



Scouting for the Reaper

by Jacob M. Appel

NOTHING SELLS TOMBSTONES like a Girl Scout in uniform. This was my father's pearl of entrepreneurial genius, the closest he ever came to a formal business plan, and it's how I ended up lugging thirty pounds of granite onto Delia Braithwaite's front porch, while sporting a pleated skirt, a collared blouse and a trefoil pin. "You make your profit on the 'his-and-hers' specials," Papa coached—referring to deals that allow surviving spouses to lock in future epitaphs at present-day rates. "Who's a grieving widow going to trust on a twofer? A family man? Or a slick-talking bachelor?" So at the age of eight—when my sister Katie entered high school—I'd inherited both the job and the outfit, and five years later, Papa was still introducing me to potential clients as his *eleven-year-old* beauty. It didn't matter that, unlike my sisters, I'd never

actually been a Girl Scout. Or that my chest had outgrown my hand-me-down jade green vest.

Delia Braithwaite had been my father's first wife. They'd married when Papa was studying marble work in Copenhagen and split up soon after he'd inherited the monument shop in Yonkers from Grandpa Melvin. Ten stormy months, no kids, no strings. I doubt he'd ever expected to see her again, and I'm sure he never imagined that, at fifty, he'd be ringing the doorbell of her privet-shrouded Scarsdale estate to pitch her a deluxe gravesite. But there he was, bogus Girl Scout in tow. It was a mild Saturday afternoon in late April and the heady aroma of hyacinths had triggered Papa's allergies. He sneezed repeatedly into his handkerchief, his thick neck bulging. A stylish, svelte woman in a velvet cheetah bodysuit opened the door.

"Gordon?" she asked—hesitantly, as much to herself as to us. "Gordon," she responded, more

confidently, welcoming, as though answering her own question. Then: "Gordon, Gordon, Gordon." Shaking her head. As in: *Well, it's about time. Or: Look what the dog dug up.* She was conducting an entire conversation just by repeating Papa's name. "So, Gordon?" she demanded. "Aren't you going to say anything?"

"Hello, Delia," said Papa. "You haven't changed one bit."

"Nonsense," exclaimed our hostess. "I look like I'm old enough to be my own grandaunt. Like Whistler's mother! But it can't be helped, can it?" She turned toward me without warning, when I'd nearly forgotten that I was physically present in her entryway, and not merely watching a theatrical performance, and she asked, "And who might *this* be?"

Papa didn't allow me a chance to answer. "That's Natalie. My eleven-year-old beauty," he said. "We've come straight from Junior Scouts."

"Natalie," echoed Delia Braithwaite. But she said my name only once. "I've got a seventeen-year-old of my own around here somewhere," she added, shrugging. "He'll turn up when you least expect him." Then she led us across the foyer, walking with a pronounced limp, and resting her weight on a wooden cane.

Every object in the room demanded attention: the cut-glass and ormolu chandelier, the Comtoise clock at the foot of the spiral staircase, a black-and-white tiled floor worthy of Vermeer. Yet most striking were the numerous glazed sculptures, on every ledge and tabletop, depicting abstract nudes in various states of embrace. I guessed that this was Delia Braithwaite's own handicraft. My father glanced up the stairs, drawing a long whistle under his breath. I rested the sample case against the wainscoting.

"Henry isn't here," said Delia. "I didn't see the point in that."

This jolted Papa back to the task at hand. "My sincerest condolences, Delia," he offered.

"Condolences? For what?" Delia Braithwaite appeared genuinely surprised. My father, looking equally puzzled, toyed clumsily with his large hands.

"I just thought . . ." he stammered. "You wanted a headstone, didn't you?"

"Oh, the headstone." Delia grinned. "The headstone is for *me*."

PAPA HAD BEEN IN THE CARVING YARD alongside the house when Delia Braithwaite phoned. He was hunched over his outdoor workbench, his overalls caked in quartz dust, etching on a rubber stencil with a utility scalpel. While he labored, he belted show tunes in his warm, Bronx-inflected baritone. "Oh What a Beautiful Mornin'." "Some Enchanted Evening." I lay sunning myself atop a boulder that overlooked the conclave of unfinished headstones, engrossed in a pocket romance novel that I'd concealed inside my school-issued copy of *Middlemarch*. Katie perched nearby on a rusted swing, playing tic-tac-toe in the dust with her boot. She was listening for the nasal blast of her boyfriend's Mustang, dreamy-eyed like a girl who knows she'll be kissed before sundown. Orioles and grackles thrashed in the crabapple thicket that separated our property from the municipal duck pond, punctuated by the honking of taxis on Waterloo Avenue, and the rumble of eighteen wheelers passing on the interstate. Suddenly, the telephone rang in the kitchen, livid as a fire alarm. A moment later, my mother emerged through the screen door with the portable receiver pressed against her shoulder.

"Gor-don!" she cried. Her voice, once the finest soprano in local summer stock, had grown perpetually louder as her hearing deteriorated. "Te-le-phone!"

My father stopped singing. He dried the sweat from his hands slowly, unwilling to be rushed by the caller. Then he took a swig of iced tea from his canteen and lumbered across the yard—his gait as steady as a gunslinger's.

"It's *Delia*," announced Mama, inquisitive, her eyebrows raised. She'd shaded the name with a hint of distaste, as though retrieving a soiled napkin between her fingertips. "For you."

Papa walked the telephone to the far end of the veranda. He spoke for the better part of five minutes, pausing to scribble a note, most likely the caller's address, while my mother hovered on the nearby steps, periodically grimacing or

rolling her eyes. After he snapped off the phone, they conferred briefly. Then my father brushed aside Mama's gray-tinged bangs, kissed her on the forehead, and climbed back down into the yard.

"Natalie!" Papa called. "Put on your uniform! We're making a house call!"

"What do you need Natalie for?" demanded Mama. "Jesus, Gordon. You're not planning to swindle your own ex-wife?"

The word "swindle" was a surefire way to rankle Papa. Now, he couldn't back down. "My ex-wife is a rich woman," he snapped. "And since when are *you* so concerned about Delia?"

I'd never heard of Delia before. I knew nothing of the first marriage.

Mama scowled. She'd given Papa hell for "exploiting" us girls ever since he'd first dragged Annie on a sales call—but only when she was upset about something else. Usually, she didn't mind the extra sales, the cash for dinners out or weekends at Cape May. "You already know what I think," she said, her voice fraught with injury, and she disappeared into the house, letting the screen door slam shut angrily behind her.

Papa appeared unfazed. "Let's get a move on, Natalie," he ordered.

I looked to Katie for help—for illumination, for pity—but she wouldn't meet my gaze, so I darted inside, stashed my romance novel under my mattress, and changed into my undersized uniform. On impulse, I left off the wool beret and itchy nylon tights.

My father stood waiting for me in the garage, reviewing the inventory in his sample cases. Mama—I knew from many years of careful observation—would be upstairs, moping beneath a heap of afghan quilts and down comforters. "Jealousy is an ugly thing. Like a crack in healthy marble," Papa said. "Your mother is very lucky that I love her as much as I do."

I said nothing. I felt embarrassed for both of us, and for Mama too, as though I'd interrupted the pair of them having sex.

We walked out to the truck. On the drive into Westchester County, Papa told me all that he believed I needed to know about his relationship with Delia Braithwaite: that they'd apprenticed

together under Lars Willumsen in Denmark, that he hadn't laid eyes on her in thirty years, that he and Mama had never mentioned her because she wasn't relevant to their lives. *Or mine*. "She's relevant only because she's married to the CEO of Braithwaite & Nolan," he added. "To you, she's just a wealthy woman in the market for a headstone. Okay?"

I nodded.

"Good," said Papa.

He popped a cassette into the tape deck. Soon we were listening to Robert Preston seduce Marian the Librarian, leaving Mama's displeasure far behind us. The overhead sun coaxed figments of water from the parched asphalt. We'd already advanced forty minutes up the parkway when Papa turned to me, surprised, and demanded, "Where's your funny hat?"

"**DO YOU KNOW WHAT THE PROBLEM** with dying is?" asked Delia.

She'd steered us into a brightly lit parlor furnished entirely in white. Above the mantel hung an enormous canvas swathed with blue rectangles, yellow crescents, crimson crosses and sinuous green lines—as though the painting had sucked all the color from the rest of the room. The work may well have been a Kandinsky. Again, abstract lovers—some stone, some aluminum—caressed on the coffee table and atop a mahogany stand beside the bay windows. Delia Braithwaite had poured us each a tall glass of sweetened pink lemonade from a crystal pitcher. Then she'd settled down far too close to me on the sofa.

When Papa failed to reveal the *real* problem with dying, she patted my thigh and asked, "How about *you*, young lady? Do *you* know what the problem with dying is?"

"Maybe you're not really dying," I suggested. "Maybe you'll get better."

"You sound just like my husband," said Delia. "Henry is always going on about the miracles of modern science, insisting that they'll find a cure. But that's a pipe dream. Let's face it: if they didn't find a cure for Lou Gehrig, they're certainly not going to find one for me." Our hostess laughed—

a lush, rising laugh like a waltz up a staircase. I'd met dying people before—Great Aunt Arlene in the nursing home, the chain-smoking Moroccan who co-owned the flower shop where Mama worked—but none had ever seemed so happy. "I'll tell you what the *real* problem with dying is," Delia said, her eyes fixed on Papa. "It's a one-shot deal. You don't have an opportunity to learn from your mistakes."

My father remained stone-faced. He sat with one leg crossed over the opposite knee, nursing his lemonade like cognac. "I'm sorry you have to go through this," he said.

"Me too," agreed Delia. "I've been making a list of the things I'd still like to do. Photographing the Serengeti, picnicking beneath the Colossi of Memnon, making love on Easter Island in the shadows of the moai. Not that I'm actually going to do *any* of that—but it's nice to have fantasies. And daydreaming keeps me busy, now that I can't sculpt." I blushed. I wasn't used to discussing love-making fantasies, however tame, during casual conversation. Delia set her empty glass on the coffee table. "I also wanted to see you, Gordon. You don't mind my saying that, do you? It's rather convenient that you sell tombstones for a living, isn't it?"

"You didn't always think that," said Papa.

"No, I suppose I didn't," agreed Delia. "You never let anything slide, do you?"

"I just call things as they are," answered Papa. "Or, at least, as I see them."

This sort of cryptic aggression was nothing like the father I knew—but neither was having a clandestine ex-wife. I longed to leap from the sofa and retreat to the safety of the truck. Instead, I spread an embroidered cloth across the tabletop and started to lay out the granite samples: small rectangles in coral gray and sierra white, Wausau red and Salisbury pink, each carved with R.I.P in uncial gothic. Papa often told clients how Great Grandma Pauline had hand-stitched the cloth in the days when Great Grandpa Leo went door-to-door on horseback. A reminder that Luftigs had been hawking headstones since 1892. (Mama, who'd actually bought the cloth from a discount bin at Gimbels, would *not* have been amused.) I focused on adjusting and readjusting the tiny

stones, afraid of making eye contact with Delia Braithwaite.

"So how have you been, Gordon? How have you *really* been?" she asked. "I do hope you've had a good thirty years."

"I have, Delia," answered Papa. His tone was matter-of-fact and unequivocal, which is what a daughter wants to hear. It didn't cross my mind—not until later—that he might have been lying. "Now tell me, Delia, what exactly are you looking for in the way of a stone?"

Our hostess appeared disappointed, irked—either by Papa's thirty good years or his change of subject. Her eyes settled on the sample display. I felt suddenly unwelcome.

"I have absolutely no idea," she answered. "Honestly, I thought you'd tell me. Like I said, Gordon, I've never done this before . . ."

"That's why I've brought samples," said Papa.

I knew what came next: my father's sermon on how headstones were like houses, each suited to a particular taste and temperament. The sound of a barking dog, followed by a door slamming in the entryway, cut him short. Seconds later, a deep masculine voice announced, "Rodin caught another goddam squirrel," and then the speaker sauntered into the room. He was a broad-shouldered, square-jawed teenage dreamboat with a playful smile and long, golden-saffron bangs that nearly concealed his eyes. When he realized that Delia had company, he said, "Oh, hi," sheepishly, waving toward us, and his cheeks blossomed like peonies. Only then did I notice his vacant, irregular gaze—and the collapsible white cane tucked under one muscular arm: my newfound Adonis was blind.

"This is my wayward son, Lucien," said Delia. "And this is Gordon Luftig. He's selling me a tombstone."

"Delia—" Lucien objected, calling his mother by her first name.

Delia cleared her throat audibly, her means of staring him down—akin to my own mother's icy, *we have company* look. "And this is his eleven-year-old daughter. Natasha, right?"

"Natalie," I mumbled.

"I was a scout when I was eleven," said Delia Braithwaite, "as hard as *that* is to believe."

Our hostess placed her right hand on her heart and declaimed:

*On my honor, I will try:
To do my duty to God and my country,
To help other people at all times,
To obey the Girl Scout Laws.*

"Not bad for a dying woman, is it?" she asked.

I despised Delia Braithwaite for informing Lucien that I was eleven. As the ugliest thirteen-year-old in the eighth grade, I had little shot at dating him—even if he couldn't see me through his own eyes. Somehow, he was bound to find out how hideously unattractive I was. Yet branded an eleven-year-old *child*, I wouldn't even have an opportunity to fail.

If my father was surprised by Lucien's lack of vision, he didn't let on.

"I was just showing your mother some samples," said Papa. "I think it's best to choose your coloring first and *then* decide upon a suitable design."

"You have an awful lot of samples, don't you?" asked Delia. "What's this one?"

She scooped up a pink-hued specimen.

"Sunset pink," observed Papa. "Very eye-catching. The deep pinks have a mystical look to them . . . and a striking reflection when polished to a high sheen."

Delia returned the stone to its original place like a puzzle piece.

"I need an epitaph, don't I?" she declared. "How do I want to be remembered?"

"That's entirely for you to decide," Papa replied patiently. "Many people prefer to purchase a stone and then choose an inscription later."

"That makes no sense at all," snapped Delia. "How can I decide what stone I want if I don't know what I'm writing on it?" She clasped her hands together, her posture rigid. "Form follows function, doesn't it? So what do you think, Lucien? What wisdom should your mother leave behind for eternity?"

"I think you should concentrate on living," said Lucien.

"How about you, Natasha?" asked Delia. "Any ideas?"

I did have a choice phrase or two, considering that she'd butchered my name *again*—but not ones that I dared express. She was my future mother-in-law, after all. (I'd already decided that I was going to marry Lucien Braithwaite, or that I would die a virgin trying.) My future husband was half-sitting on the back of the sofa, his strapping forearms folded across his chest, so close to me that I could have touched his bare elbow.

"I suppose you should come back again, Gordon. How about next Saturday?" asked Delia—but it was more an order than a question. She rose from the sofa with the help of the cane and dusted the upholstery lint from her bodysuit. "I'm sure I'll come up with something by then. Maybe I can find something on the internet."

Our hostess led us through the oak-paneled dining room into the opulent foyer, dragging her weak leg like an anchor. Lucien followed in silence, feeling his way deftly along the walls. He even paused at one point to straighten a picture frame. I felt deathly self-conscious watching him, although I knew he couldn't see me. When Delia waved goodbye to us, my dreamboat stood behind her like a bodyguard.

Farewell Lucien, I thought. Farewell, my darling.

He smiled at us and shut the heavy door.

I stood at the curbside, smitten, pollen-drenched, already mapping out the hours until the coming weekend, while Papa hoisted the sample case onto the bed of the truck. "Your mother is not going to be a happy camper," he said. He wiped his swollen eyes and climbed into the cab. I followed. "I suppose this is a good life-lesson for you, Natalie," he said. "Cracked marble isn't pretty, but sometimes it can't be helped." I should have been alarmed by Papa's meditative tone—but I was far too love-struck to care.

MAMA MET THE TRUCK AT THE HEAD of the cul-de-sac. She was wearing her threadbare terrycloth robe, her short hair damp and tussled, pacing between sidewalk and street like a madwoman walking an imaginary dog. Twilight had already fallen, casting lazy shadows off the telephone

poles and the heads of the crab apples—the mild spring evening somehow accentuating my mother's fury. I couldn't help comparing her broad features and childbearing hips to Delia's classical, hard-edged beauty. Mama, even in her heyday, had merely displayed the fleeting, girlish charms of a well-fed peasant. She hardly gave my father a chance to climb down from the truck before she launched her first salvo.

"Well?" she demanded.

"She couldn't make up her mind about the lettering," said Papa, trying to sound indifferent. "She wants us back again next weekend."

"I have a suggestion," snapped Mama. "How about: *Here lies a cold-hearted bitch.*"

"Can you please watch your language, Eileen? For heaven's sake." My father scanned the neighbors' homes, their brightly lit windows slicing through the dusk. He unloaded the heavier of the sample cases, leaving the other for me, and lugged it up the driveway. "If it's *that* important to you, Eileen, I won't go back. I'll cancel the whole thing." Papa set the case down beside the garage door and added dryly, "It's not as though we could use the money."

"That's so not the point. I don't want you to not go back," Mama retorted. "I just don't want you to forget how that woman treated you. How she discarded you like a broken sculpture, like an animal carcass, like a piece—"

"Believe me, I haven't forgotten," said my father. "And it wasn't all that simple."

Mama's fist pounded the air. "How wasn't it that simple?"

My father stepped toward her and gently peeled open her clenched hand. "Let's not fight about this, okay?" he pleaded. "Look, life has more than caught up with her. She'd dying of ALS and,"—here my father lowered his voice—"she's married to a first-rate asshole."

"Did you meet him?"

"I didn't need to," Papa answered. "Trust me. I can tell."

"Well, he's a rich asshole. Better than a . . ."

"Better than a *what*?" asked Papa.

They faced each other in silence, dwarfed by the hulking shadow of the unlit house.

"Nothing," said Mama. She leaned her body

into my father's chest, and he wrapped his arms around her. "I'm sorry. I just hate her for what she did to you."

"If Delia hadn't discarded me like—what was that?—an animal carcass, I wouldn't have a beautiful wife and three brilliant daughters, now would I?" asked Papa. "Besides, she's been dealt a pretty lousy hand. She's got a blind kid too. I'm sure that's punishment enough."

"Serves her right," said Mama. "I hope she catches it."

I wanted to gouge their eyes out for calling Lucien a punishment. Instead, I retreated to my bedroom and buried my head in the pillows. I could hear Katie and her boyfriend making out in the converted attic, the springs of her Murphy bed dancing above my ceiling, and I pretended that they were actually us, Lucien and I, and that he'd torn open my pleated jade skirt and I was guiding his powerful hands through the perpetual darkness.

THE NEXT SEVEN DAYS lasted several millennia. I drew a grid containing one hundred sixty-eight boxes, for each intervening hour, and crossed them off one by one. I watched the second hand on the dining room clock making its glacial rounds. I was consumed with the dread that some unforeseen obstacle would interpose itself between me and my impending encounter with Lucien—that he might step in front of a locomotive or elope to Reno with the blind cheerleader who'd been profiled in the county newspaper. My concern may seem rather excessive, considering that Lucien Braithwaite and I had hardly exchanged two sentences. But for a lonely, flat-chested thirteen-year-old girl nicknamed Dumbo, on account of her arresting ears, the prospect of intimacy can become all consuming. I yearned for a chance to reinvent myself, away from the unforgiving corridors of Samuel Tilden Middle School, and a handsome blind boy offered a once-in-an-adolescence opportunity. I was so anxious, so fragile, that even the sight of a baby rabbit on the lawn sent me bawling.

Mama was also on edge. Our family dinners, which had grown increasingly subdued ever

since Annie had escaped on scholarship to Vassar and Katie had absented herself psychologically from the household, suddenly became ground zero in the one-sided verbal war between my mother and her predecessor. "I've got the perfect epitaph, Gordon," declared Mama. "How's this? *Went Digging for Gold.*" On another night, she suggested: "*Delia Luftig Braithwaite: She Married Up.*" Mama couched her jealousy in the guise of righteous indignation at how Delia had once treated Papa. This helped me piece together the details of the divorce: how my father had felt obliged to return to Yonkers to support Grandma Florence and Great Grandma Pauline and Uncle Lester, who was only a toddler when Grandpa Melvin collapsed, while Delia had been determined to remain in Denmark. She'd married an avant-garde sculptor, a protégé of Willumsen, an artistic heir to the late Dietrich Marcus. Grave dealing hadn't been part of the bargain. Delia was more than willing to support Papa on the allowance provided by her own father, a Park Avenue urologist, but she felt no obligation toward poor relations she'd never even met. So they parted. Not *un-amicably*. Yet now, three decades later, Mama declared the woman's disloyalty unpardonable. She compared her, at various times, to Judas Iscariot and Lady Macbeth and Lord Haw Haw. Papa let these outbursts take their course. He never defended Delia. Instead, he'd deflect Mama's sarcasm with an intimate gesture—a squeeze of the wrist, a kiss on the palm—and he'd say, "I dodged a bullet with that woman, didn't I?"

My father's reunion with Delia had affected him too. I know this because one evening, while I was concealed in the arbor, reading an antebellum-era romance with a flashlight and fantasizing about Lucien, Papa exited the house by the kitchen stairs and climbed down to his workbench. But he didn't pick up where he'd left off, lettering "R.I.P. Chester the Schnauzer" onto a granite doghouse while singing "If I Were A Rich Man." He didn't even touch his tools. Instead, he stood motionless with his hands in his pants pockets, his broad shoulders slightly hunched, and stared at the unfinished gravestone, almost *through* it, as though it were

his own. I don't know if he was thinking of his relationship with Delia—or merely of the reality that she was dying. *That a woman he'd once loved would soon no longer exist.* He stood in the damp twilight for nearly an hour, and I felt a sudden urge to hug him, and to apologize for being such a disappointing daughter, for not wearing my nylon tights and wool beret with greater alacrity, but of course I didn't do that. So Papa retreated up the kitchen stairs again, slowly, wearily.

And then it was Saturday.

DELIA BRAITHWAITE GREETED US from a plaid beach chair on her front yard. She'd traded her cheetah bodysuit for a loosely draped silk robe; her long chestnut hair was looped around a pair of knitting needles. The wooden cane rested against a tall stack of nearby books, and in her lap she held a bowl of fresh cherries, which she offered first to Papa and then to me. "How's Scouts, Natasha?" Delia asked. She held up three fingers in solidarity. I raised three fingers of my own, while sliding my other arm into my tights to scratch. Then I remembered that I was supposed to offer my *opposite* hand for the Girl Scout shake—Katie, who'd once cared deeply about these details, had warned me countless times—but my partner had already turned away.

"I've been hunting for an epitaph all week, Gordon," said Delia, "but I'm afraid I haven't made much progress. When you search for epitaphs on the internet, you come up with lots of psalms and sappy poetry, but nothing you can actually use." She retrieved her reading glasses from the apron of her robe and flipped open the topmost book on the stack. "I figured I'd find something in the *Golden Treasury of American Verse*, but the only potential lines even remotely tolerable were Ogden Nash—'Candy is dandy, but liquor is quicker'—and when I told Henry, he threatened to have me buried in an unmarked grave." Our hostess snapped shut the poetry anthology decisively; it struck me that her husband had said no such thing. "What do you think, Gordon? 'Candy is dandy, but liquor is quicker'? Or how about something simple and barebones like 'Beloved ex-wife and mother'?"

Papa's face remained impassive as a bed sheet. He reached toward Delia as though to reassure her with a gentle squeeze of her shoulder—part of his routine with female customers—but, at the last moment, he stuffed his hand into his pants pocket. "All I can do is offer up suggestions, Delia," he said. "In the end, it's your choice. That being said, you can rest assured that nearly everyone manages to find something that they're comfortable with."

"I suppose you don't get many long-term complaints."

"Emily Dickinson is often a popular choice," continued my father, "especially among educated woman. Or you might like a quotation about sculpting."

"What I'd like," answered Delia, "is to have Lana Turner's teenage body. But we're past what I'd like, Gordon. Well past. At this point, it's more a matter of what I'd settle for."

"In that case," replied my father, deadpan, "I suppose many educated women settle for a quotation from Emily Dickinson."

"Okay, Gordon. Have your fun," Delia fired back. "You'll only have a few chances left to mock Delia Braithwaite, so you might as well make the most of them. The neurologists—in case you care—say I'm down to my final eighteen months. Not that anybody *around here* believes them. Henry and Lucien are both practically drowning in denial. How does this sound for an epitaph? 'I told you I was sick!'"

Our hostess was *flirting*. She was dying and bitter *and* she was flirting. I scanned the corners of the lawn, hoping for a glimpse of my future husband, but a morbid torpor hung over the manicured facades of rhododendron and forsythia. The house was equally still, a colossal ranch-style tomb. No sign of Lucien. The only evidence of life beyond our own was, drifting from some distance past the house and across the Braithwaite's red clay tennis courts, the deep, playful bark of a large dog. Fortunately, my presence must have made Delia as uneasy it made me, because she turned suddenly in my direction and said, "Why don't you go find Lucien, Natasha? He should be out back with Rodin." I didn't need to be told twice. Yet even

as I darted toward my unwitting fiancé, following the pachysandra-lined footpaths and ducking through a lilac-wrapped arbor, I was seized with an unpleasant realization regarding my future late mother-in-law: Delia was *butcher*-ing my name *intentionally*, because she found doing so amusing. She knew damn well that I was Natalie, not Natasha. She didn't care.

I FOUND LUCIEN BESIDE THE SWIMMING POOL, counting push-ups on the concrete. He'd stripped down to his boxer shorts, and perspiration glistened off his shoulder blades, off the caps of his muscular shoulders, off the nape of his sun-bronzed neck. The dog, a black Labrador, stood exhausted and dripping atop a vinyl-matted chaise longue. In the deep end of the water, a Frisbee drifted like a raft. I stood motionless, hoping Rodin would ignore me, watching electrified as Lucien's biceps contracted and released. When he reached fifty, his breath grew shorter. He paused at seventy-five, grunted his way from eighty to ninety. "One-fucking-hundred," he announced, falling flat on his stomach. Then he stood up and, glancing toward me, warned, "Didn't anybody ever tell you not to sneak up on blind people in their underwear?"

I didn't move. I didn't speak. I wanted to sink into the earth forever.

"Hey, Natalie. You better say something before I sic Rodin on you."

Lucien flashed his teeth. He wiped the sweat from his underarms with a crimson bath towel. My eyes focused on the small horizontal scar at the flank of his abdomen where he'd apparently had his appendix removed, a mark nearly identical to my own. I considered running back to the truck and locking myself inside.

"How did you know it was me?"

"Your shampoo," he answered.

I drew one of my bangs to my nose. I could hardly smell anything. Maybe a hint of citrus flavor and another vaguely toxic scent.

"I like the smell," he added. "It's sweet."

Lucien tossed the towel onto the chaise longue. He clapped his hands together and Rodin sprang to attention. "Frisbee! Go get it,

boy!" cried Lucien, dispatching the dog into the water at top speed. "He's not a guide dog, just an old-fashioned mutt," my future husband explained. "But nobody knows that, so I take him into the post office . . . and even into upscale restaurants. Who's ever going to tell a blind guy that his dog's not the *right kind of dog*?"

"I had my appendix removed too," I blurted out. "When I was eight."

Lucien traced his fingers along his scar. "And you're eleven now, right? So that was three years ago. I had mine out three years ago too. New Year's Eve." He eased the Frisbee from Rodin's jaw and lobbed it back into the pool, only inches from where it had been. "We were skiing up in Vermont and my girlfriend had to drive me to the hospital through a blizzard."

No physical pain had ever hurt me so badly. *Even Lucien had a girlfriend.*

"You're wondering about the skiing, aren't you?" he asked. "They have a special course fitted out with ropes. I'm actually ranked seventeenth in the country. I've got a shot at the Special Olympics in three years."

I sensed my anger mounting. *How could he think I cared about skiing?*

"Is your girlfriend from Westchester?" I asked.

"Originally. Janine graduated last spring," said Lucien. "She's at school in Colorado. It's a really good program for psychology. I was going to go out there too . . . for skiing . . . but now with Delia the way she is, I don't know *what* I'm going to do. I still have another month to decide . . . almost six weeks . . ."

He turned his head away, as though gazing at the horizon, although obviously he couldn't see it. His damaged eyes looked moist—or I may have imagined this. I longed to hug him, to plant butterfly kisses on his eyelashes, but I didn't dare.

"I'm sorry about your mother," I said.

"Me too."

"Maybe they will develop a miracle cure."

Lucien shook his head. "Sometimes I think Delia's secretly happy that she got sick. That this is her way of getting back at Henry for cheating on her." When he'd initially called his mother by

her first name, it had seemed mature and modern—but now, referring to *both* of his parents by name, *when they weren't present*, made him sound cool and detached like a psychiatrist. But who could blame him? "If she hadn't gotten sick, he was going to leave her," Lucien added. "You knew that, didn't you?"

"I guess so," I lied.

"Janine says Delia is a very angry woman. I didn't believe her at first, but now I can see that she's right," Lucien confided. "My mother is one of those people who has always had unrealistic expectations. She really believed she was going to be the next Michelangelo. I hope your father realizes that she's *never* going to choose a headstone. No epitaph is *ever* going to be good enough for her."

"Papa will convince her to buy *something*," I answered. "He always does."

"We'll see," said Lucien—less invested than I was. "Say, do you want to go for a swim?"

"I don't have a bathing suit."

"You don't need one. I'm blind, remember? What am I going to see?"

"But your neighbors . . . ?"

"Trust me, nobody is paying attention," said Lucien.

So I removed the pleated jade skirt, and the collared cotton blouse, and the prickly nylon tights, and folded them neatly on the chaise longue. Then I dove into the water, wearing only my underwear, as unlike a Girl Scout as anyone has ever been.

I WAS OVERJOYED TO LEARN that we would be returning to Scarsdale for a third time the following Saturday, that Delia Braithwaite hadn't been able—or willing—to choose a stone. My mother, needless to say, was far less pleased. When my father first told her, she stormed out into the carving yard, gathered up his favorite set of chisels, and dumped as many implements as she could carry into the murky stew of the nearby duck pond. She'd have done the same with his treasured stencils—a far more expensive tantrum—if Papa hadn't grabbed her by the arm.

"Let go of me!" shouted Mama.

Papa did not let go. "You've got to calm down, Eileen. I'll go phone Delia and tell her we're not coming back, and that will be the end of this."

"You'll do no such thing!"

"Be reasonable. She's expecting us. It's one thing to cancel on her, but I can't just not show up without telling her."

"We're not cancelling," snapped Mama. "I'm going over there *with you*."

She wrested her arm from Papa's grasp and glared at him defiantly.

"That's fine by me," answered Papa—although I could tell that it wasn't. "Now please get a grip on yourself. You're out of control."

"I have every right to be out of control if I want to be," said my mother. "Most women would be out of control *under the circumstances*."

"Good God! There are no circumstances, Eileen. You know that."

"Don't get me upset," answered Mama. "I'm getting into bed, Gordon, and I don't want to hear another word about that woman. *Period*."

Papa spent the remainder of the evening recovering his missing equipment, wading into the stagnant water in his fishing boots and retrieving the chisels one by one. By midnight—when he finally gave up for the day—he'd recovered eight out of nine. Any sane person would have quit at that point, willing to swallow the loss of a ten-dollar carving tool. But Papa kept at it for the next six evenings, leaving the dinner table before dessert and working into the early hours of the morning. Several nights he dragged me with him to hold the flashlight. Once, he even recruited Katie's hoodlum boyfriend to help him sweep the area with a heavy-duty net. Nothing. On the final night of our futile search, Papa explained his determination. "That was your grandfather's chisel," he told me. "I was a hoping it would be *your* chisel someday."

My first reaction was surprise—then anger. How could he possibly have thought that I wanted to sell tombstones for a living? The only constraint that kept me from setting that hideous Girl Scout uniform on fire immediately was the fear that he wouldn't let me accompany him to visit Delia and Lucien. Never had it crossed my mind that I would stay in the monument

business any longer than Annie or Katie. But as soon as Papa planted the idea in my head, the path toward running the monument shop became increasingly clear. That was the obvious trajectory of my future life—not a life of ease and luxury in Lucien's strong arms. My father had been planning for the shop to stay in the family all along, much as he'd anticipated how Mama would ultimately handle her encounter with Delia. That explained the relaxed smile on his face the next Saturday as he prepared for our next drive up to Westchester.

"I'll bring the car around, Eileen," he said casually, twirling his keys around his thumb. "Can you please help Natalie with the sample cases?"

"I'm not going," Mama announced. Her voice was lethal with venom. "I don't owe it to that odious woman to take time out of my busy day to sell her a headstone. But let me make this clear, Gordon Luftig. This is the *last* time that you're going over there. *The last!* If you go over again, you'll come home to an empty house."

WHEN DELIA BRAITHWAITE GREETED US that third Saturday, she made no pretense of wanting me to accompany my father and her into the parlor. "Be a dear, Natasha," she said, "and go keep Lucien company. He's upstairs, somewhere. You'll find him." At that moment, I swear I could have fallen to my knees and kissed the woman's slippers. I still despised her—for calling me by the wrong name, for flirting with Papa—but I was grateful nonetheless. I glanced quickly toward my father for permission, and then abandoned the pair of them in the entryway.

The upstairs foyer was as elegant as its downstairs counterpart, but less coherent. The walls were lined with African tribal masks, and framed eighteenth century maps, and two massive surrealist canvases signed *Joan Miró*. Several free-standing nudes, clearly more Delia Braithwaite originals, cuddled in various corners. I heard music drifting from the far end of the hallway—Van Morrison's "Brown Eyed Girl"—and I followed it to a closed door. I drew the deepest breath that I've ever taken. Then I knocked.

"Come in!"

I opened the door. The room was three times the size of my own bedroom, a giant rectangle cluttered with ski equipment and free weights. A state-of-the-art sound system covered nearly an entire wall, while a second housed honeycombs of CDs. Lucien lay sprawled out on his queen-sized bed, shirtless, his arms splayed and his knees drawn up.

"It's Natalie," I said.

"I know," answered Lucien. "Same shampoo."

I crossed the room rapidly and sat down at the foot of the bed. This would be my last chance to spend time with Lucien, I realized—unless I did something drastic. And that was *exactly* what I intended to do. I knew deep down that I didn't have half a prayer of winning over a handsome high school senior with a college girlfriend—one who believed that I was an eleven-year-old Girl Scout—but I was going to do my damndest to try. I inched my way along the mattress until my hip was nearly touching Lucien's ear.

"I like you," I said—trying to keep my voice as steady as possible.

"Okay," said Lucien. "I like you too."

"I mean I like you *like a boyfriend*," I said.

I'd done it. I'd set myself up for Lucien to reject me, for yet another confirmation that I was thoroughly unlovable. Instead—to my amazement—my teenage dreamboat reached his arm across my waist, drawing my chest to his head. Seconds later, his lips were pressed to mine and his fingers were fumbling with the buttons of my uniform vest. Nothing in my romance novels had prepared me for the tingle of flesh upon flesh, the pleasure of Lucien's body braced gently above mine. That was when I started to hate him.

Maybe it was because he already had a girlfriend in Colorado—because he was cheating on her, just as Henry had cheated on Delia. Maybe it was because he thought I was only eleven and not caring. Or maybe Lucien's greatest sin was being blind—liking me for who I was, rather than finding me physically alluring.

So I let him finish. I let him do whatever he wanted, making no effort to stop him. And when he was done, I squeezed back into the

jade skirt and collared cotton shirt, leaving the nylon tights bundled in a ball on the bedspread.

"Where are you going?" demanded Lucien.

I didn't answer. I slipped into the hallway, indifferent, letting him pepper the empty gray room with his questions.

On the way down to the white parlor, I took the stairs two at a time. My trefoil pin fell off and clattered against the landing, but I made no effort to recover it. I'd already decided that this was the last time that I would ever wear a Girl Scout uniform. If my father was going to stick to his business model, he was going to have to find another accomplice. I was *never* going to sell tombstones door-to-door again! I might have told my father as much in front of Delia, if her shouting hadn't stopped me short.

"What do you want me to say, Gordon? I was wrong," declared our hostess. "It has taken me thirty years to admit it to myself, but that doesn't make it any less true. If I'd found a way to keep you in Copenhagen, my life wouldn't be such a mess. Everything since then has been a *waste*. Except Lucien. I do love Lucien. But all the rest has been a *colossal waste*."

"You don't mean that," answered my father. "Any of that."

I tiptoed toward the parlor, pausing just before the open door. I could see the pair of them reflected in mirrored windows of the Louis XV armoire. They sat side-by-side on the sofa, Delia clutching my father's hairy forearm with both hands.

"You feel the same way, Gordon," said Delia. "There's no point in lying about it. I know you do. Why else would you drive out here *again and again*?"

"To sell you a headstone," said my father.

He did not sound like a man who believed what he was saying. When Delia started sobbing, he wrapped his arm around her shoulder and let her cry.

"It's okay," he said softly. "It's all going to be okay."

Delia broke away from his embrace.

"Bullshit. It's not going to be okay . . . And you know you feel the same way I do, Gordon. You're

just afraid to admit it. Like hell, you're trying to sell me a headstone. That daughter of yours isn't even a Girl Scout."

"I realize you're upset, but—"

"Don't lie to me, Gordon. She's not a Scout. Scouts don't salute with their left hands."

Papa nodded. "Natalie is not a Girl Scout," he conceded.

"You're in love with me, Gordon. I know you are!" Delia's voice was desperate now, devoid of any vestige of control. "Stop lying to yourself—lying to *everyone*—and at least have the decency to admit that I'm right. You're still in love with me . . . and I am going to die."

Delia Braithwaite's voice choked up as she acknowledged her impending mortality, and Papa waited patiently for all the tears to drain out of her. He didn't say another word until she'd dried her eyes on a tissue and stanchied her streaming makeup.

"So?" she asked. "I trust you, Gordon. I think you might be the only person left in the world

who I really trust. So please tell me. What should I do now?"

Papa took her hand in his and leaned forward, as though he might kiss her. His entire body was trembling, and he wore an expression of suppressed pain—as though he'd stepped on a nail but was unwilling to scream. "I think you should talk this over with your husband," he said softly. "Our best package is a 'his-and-hers' special. You place both epitaphs on one long stone when the first spouse passes, and then later all you do is carve in the surviving partner's dates." My father's tone shifted slowly from intimate, to *false* intimate—the voice he used to clinch the bargain with his other customers. "It's the best way to go about matters, particularly if you have children. Everything is taken care of in advance. Far less strain on them." Papa patted the back of Delia Braithwaite's hand. "It's the arrangement I have with my own wife," he added, a reassuring smile taking hold of his lips. "Honestly, it's the most reasonable deal around." ■

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