ANTIFREEZE DREAM ■

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One of the customers ran over Susanna's dog. Only recently had she become what they called a dog person, though she was ill, recovering from a stay in the hospital for broken bones and a secondary infection, forced to hire a friend's teenaged daughter to walk the dog and bring in the mail. Growing up, though, she had never been a dog person. Neither was she what they called a "people person." She enjoyed the dubious distinction of rising every day before the sun came up, a morning person, though she kept it a secret so as not to appear puritanical or dull.

She was up in time for the early show the morning after her dog died in the street. Anger rose in her chest when she thought of the lemonade-drinker puckering his lips as he stomped on the brakes late, too late to notice her Australian Shepherd dashing after a squirrel, his leash trailing off like a kite's tail behind him. She didn't know which customer had been responsible—could have been anyone, really, the line was so long—and her injury kept her from undertaking the fruitless pursuit of criminal investigation. The whole set-up was strange, too, since most normal people didn't like to drink lemonade in December. It was one of those rules: fresh vegetables in July, hot chocolate in January, red wine in winter, and lemonade stands run by greedy, pint-sized capitalists, their hand-painted signs advertising watered-down refreshment in June, July, and August, a rip-off and a smile all summer long.

To run a lemonade stand in December seemed to her not only ill advised but also stupid and inconsiderate, like those

parents who tried to sell their sons' Cub Scout popcorn at work. And now that one of the lemonade-drinkers had killed her dog, she nursed a grudge against the neighbors, the neighbors' children, all the customers, and lemonade itself, a poison, like antifreeze or gasoline.

Her dog-walker was named Lynette. Lynette was sixteen and serious, the daughter of a co-worker, an honors student, the star goalie on the citywide soccer team and an intern in the office of a democratic state senator. She had seemed trustworthy enough. The morning after the dog's death, Susanna sent the girl a text message to deliver the bad news, her walking papers so to speak, her services no longer required, thanks, she said, for all your help. Had the girl sense enough to hold tight to the leash or even run in the opposite direction, the dog would have obeyed and kept his life. Susanna had told her this much right after it happened. She had been watching a tasteless "Holidazzle" Christmas parade on television, and, hearing the screech and scream just ten feet from her bedroom window, she scrambled for the door and hobbled outside on her crutches to see her dog's motionless body in the street. The car drove away. No one thought to check for the license plate number, and Lynette, crying and gulping with great, voluminous waves of panic, drew more attention from sympathetic onlookers than did either Susanna or her dead dog. But the dog did not suffer, and he was old, in any case, almost too old to be chasing after squirrels in the first place, and when the car slammed against his chest, his breath was taken from him in an instant, like an exploding light bulb on the cobwebbed ceiling of some old garage.

Still, Susanna missed him, and it was not lost on her that while she herself had been hit by a car and lived, the dog had been hit by a car and died. Three months before, she'd been on a bicycle, riding illegally and in the wrong direction on the shoulder of a state highway, when the twentysomething farm kid driving bales of hay to his grandpa's cattle ranch reached for his sunglasses in the cup-holder of his truck before grazing her rear tire. It was the fall into the ravine that broke her collarbone and fractured her femur—and she ultimately concluded he'd been lying about the sunglasses and was in fact reaching for his cell phone—but she had lived to tell the tale, and she felt guilty, somehow, because her poor old dog, out for a jaunt in his very own neighborhood, had not.

Now, it turned out, the driver of the truck—the boy who not three months ago had sent her to the hospital and, strangely, visited her every day clutching a single, helium balloon—was also her dog-walker's new boyfriend, an unsurprising coincidence in this backwater town. Stuff like that was always happening: the mayor who also drove the school bus, the accountant who moonlighted at Walmart, the police officer neighbor who should have given you a break but didn't when he pulled you over for speeding. Worse, the dog-walker's mother, Susanna's only close friend from the public library where they both worked, offered to pay Susanna three hundred bucks plus a sizeable Walmart gift card to photograph the happy couple for the dog-walker's senior prom. Though the girl's name was Lynette, Susanna, both in the privacy of her own thoughts and in public to the girl's own mother, called her The Dog-Walker and her boyfriend Balloon Boy, named after a flash-in-the-pan

media sensation, the seven or eight-year-old boy whose father had lied about his disappearance in the basket of a weather balloon with the hope of scoring the family's own reality television show. The nickname, a dual nod to the young man's odd, daily presence at the hospital and the duplicitous nature of his original scam, did not seem to bother Susanna's coworker, since she admitted to thinking her daughter could do better. And now that Susanna was out of the hospital, he visited her at the library on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, still clutching his single, strange helium balloon, which he never offered to Susanna but called on her to admire nonetheless. Judging from the hair falling into his eyes and the cowboy hat he always wore, even indoors, Balloon Boy probably didn't even own a pair of sunglasses, much less keep them in the cup holder of his stupid farm truck. But a cell phone? These days you rarely met someone without one.

Now Susanna's leg had improved to the point she no longer needed crutches, and she wondered if hiding behind the camera, poised and ready on a tripod, might keep Balloon Boy from feeling the need for his customary prop. But her history with The Dog Walker would only add to the tension, so that the room would fairly well buzz with resentment and dread. But Lynnette would pretend to be happy to see her, offering an insincere hug, making false attempts at flattery with sweet-sounding observations about Susanna's outfit or hair. Lynnette's mother had arranged to conduct the photo shoot in the alcove of the public library, an odd, but neutral choice, since the photographs were bound to feature either a bust of some dead white man or a map of the world somewhere off in the background. But Susanna

felt confident she could make the happy couple appear glamorous, on the precipice of some unnamable success, like young stars making the leap from their roles on the Disney Channel to mainstream movies and leading spots on the talk show circuit.

For Susanna, photography had started off as a hobby, but she was good enough to score a summer full of weddings and the occasional commercial gig shooting stuff like the Parade of Homes and bowls of cottage cheese.

"You look beautiful," she said to Lynnette, and she meant it. She refused to meet the gaze of Balloon Boy. "That dress is a stunner."

"Thanks," she said. "I got in on Ebay."

"*I* got it on Ebay," Balloon Boy said. "Connections."

Lynnete's mother made small talk about the cost of the dress, the cost of the shoes, the cost of the steak dinner before the prom. Susanna was used to people bragging about their expenditures, but she surprised herself by joining in. Together, they spoke of the cost of chicken versus steak, the cost of the corsage, the cost of hair and make-up, the cost of the prom's rental space, the cost of hiring teachers to chaperone, free, it turned out, since they were made to volunteer. Twenty minutes had passed, and Susanna hadn't taken a single picture.

"You're slowing them down," Lynette's mother said. "Who would have dreamt a photo shoot could take so long."

“You want to get your money’s worth,” Susanna said. “I don’t come cheap.”

“Don’t I know it.”

“Mom,” Lynette said. “Could you please leave?”

“Shut up now,” her mother said. “I’ve spent eighteen years and nine months waiting for this moment.” Today, it turned out, was Lynette’s birthday.

“Great,” Susanna said, taking the first photo. “Now you can vote.”

“She’d better not vote,” Balloon Boy said. “Not for Obama.”

“He already won,” Susanna said. “In case you haven’t noticed.”

“I know,” he said. “But in case he runs for dictator or head of the one-world government or something.”

“Smile,” Susanna said. “Say cheese.”

“Fontina,” Lynette said.

“Velveeta,” Balloon Boy said.

“I taught them that joke,” Lynette’s mother said. “They love me.”

Things went on for a while in the usual fashion—Susanna asked them to sit, stand up again, stare at the ceiling as if it were heaven above. She took a long series in which Balloon Boy pretended to tie the corsage's ribbon around Lynette's slim white wrist. The truth was the whole thing was boring, like watching a PowerPoint presentation or entering the end stages of a game of Scrabble you knew you were going to lose. She was more or less confident she had enough shots to put together a pretty good package when she had an idea.

"Oh no," she said. "My memory card."

Lynette and her mother both froze in terror, but Balloon Boy, who seemed to understand this as a sign to take a much-needed break, departed for the vending machine in the library's break room. Lynette's voice rose in panic, and her mother grabbed the camera from Susanna's hand.

"Everything's gone," Susanna lied. "They'll have to come back tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Lynette's mother said. "But the prom is tonight."

"They'll have to come by after their little—parties—then," Susanna said. "I'd planned to stay here all night to do some re-shelving anyway."

"This is crazy," Lynette said. "We can't take our prom photos *after* the prom."

“In the morning,” Susanna said. “I work best in the morning.”

By this time, Balloon Boy had returned with a Mountain Dew and a bag of Cheetos, his fingers coated with a fine, orange dust. “What’s going on?” he said.

Lynette began to cry. For a moment, Susanna saw herself in the girl’s despair, and she remembered, in a flash, the desperate and sudden pitfalls of the required rituals of young adulthood. Only no one had asked *her* to go to a prom, not once. Always on prom night she’d rented a movie or taken a walk around town alone. Later, in college, her first serious boyfriend would take a dubious pleasure in her dateless high school years, as if he’d been the first to climb not a mountain but a rocky hill littered with bottle caps in some boyhood friend’s backyard. Now she wanted revenge, not on her first serious boyfriend, not on all those high school boys who’d failed to notice her, not even on Balloon Boy’s negligence that day on the highway or Lynette’s stupidity in allowing her poor old dog to get killed. She wanted revenge on youth itself, its heedless stretch across the cultural landscape, its hunger, its all-pervasive need. That she herself wasn’t getting any younger might seem like a sign of mere envy, but it was more than that; she was angry, and she knew she deserved some lasting attention, or at least a nod in her direction. No one noticed her in youth, and no one noticed her still.

After a series of negotiations in which Susanna would not budge, Balloon Boy and Lynette finally went off to the

prom, and Lynette's mother went home. They all agreed the happy couple would reappear at the library's back door at exactly 5:30 the next morning. During the prom itself, Susanna went shopping. It took her eight trips to and from the grocery store, eight trips in which her backseat was completely full and the view from her rearview mirror was impossibly blocked, but by the time she was finished, the library's alcove was packed with the electrified energy of exactly 55 helium balloons, all of them red with silver ribbons, and all of them pulsing with the live-wire energy of an Easter parade. She made a final trip to the store and back for straight pins, a quart of antifreeze, a plastic pitcher, a wooden spoon, a small bag of sugar, and, of course, a packet of lemonade.

"Let us in," Lynette said from the alleyway. They were early by an hour or more, but Susanna was prepared, and having Lynette's mother out of the way would liberate the process from the prying eyes of adulthood. "Our pictures," Lynette said. Her pounding knock was like a cop's. "We're ready to make memories."

"Speak for yourself," Balloon Boy said after Susanna had unlocked and propped open the door "I feel like shit." His face was puffy and his eyes were bloodshot, both obvious products of the evening's revelry, rented hotel rooms, maybe, a punchbowl spiked with something stronger. Lynette appeared more or less preserved, like a doll enclosed in glass. She was the driver, she told Susanna; always she obeyed the rules of traffic.

"Of course you do," Susanna said. "So responsible."

Balloon Boy's rumpled clothing reeked of cigarette smoke, though Lynette seemed neither to notice nor care. She doted on him as much as or more than she had before the prom, and her cooing attentions hardened Susanna's resolve. Bypassing the alcove, she directed them to the reference section, a row of tasteful dictionary stands in the background. For a while, she pretended—the memory card *and* the batteries removed from her camera—to take the standard set of romantic tributes, the usual poses of the young and in love. She directed Balloon Boy to hold Lynette, kiss Lynette, kneel in front of Lynette, gaze into her eyes. So far, the helium balloons in the alcove remained hidden from view.

"The alcove," she said finally. "I need you two lovebirds to see what I have set up for you in the alcove."

They followed her into the crowded hallway; the balloons took up so much space it was difficult for the three of them to stand for very long without ducking or shifting. The whole thing was very funny, and before long they all began to laugh.

"Pop them," Susanna said, handing each one a straight pin. "Pop the balloons."

Lynnette spoke first, "But why?" she said. "I'm sorry, Susanna, but this is weird."

"Pop the goddamned balloons," she said. "This is part of the photo shoot."

“I’m not going to pop them,” Balloon Boy said. “You pop them.”

“Look,” Susanna said, grabbing her own straight pin and taking the first stabbing shot. “It’s easy.”

POP, went the balloon, and all three were stunned into silence.

“Now,” Susanna said. “Your turn.”

They were reluctant at first, their hands shaking in rhythm with Lynette’s nervous laughter. But they complied with her wishes: *pop, pop, pop,* the pinprick attacks no longer hesitant, more confident now, becoming frenzied and rushed. After the last burst of energy, all the balloons were finished off, dead soldiers on the alcove floor, like the final day of the circus or a clown’s precursor to suicide. Susanna, though she would never be beautiful, never again be young, had this one moment of triumph, the satisfaction that came from the gunshot-sound of each balloon’s last, lifeless spark, the pleasure of taking the only actual picture she would take all night, the comic photo of the boy’s stone-faced silence and the girl’s perplexed awe, the two of them standing among the red rubber ruins in the alcove. And with her vision of the photograph came the knowledge she’d made something happen, for once, and she grew calm with the true fact of her power. Now she took up the pitcher and two Styrofoam cups. If only she’d thought to buy bendable straws.

“Pucker up, you two,” she said. “You must be thirsty.”