kate had been enthusiastic about

the girl’s role with the baby that might allow her to paint again. The girl could attend

classes at the university, work Kate’s old courier route when Jack needed her, and help with

the baby in trade for room and board.

Andros had balked at sharing the small house with more women. He’d inventoried

Susan Stillwell’s short skirts, multi-colored hair, and weird friends wondering over Kate’s

sanity. He complained to Kate’s parents, brother and grandmother. He secretly admired

Susan’s figure through thin, flirty tee shirts and cotton pajama bottoms. He watched a

series of boyfriends arrive and leave dissatisfied. Susan was confident and unattached

where Kate seemed increasingly distant and petrified.

Then Kate was pregnant again just before Annie began to walk. Kate was fractious

over this news but shared it with him sooner than her pregnancy with Annie. She wept in

his arms that she was a terrible mother who hadn’t bonded with their beautiful, little girl.

She confessed jealousy over his obvious affection for the imp. Andros caressed her and

lulled her into exhausted sleep much like he’d done with his daughter as an infant. He

remembered lying there with her a few nights, stroking a hand through her hair, touching

her curvy body that he craved so much and kissing her gently. He had wanted her to wake

up and soothe his worries, but she slept on through the night.

On an early April Friday like so many others, Kate had left for a trip east into

Delaware; she’d given the excuse that she wanted to see her friend Callie Alber who was

weakening in the last stages of cancer. The unstated plan included driving south to see her

brother and his wife in Virginia. She neglected to take Annie, excusing herself as emotional

with Callie’s fragile health and the new pregnancy. She’d scheduled her mother and Susan as Annie’s primary caregivers so that Andros could work.

Andros had grumbled that she was a very selfish girl to leave her child for such a

long trip, and they’d fought over it. He remembered the passionate kisses just before she

left in tears. He loved her; she loved him; he asked her to wait for him to pack a bag, and he

would come with her. Callie would love to see her beloved Annie. But Kate had refused.

Two nights later during a long conversation from the beach home that Callie called

“Stone House,” Kate had told Andros she wasn’t sure about her place in their lives anymore.

She’d slept peacefully at Stone House had dreams of birds in orchards and ghosts in the tall

grasses. She confided that she’d imagined ghosts hanging about a clothesline in the

backyard of their house in Baltimore. Kate was worried over her crumbling sanity.

Crying quietly, Kate told Andros that she felt at peace in the house on the ocean. She

proposed they move there because Callie and her son Robert had given her the house the

night before because they were giving everything away before the old woman’s death. Kate

had bought the house for five dollars and a painting. It would be the last painting she would

ever finish, and it now hung in Stone House as a tribute to her. That night Kate told Andros

that if he didn’t want to move to the shore with her, he could stay right there, but he must

keep their Annie. That conversation had broken his heart. He had called her selfish once

more and had hung up angry with her.

Susan Stillwell had been listening from her trapped position holding the sleeping

child on her lap in the living room. She had been afraid to move the child while her father

was so upset and roaring. She wondered over the frequency of their fights. Susan was

barely twenty-two to Kate’s twenty-nine years, but she felt older and more settled than the

artsy blond. She let her eyes rake Andros’ figure, as he paced through the house having the

increasingly loud exchange with Kate, and Susan let her mind wander. She couldn’t figure

why Kate insisted in distancing herself from this attractive, passionate man or the adorable

toddler. She closed her eyes and focused on the rise and fall of the child’s chest and

matched their breathing to Annie’s. A large lump formed in her throat and a ticklish feeling

grew in her midsection; she had been infatuated with their family even before Annie was

born. The thought of Andros holding Kate and running his hands over her belly made Susan

quiver. To be loved like that! She was thinking about the warmth of the large man pacing

the house when he leaned over to lift Annie out of her arms probably thinking she had

fallen asleep.

“I’m sorry you heard all that,” his voice had been deep and rough. He let Annie

snuggled against him. “I love Kate, but she is a difficult woman.” His eyes had focused on

the damp spot where Annie had drooled on Susan’s blouse after finishing a cup of sweet

juice.

Susan had nodded, “She loves both of you. I can tell,” she’d stood and stretched

unaware that her pose was provocative. “It’ll blow over. I’m going to bed now.” This she

blurted out unevenly because it seemed that Andros was suddenly larger, more male and

just a little dangerous.

When he appeared in her bedroom doorway a half an hour later, she should have

packed up and stayed with friends. The lure of looking at a few photographs took her back

to the living room, a couple of silly Annie stories made him laugh while toys were gathered

from the first floor, and then kisses erupted as they locked up the house and turned off the

lights. Andros remembered murmuring that Susan had an old soul and that he thought he

knew her from another life. Susan had finally dared to touch his curly, dark hair and to find

it one degree coarser than his daughter’s silky strands. Then his arms had drawn her to him

and down on the couch where Kate had cried and said she just could not have another baby

with him.

He made love to a woman who was young enough to be his child that night and

turned her into his enchantress by dawn. She was still naked with a cotton throw barely

covering her lush young body when he stumbled to the phone at eight to speak to the state

police. *Yes, his wife was Kate Walsh Kirkas; yes, she drove an ‘69 Ford truck; yes, she should*

*have been on her way to Chincoteague that morning.* He dropped to his knees and stared in

horror as Susan sat up, and he heard Annie crying to be released from her crib. *Yes, he*

*would come to the police station in Snow Hill and go with them to identify the remains of his wife.*

He woke up sobbing after the counseling sessions. He was sure his life was over, but

then Annie would rush into the room, throw her arms around him and babble at him about

something stupendous had occurred. His Annie loved him with the grand heart of a lioness.

She just would not let him slip away. On the Saturday that he woke to the smell of the

frittata, his daughter held his wet face in her hands and crooned, “Wake up, Daddy. Suzie

made us eggs for supper. She’s bringing iced cream later.” He smiled at the joy barely

contained in her tiny body and decided to go on living even if it was just for the next few

minutes.

Susan Stillwell took a silent inventory of her pantry and checked it with the one

she’d taken at Stone House. She bit her lip and considered very seriously, for two whole

minutes, failing to buy him groceries for the week. He was so angry with her interference in

his life. Too much guilt had poisoned their relationship for two years, and Susan was

suddenly impatient. Last night when her father and step-mother broached the subject of

taking over the Birdsong Bed and Breakfast outside of Lewes so that they could travel a bit,

her hesitance had been over Annie and Andros. The move to the old farm turned into a five star inn by her step-mother would mean she’d be twenty minutes away from the Kirkas’

home in the former Stone House.

The old beach cottage hadn’t felt like Stone House since Kate Walsh died two weeks before Callie Alber slipped into a coma. In Susan’s mind, the two women hung around Andros and Annie like angels. Susan wrote a story about their haunting but didn’t publish it because her friend Daphne said it was maudlin. Susan had told Daphne that she felt maudlin most of the time. Susan was rounding twenty-four with no real goals on the horizon. Taking care of Andros and Annie had become a career unto itself.

And she wasn’t wanted there anymore. He needed to move on with his life, and she

was a constant reminder that he hadn’t been faithful to Kate. Without hesitating further,

Susan Stillwell called her step-mother, “Jenny? Sorry for the hesitance last night. Of course

I’d love to run the inn for you. You started teaching me to cook and clean when I was ten?

Remember?”

The relief in her step-mother’s voice was obvious, “Yes! I remember you grumbling

over making the bed. You could make it your home, sweetie. Time to break out of holding

pattern since Kate died, you know?” Susan felt a wave of unfettered love flood her for her

father and his wife Jenny. There was easy love, and then there was complicated love.

She finished her plans for the move into her parents’ inn and called the rental agent

for her cottage inside the next hour. Susan Stillwell began to pack up the small house with

anything too personal to leave for summer renters. Her heart began to loosen as she

gathered pictures, knick-knacks and books she couldn’t trust to strangers. Avoiding daily

contact with Andros would heal over the wound of Annie’s loss. She stared out at the busy

street and looked forward to abandoning the noise of the summer tourists in the busy

resort.

When she remembered her promise of iced cream, she slipped back on her shoes

and left the house with a carton of frozen yoghurt and some berries from her garden.

Father and daughter were playing a child’s version of dominos when she stepped into the

kitchen from the wrap around deck.

The lounge chairs on the deck were inhabited by the ghosts of Callie and David Alber in Susan’s imagination. She had grown to love Callie like a favorite aunt in this house. Callie had told Susan that she saw her first husband Matthew often in the shadows and that the voices she’d heard even as a child were strongest here in this oceanfront cottage. Now it was haunted by the specter of Kate at least in her mind.

Susan wondered if Andros saw Kate in the house like that. He’d been so destroyed

by her death that Susan thought, for a time, that he would not survive. But Annie had him in

a stranglehold of love from the first, so he really did not have a choice. Susan wished she

did not love them both so fiercely. Annie’s love was rejuvenating, but Andros hated her passionately because she reminded him of his failure to remain faithful to his difficult Kate.

Susan understood that she was not the only girl he’d been tempted to lapse with during his marriage, but she had been the only one to fall in love with him. She had been the only one

who truly understood his marriage to the moody, artistic Kate Walsh. And Susan had loved

Kate unconditionally, so the betrayal was wrong on too many levels. There was no coming

back from that basic sin.

Annie and Susan ate their iced cream on the deck in the late spring evening while

Andros took a shower and finished his work for the mail drop in the morning. His book

about the wildlife of Delaware had been well-received, and the Lewes Chamber of

Commerce was considering his bid to do the artwork for their next tourist magazine. Susan

had written the proposal for him thinking about the expensive Montessori program Annie

would attend that next fall.

She ate the cool bowl of cream with strawberries and figured she wouldn’t be doing

this simple thing with the child soon. “Annie?” Susan heard her voice crack. “I am taking

over my parent’s business soon. They need my help with their inn.”

Annie’s eyes darkened with immediate understanding, “You are going away.” Her

voice lowered with tragedy. Her eyes widened, and her teeth clenched together. She sighed

as serious as an old woman, “I need help with Daddy. He loves you, Suzie.” This would be

the most anyone would plead for Susan to stay just down the street in her cousin’s old

summer cottage.

The child assessed the adults around her and was confused that they could not see

the world as clearly as she could. Suzie and her father should be wrapped together in kisses

and sleep in the big bed in the front of the house; she might be joined by a little sister in her

room and a brother in the next one down the hall.

Annie thought about her sad Grandma Laura who lived in the big city so far away

that she floated back on a sea of salt tears every time she visited. The old woman Jane who

came with her grandmother was sweet and fun but confused because Annie’s stories made

her cry and laugh at the same time. Her Uncle Rob was the best. He took her out on the

town, took her to see wild horses, and hugged her just like her father did.

Now Susan would leave them because her father could not admit loving her. Annie

needed Suzie to stay with them forever. In her child’s mind, there was no other place more

appropriate for the willowy brunette to exist. The inn was like a distant planet inhabited by

birds because of the fanciful name, Birdsong Bed and Breakfast.

Susan was making earnest promises, “Annie, my love, I have thought this over. I will

bring you with me to the inn for a few days at a time if your father allows it. Your dad and I

just cannot go on this way; I make him sadder.” When that thought was confessed aloud,

Susan knew it was true.

The finality of her decision hit her the moment she stacked their bowls and led

Annie back into the kitchen. Andros was there and had been privy to most of the

conversation. It was a relief to Susan because she didn’t have to say it aloud twice. He

nodded to her questioning look but remained silent.

After they put Annie to bed in a solemn ritual, they fell on each other in the hallway

for kisses that brooked insanity. Susan broke away first and whispered, “Good night.” She

hurried from the house without her little belongings left behind like the ice cream scoop;

she could have cared less. Andros would find notebooks, hair ties, a brush and one very fine

pen as talismans of her absence. He decided she was a witch with her lure, the magic, their

instant attraction. She knew their whole connection was a trough of sin that she’d thrown

herself in for a few years’ wallow. It was time to crawl out.

A whole summer after he lost his haunting young witch, Andros Gregory woke

uneasy. There was a singsong voice rising and falling in a room nearby that was working

spells. He blinked awake in late August and realized that he had not dreamed of Kate for

many months. He lay in bed listening to the eerie song in the woman’s high reedy voice as it

was joined by his daughter’s and tried to conjure Kate for a moment. It was an exercise that

usually resulted in the pain of a poke to the gut. When he tried, Susan Stillwell’s lovely form

materialized before him, and he imagined Kate whispering, “Go!” He groaned and rubbed

his face; he must not miss Susan. It made him roll off the bed and splash his face with water

before daring to spy on the old witch and his child.

Maggie Trent, the woman he’d hired to take Susan’s place was a rare thing. Women usually grew ugly with age or looked wrinkled and wiser, but Maggie Trent seemed trapped at forty and sometimes looked younger. The long, silvery hair bound up in a loose knot at the nape of her neck revealed a few wrinkles, but her movements were that of much younger woman. She was some far off cousin to the Stillwell family, so Andros dubbed her “the old witch” in his mind and wondered what Susan might look like as an old woman.

He’d discovered that Maggie was trapped in time because she abandoned her family

at their apex of need. Her son had been finishing high school, her three youngest girls were

verging adolescents, and her husband was more in love with her than ever. She had packed

up and left them to twist in pain. She hadn’t disappeared like a good ghost might, but

simply moved a few streets away to her studio and began to churn out sculpture after

sculpture instead of laundry, brownies and love like other mothers. Her son and daughters

had turned bitter and silent at this rejection.

Andros examined Susan Stillwell’s cousin with her hard, brittle heart and wondered

over Susan’s urge to nurture love in the most unlikely places. He knew his heart was a

stony place, but she had smashed herself against it over and over since Kate’s death. Now

that she was gone, Andros saw the truth and need the young woman thrust at him. He was

too wary to love anyone so giving.

So Andros emerged from the house to sit on the porch and listen to the story that

the old, selfish witch who might look like an older version of Susan read from the book his

daughter loved. He knew it was Susan’s book; Kate had let that secret go the night the girl

gave it to Annie long ago. He’d read it too many times to believe the true nature of witches,

goblins and elves might be good. He pictured Susan taking care of strangers at that grand

inn a whole town away and hoped she hadn’t poison them and stacked their bodies like

cord wood in the orchard.

He had seen evil a few times in his life, and he thought he’d seen it in her naked body

on the couch the morning his Kate died. Susan had slept with a satisfied smile on her face

near dawn. She had turned to bury her face in his chest and murmur, “I love you,” before

she drifted back into sleep. Andros was sure he’d been her only lover even yet. She was one

of those women who crawls into your life and will not leave. He watched her cousin weave

a spell in the house, as she took care of Annie a few days a week. He watched her make him

want Susan back.

The Birdsong Inn

Daphne Alber narrowed her eyes and thrust the magazine into her best friend’s face.

She tugged back the thick mane of deep brown hair and smirked, “Whoever took that

picture of you owns your heart. I don’t even have to ask his identity, do I? What are you

going to do about that stupid man?” She rolled her eyes in an expression that she would

have punished if displayed by her eight year-old daughter Jane. With Susan Stillwell,

Daphne could forget being an adult because Susan acted older than anyone in her acquaintance.

Susan glanced at the photograph and winced. She remembered him telling her to

freeze while she prepared the last meal she would make at Stone House. The bright April

morning had clouded up after she and Annie had returned from sand castles on the beach

and checking the spring gardens. Six white eggs lay in perfectly cracked halves beside the

open dozen. The yolks were still whole, swimming in whites inside a green earthenware

bowl that predated her birth. Her smile was a subtle version of love, adoration and

exasperation. Her hair had been lushly caramel and shiny, her lips reddened by the breezes

that day and her breath nearly caught by his attention through the lens of the camera. Who

would imagine that April might actually become the killing month? Susan Stillwell smirked

at her inner urge to Elliot with his caustic voice. She was relieved it was October and she

had hardened her resolve to let them go.

The girl in the photograph who looked like a kitchen goddess had been banished

from their lives that same evening. She had moved back to her parent’s home, cut her hair

and busied herself with cooking and cleaning for strangers. During the first week, she had

stopped eating except to curb light-headed spells and nausea. Susan couldn’t remember

feeling so desperately bereft even when Kate and Callie died within months of each other.

She’d quickly dropped thirty pounds though she felt stronger and more muscled than she

had in her life.

Susan had returned to regular attendance at the Catholic Church in atonement for

every evil she damned herself for committing. A friendship with the priest there turned

into impromptu counseling when she tried confession for the first time in five years. After

the nightmares and the crying jags ended in May, she had gone into town for groceries one

Thursday and visited the beauty salon instead to be shorn. Susan asked for highlights and

shoulder-length hair. Another week later, she cut bangs in the front just to get it out of her

eyes. The temptress in the picture featured in *Cook’s Magazine* no longer existed.

She remembered Daphne being a short-haired blond when they first met. Susan

thought about the sad, frightened girl Daphne had been at that time as she considered her

words. Susan looked at Daphne and shook her head saying, “He doesn’t want me. He thinks

I’m evil. I am trying to forget them, Daphne. You know it’s for the best.” She absently created the little sandwiches for afternoon tea.

“Your cousin Maggie has taken them over for you. I almost feel sorry for Andros;

that Maggie is the wicked one, and your family is one scary one to marry into no matter

how it goes.” Daphne let her eyes water a moment; sometimes being married to Robert

Alber was a chore, yet most of the time it was blissful. Life had taught her that you must

purchase bliss. She considered the suffering of her best friend and cousin by marriage. She

extended a hand that Susan clasped, “Sweetheart, the man that took that picture sees you

as beautiful and desirable. Never doubt that he loves you—even if he is keeping it a secret

from himself.”

Andros had a meeting with the Lewes Town Council so it made the most sense to

grant Susan one of her rare visits with Annie. It had been a long, dry summer and autumn

with few opportunities to lend the young witch his child. The Birdsong Bed and Breakfast

was fully booked for the season. Annie had made a few friends at the prekindergarten

program at St. Edmond’s Parish, so she visited with them instead.

Maggie Trent confided once that she thought Susan should go “cold turkey” with her

affectionate heart. That had shocked Andros at first. He’d thought of Susan as a leech so

long that he’d discounted her feelings completely. Could she truly love them both? He

thrust it away and let himself work with the easy assignments from families vacationing

desiring artsy shots of their happiness with the sand and the ocean as a backdrop. Annie

could go to these shoots and assist. She did running commentaries on the families that

made him laugh because her intuitive mind drew connections and revealed secrets just like

her mother’s sketches had laid bare the subject’s past life. He often wondered if Annie had

that twinge of psychic sense like Kate had. He often wondered if Kate knew she faced death

on that last trip and so refused to take them with her. It made him shiver.

As he pulled into the gravel lot beside the spreading farm mansion, Susan ran from

the front door, and Annie gasped, “Oh Daddy, you didn’t tell me Susan was sick!” He looked

over to his daughter who was starting tears as she watched her Susan rush toward her

door. “Oh, Daddy, we have to help her!” Then Susan was opening the passenger door, lifting

his child from her seat and crooning in an embrace.

“I have missed you so much, my little lamb!” Susan’s eyes fastened to Andros’ collar

but didn’t dare look at him directly. “A few hours then?” She picked up the little bag of

belongings the child had collected to keep herself busy.

Andros wanted to touch her hand and ask what was wrong, but he only grunted,

“Have you been ill, Susan?” She would not look at him but shook her head.

“I am fine. You’ll be late for your meeting,” she closed the door of the truck too hard

and rushed with the child by the hand back to the safety of the grand home. He detected a

thinner form under her pretty dress and a trembling that was not like Susan. He sat for

many minutes considering her failure to look at him, but finally put the truck in gear and

drove back into town for his meeting.

At the meeting, Andros met the mayor of the little town and felt a strange wave of

intuition. This large elderly man named George looked him over caustically and examined

the portfolio and proposal. When the council voted and accepted Andros’ bid for the tourist

magazine, he was surprised because the mayor seemed unfriendly. The large man asked

after his little daughter who had accompanied Andros to the initial meeting in a babysitting

fiasco with Maggie. Andros figured that the initial impression must have soured the old

man on his fathering style. Then the old man had revealed his irritation, “My son tells me

Susan Stillwell is back at her parents’ place working it full time. He played a wedding there

last week and says she’s too thin. I thought you might stay together--not even for the little

girl?”

Andros shook his head but didn’t explain. The mayor wasn’t the first man to

interpret a bond between them, or the last one to assume that Annie was Susan’s child.

Walking through the little town, Andros took a few pictures of old buildings that

housed restaurants, a hardware, some clothing shops and an ancient jewelry store. He

paused in the window of the jewelers and watched a young man discuss rings with a

woman behind the counter. He looked at a topaz ring that reminded him of the color of

Kate’s eyes. He looked up into the sky and remembered the blue ceiling of St. Mark’s in

Baltimore that had transfixed his Kate. He wondered what exactly the sky had looked like

to make her pull over in the half-dark and take out the sketchbook. He had probably been

making love to Susan again at that moment. They’d been awake early and had fought the

initial wave of guilt and remorse into another heady interlude. He wondered if Kate had

sensed how attracted he’d been to their boarder.

He wandered Lewes and wondered how long he’d been in love with Susan Stillwell.

He was standing under aged, peeling elms in the historic village snapping shots of old glass

when that thought occurred. All the threads of dark thought evaporated as he set each shot

and flew through a roll of film. Annie was right in her little girl logic. Susan belonged to

them, and she had thrust herself away from them because he had convinced her she was

unwanted. She had told Annie what about her effect on him? She made him sadder.

Andros wondered over his daughter’s eerie words in the truck that morning. Was

Susan sick? Would Andros lose another great love? He wished his heart could stop beating

so hard in his powerful chest. No one should feel such pain and be allowed to continue

breathing.

He retraced his steps to visit the florist, but instead, he purchased two rings on a

whim at the jewelers with the understanding that he had no idea what either recipient’s

size might be. He ran a finger around the circumference of each and chose by touch alone.

They were in the kitchen arranging pastries, scones, fruit and little sandwiches on

tea trays when he let himself in the back door like the help. They were laughing and

giggling like old times, and Andros felt grateful for their mirth. He was relieved not to walk

in on some heart-wrenching scene that might make him feel more of a heel.

He nodded to Susan and took the first tray into the front sitting room where tables

were set for high tea. He placed the tiered delicacies carefully and gestured to the hovering

guests to choose a seat. He watched Susan bring in the hot tea pots and making small talk

with the guests about their day before introducing the intricacy of each layer of tea cakes,

sandwiches and quiche. He listened to her voice rise and fall in accordance to need. He

closed his eyes and heard her whisper into his chest two years ago, “I love you.”

He had been to one of these tea gatherings at the Birdsong for Kate’s second wake.

She had touched so many lives with her brief one. He’d made small talk all that afternoon

and then had collapsed into bed at Stone House and failed to rise for two days. A week after

the funeral, his old friend Jennie Stillwell had brought Susan back to the shore to help care

for Annie. Susan had never returned to the university after that weekend. She hadn’t even

cancelled her classes and had failed every one. Now he remembered the devastation of that

season.

When Callie died a few weeks later, Andros hadn’t even been able to make

conversation at that wake. Annie had toddled around the room clasping everyone’s hands

and baby-talking interested parties about Callie and her mother who she’d seen dancing on

the wide black rock at the foot of their dune path just that morning. Didn’t any adult

understand about angels? She screwed up her face and found solace with Susan and

Daphne who took her out for long rambles while the others told stories and ate cakes.

Annie played with Daphne’s little children and giggled over secrets as she eyed her father’s

distress with mild concern.

He remembered waking to Annie petting his unruly hair one morning that week in

complete silence. He’d taken her in his arms and slept for another few hours comforted by

her warmth. A year later, he saw how unfair it was that a child should have to offer comfort

to him, a grown man mired in sin up to his chest. He deserved no tenderness, so he had

been cruel to the other child at his disposal—Susan Stillwell.

The guests shared stories of bird-watching on this trip, others trips as they

devoured their mountains of delicate layers; Andros wandered the first floor remembering

both of the wakes he’d attended in this grand house. Jennifer Stillwell had created this

masterpiece out of an old farmhouse to heal herself from a messy divorce and

disappointment in love. She’d told him the story of her love affair with Grant, Susan’s

doting father long ago when they first met. Susan had barely been a teen when her natural

mother had died and Jennifer stepped in to fill the void.

Jenny Stillwell had whispered to Kate and Andros that Susan was going through a bit

of a rebellion after being the model child all through high school. She’d been Jenny’s

helpmate in the kitchen for so long, they expected her to stay close to them after

graduation, but she had applied and had been accepted at a private university in Baltimore.

It was quite expensive, but they had paid the full tuition.

At the university, she had taken up with a group of wild friends and had nearly

become involved with a professor during her first year. They’d counseled her out of that

situation, and she changed her major to writing.

Susan was witty, energetic and warm, especially with the baby who immediately

calmed in her arms. Andros noticed that their dark curly heads together gave them the

appearance of mother and child. Kate blinked at the two of them curled on the end of her

old tapestry-covered couch and saw it, too. He heard her utter, “I can’t live without her.” At

the time he was confused if Kate spoke of Annie or Susan, but it barely mattered.

When Kate had her first breakdown after Annie was three months old, Jennie

Stillwell came to stay. After that, Jenny suggested that Susan move in with them because

the girl hated dorm life and missed cooking. She had been cooking with Jenny since she was

fifteen, and cafeteria food was making her ill.

They’d met with Susan over one weekend and a dinner in between. The day after

their second meeting, Andros came home from a meeting and found Kate rocking in the

backyard swing holding one of his cameras like a baby while their child screamed in her

crib. Kate was in tears and trembling. She’d wanted to leave the house but couldn’t

remember where she’d left the truck keys. Andros had called Susan that day and asked her

to move in for the duration. She had never left them.

Andros walked out onto the porch that ran three sides of the old house and looked

out into a careful garden. All was lush with the warm, late autumn so that the roses

drooped and mums were budding in wait for the first cool night to burst. He could hear

bees in the shrubs and a flock of dark birds moved chattering from tree to tree in a

profusion of wings. He thought of the woman in the kitchen with his daughter and the girl

she’d once been. That had been years ago. She was twenty-four now, and he was close

to forty. His Kate had been dead for a year, and he had stopped dreaming of her at night. He

thought of falling in love with Elena when he was twenty-four, and how wrenching it must

have been for the woman because she had thought he was settling. He had loved her, hadn’t

he?

Andros did not want to convince himself into loving another ill-fitting woman. What

was going on with Susan? She would not meet his eyes. She had not said anything personal

to him for months, and today when she had the opportunity, she busied herself with other

things that did not matter. She wanted him away from her perhaps. Annie slipped out the

screen door and placed her hand on Andros wrist to tug, “Susan says it’s time for us to go.

We’ve been here longer than she can bear.” Such adult words from a tiny child! Andros

stared down to her eyes which were dark pools of brown just like his.

He shook his head, “I think we should stay. I have a gift for you and Susan. Let’s go

back to the kitchen and give her my gift.” Annie shook her head and tugged for him to go

down the front steps and back to the truck.

“No, Daddy. It’s time to go home.” His little girl was resolute which switched off

some lick of anger in his brain.

He dropped her grasp of him and turned back to the house. “You are the child, and I am your father. Come with me into kitchen so that I can tell Susan the truth.” Did the child have some weird telepathy like her crazy mother? His heart hurt with a sharp pain. He was suddenly afraid.

Annie shook her head in derision but followed his steps through the long hallway

padded with an oriental runner and back through swinging doors to the kitchen. There

stood Susan braced against the marble counter in an agony of silent tears. Her sobs

wracked her thin body so that she nearly gagged holding herself together. Andros crossed

the space in two steps and held her gently.

Annie’s voice was one of caution, “Don’t be gentle with her now if you are going to be mean again, Daddy. Be one way. Be the way you are with me.” She stamped her foot and continued on through the dining room doors, “I’ll see to the guests.”

Andros groaned a curse and rubbed his hands up and down Susan’s back to ease her

quaking. They clung to each other like the survivor’s of some terrible storm. All their

bulwarks were torn down, and their strength was in tatters. After she stopped sobbing, he

began to kiss her face and then her neck. *He loved her*, he whispered. He loved her and

could not let her suffer alone anymore; she would have to be there with him on the front

lines of this war they were fighting with ghosts, illness and love. “This is a war,” he

muttered, “but I want you on my side, by my side, fighting with me.”

He pulled the circle of diamonds out of his pocket and slipped it onto her left hand to

find it fit well enough. He showed her the small ring just like it for Annie. Mother and

daughter rings, they were. “Marry me, please. Marry me and save both our lives.”

She buried her face in his chest and breathed him into her lungs. Such a large,

imposing man to choose at such an inopportune time, but there it was. She whispered, “Yes,

of course, you wretched beast.”

Annie returned with the teapots and grinned at both of them. Andros set to refilling the pots with hot water and infusing the tea exactly right. Susan kneeled before Annie and asked if the little girl would like to be her daughter.

Annie answered with her mother’s rolling eyes, “Well, aren’t I already yours?” Then she laughed with Kate’s raspy laugh which gave her parents the shivers.

Greg Champion’s throat closed over the last few paragraphs, and Eleanor’s throat

ached, as tears dripped down her face. Her voice was no-nonsense but gruff, “Check the

glove compartment for napkins, Greg.” She didn’t dare acknowledge the grief building up in

her heart for Susan Stillwell, Andros and Susan’s parents. He passed tissues to Eleanor and

took one to surreptitiously dab at his own eyes.

Interrupting the urge to speak, he shuffled through the rest of the sheaf of ribbon-bound pages, “Wait. There’s a note in long hand from the author. This Daphne Alber says,

‘In my heart, Suzie’s story ended with the fairytale of love and a family. When I am old, I

hope I remember it as I’ve written it here.’ There’s also a clipping—an obituary . . .” Greg

was silenced by the name, the dates of her birth and death, the litany of names the

deceased left among the living and the dead. He had no words.

Eleanor looked over at him, as he stared out at the fields when they stopped at the

next intersection. He’d been rubbing his mouth and whiskers with one hand like Andros

had done in the luncheonette whenever he spoke of his Kate. His other hand rested on the

bundle of paper.

Finally he spoke, “I wish I didn’t know. Did you know about this?” He stared at his Bird in her new, removed grace. She looked older, wiser but kinder than the girl who stumbled into his office, spilled the coffee and let her heart break just a week ago.

She gave him a glance that showed she was not unaffected, but she admitted, “My

father told me, Martin, my Bramble father told me, that he and Millie met me at an inn outside of Lewes on one of their birding trips. I was probably close to two years old. Some of that,” she gestured to the story, “must be some, sweet fiction. Children that age do not speak so clearly. He did tell me about the teapot and the innkeeper though . . .” she grimaced comparing the two stories. “I think I would like to meet Daphne Alber. I think I would like to know more about this Susan who might have become my step-mother. Poor girl! Andros is complicated, isn’t he?”

Greg Champion closed his eyes and leaned back in the seat to digest the nuanced

version of his Bird, Miss Eleanor Birdsong Bramble. He murmured to the air, “Complicated?

You’re one to talk, my sweet Eleanor!” They lapsed into silence that lasted all the way back

to the Middletown plant.

He placed the manuscript in the box in the trunk of her car, but not before noticing a

small, leather-bound book. Of course it was titled *The Witch and Her Elves’ Fairytales,* and he touched the author’s name “S. S. Well” scripted at the bottom left; the book felt warm to the touch. Greg cradled it in his hand before opening to the title page to see the inscription: *To my beautiful Athena, May your dreams* *take you home. All my love, Suzie.*

Unexpectedly, he felt tears fall from his eyes at the same moment that Eleanor placed her hand on his. She stretched to his cheek and placed a gentle kiss there saying, “Thank you for reading it to me. I don’t think I could have finished it alone.”

Luis Suffers His Own Stupidity

Luis was troubled over the gaff with the homeless man and Judith. He and Vincenzo had taken the old beggar to City Hospital to be checked for stitch-worthy cuts and a concussion. The old man who identified himself as “Grant Stillwell” was encouraged to use a shower, surrendered his torn, disgusting clothing for a cleaner version from lost and found, and ate a warm meal as directed by a visiting priest. He tried to get the attending physician to look up or one of his daughters’ phone numbers in cities that changed every time he garbled their names. The doctor had rolled his eyes at Luis as if everyone lied.

Luis and Vincenzo drove Stillwell to the nearest men’s shelter after he was bandaged and given the all-clear. Vincenzo listened to the man’s story and narrowed his eyes. “I do not think he is lying about the wife or daughters. I’ll get Christine to do a little sleuthing while she’s home tomorrow morning.” Neither of the Fuerzas gave the man any money, but saw him installed in the shelter for the night. Vincenzo gave the man his card with the bar’s address and phone number since he’d been found near that address.

Luis wasn’t even surprised to see the man skulking around the door to Judith’s music store the next afternoon. After he jogged down the block and accosted this Grant person, Judith Lawson emerged from the store and warned, “Leave him alone, Luis. Mr.

Stillwell is working for me today.” Sure enough, Stillwell was in the midst of washing the many panes of her picture window. The bandages looked frayed and dirty from one night’s wear.

Luis sighed and offered his olive branch, “Why don’t you come down to the Shamrock after you finish, Mr. Stillwell? I have new gauze for your cuts, and I can make us

both a sandwich.”

Grant Stillwell looked at him closely, “Lonely down there in hell, young guy?” His

lined face lit with a crackled smile when Luis shrugged and nodded. From inside the store,

Judith laughed to see Luis humbled a bit. She did not, however, try to wheedle in an invitation or act anything but casual.

Later when he called Eleanor to hear her voice for comfort, Luis whispered, “Forgive me, Eleanor. I have been an idiot for most of my life.” His contrite tone made her laugh out loud.

Part II continued through Part III