

THE BEAUTIFUL EVIL

A novel by

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*One thing that comes out in myths is that at the bottom of the abyss comes the voice of salvation.
The black moment is the moment when the real message of transformation is going to come. At
the darkest moment comes the light.*

Joseph Campbell

Chapter 1

If I had trusted my intuition, I would have said no. My father died in that curse-laden city when I was five. The subsequent scandal left my mother, Madeline, paralyzed with anguish.

Madeline retreated to her bedroom and remained a recluse for weeks. Loretta, our housekeeper, took charge, staying with us both night and day.

“Is Mommy coming back?” I asked Loretta.

As much as I loved Madeline, having Loretta as a caretaker offered breathing space from an otherwise stifling environment. She cooked my favorite foods, let me pick what to wear, and didn't make me practice ballet.

“Your mama needs alone time,” Loretta said as she knelt beside me. “But don't you worry. She'll be back.”

“Is she in her room because Daddy went to heaven?”

She nodded and touched my cheek.

“Is she going to go to heaven soon?” As terrible as that would be, I *did* like Loretta.

When Madeline emerged from seclusion, she looked broken and afraid. She tore through closets and drawers, leaving piles of clothes in her wake. Sofa and chair cushions were shredded, mattresses were slit open, and Daddy's things were either donated or burned.

“Did he take it with him when he left?” she would mumble to herself. “Did he?”

She charged through the house—searching, digging, ripping—and eventually replaced the pictures, the furniture, the rugs, the mirrors... just about everything.

Or was that memory just a dream? I asked Loretta a few years later. All she did was shake her head. “My goodness, child, who can remember that far back?”

Madeline revealed few details about Daddy, even fewer about his death. Consequently, I became an expert snoop. The information I gathered was a result of my tireless detective skills.

Tucked between mattress and box spring, Madeline had hidden a journal. She had written a single entry: “Chicago lures sinners, exposes them, and leaves them on the streets to die. Albert, what have you done to us?”

I was too young to understand what she meant. I understand now.

For many years, Madeline warned me to avoid Chicago. “Evil prowls the streets. A demon will dig into your back and never let go.” I asked her to explain what she meant. Instead of an answer, she reprimanded me for analyzing “every single thing.”

If Chicago was a vortex for evil or if its punishing nature cursed sinners, it didn't concern me. I wasn't ill-fated. I had a good heart. A trip to Chicago, under the right circumstances, might be enjoyable.

This upcoming trip would not be pleasant. The looming social events, that's what had me unnerved. *The wives will meet at the Chicago Club*—a clever idea by the CEOs. Sam's

response? “Constance will be thrilled.” Sam knew my anxiety issues and was aware of my insecurities—even so, without consulting me, Sam had said I’d be thrilled to attend.

For three days, I said affirmations to bolster my determination: “I will tell Sam that I’m not going to Chicago. I will stand up to Sam and tell him no.” I repeated these declarations even though there was no question if I would accompany him.

Not only was Sam spoiled, he was relentless. If he wanted me to go, he’d nag me until I acquiesced. When it came to our relationship, Sam was the hawk and I, a single feather.

The brunch? Exactly as I’d imagined. Sparkling wives—laughing, smiling, chatting about their jobs, their children.

“Oh, Constance,” Florence Tyler said with a big, fake smile. “You’re smart. You’ve waited to have children. I envy the free time you have.”

Wife of Mr. CEO. Was she mocking me? I had difficulty grasping the underlying sentiment when people spoke to me. According to Sam, I should watch their face and body language for nuances. Unfortunately, his suggestion was problematic. I didn’t value my own interpretations and always suspected the worst.

Florence reminded me of Madeline. She had the same condescending tone. Like Madeline, Florence said one thing but meant another. She smiled as she spoke but the undercurrent in her voice, unmistakable.

“I spend time volunteering several days a week,” I blurted. “I care for three older women. Take them to the grocery store, help them with their errands. We play games, go to bingo ...”

And I had been a volunteer ... about six or seven years ago, a minor detail I chose to omit.

“I’ve always believed in the importance of contributing to my community.” I sounded like Ms. Ohio answering some idiotic question to win the crown.

“Oh really, Constance, that’s wonderful,” a blonde-haired woman with a bad facelift replied. “How did you find these women? Through a volunteer center?”

“Through our synagogue,” I said, aware that a gaggle of non-Jews surrounded me.

“Through your synagogue? My, you don’t look Jewish,” Florence said, her anti-Semitism ringing loud and clear.

“No, but *you* certainly do,” I quipped. “Some people, you can just tell. My husband is Jewish and mentioned you were as well.”

“I am *not* Jewish,” she said emphatically.

“Hmmm. Okay, sure.” I nodded my head and shot a quick she’s-a-liar wink to the rest of the table.

When I married Sam, I didn't convert to Judaism. I didn't need to—I was an honorary Jew. That's what Sam's mother said, and she was an authority.

“I’m an attorney with Baker, Baker, and Windham,” Florence announced, glaring at me. Did she expect me to oo and ah?

Florence had barely touched her food, although she had several mimosas under her belt. She wore a snappy attorney suit accessorized with her air of superiority. Like any of us cared what she did. I could have been a lawyer. I could have sat on the Supreme Court if I had wanted to.

“It's okay to be Jewish; most attorneys are,” I whispered loud enough to be heard. Not a drinker, the half-glass of champagne I'd drunk had temporarily given me *chutzpah*.

Florence turned away, flashing pictures of children with five-foot long front teeth. The nagging, the chauffeuring, the orthodontist bills—I could have had children if I’d wanted them. I’d made a choice. A deliberate choice.

As she bragged, I smiled and reached for more muffins. The strawberries were plump and ripe. The pancakes, yummy. *Sam Jacobson's wife was a peculiar woman with a hefty appetite—* I'm certain that was the topic while I was in the restroom, gasping for air.

After the brunch, we loaded onto tour buses and spent the day at the Field Museum of Natural History. We saw a film about the future National Hellenic Museum. Celebrating Greek history, culture, and art from ancient times to today, the museum was to open late fall of 2011.

At the dinner party, Sam coerced me into singing a karaoke song. "Ben and Florence Tyler sang, and we will, too," Sam said, situating me center stage.

No question they watched with interest as Sam Jacobson and his wife sang, "Stop in the Name of Love." Sam was Diana Ross on a bad day. I was his backup, The Supremes. With one step right and clap, one step left and clap, I shifted back and forth like an arthritic senior in a line dance.

At thirty-two, I was a casualty of my childhood. If I had more faith in myself, I would have belted out Madonna's "Like A Virgin" solo and stolen the show. Unfortunately, self-confidence was not my strong point.

During my formative years, it was imperative that Madeline's high-society friends accepted her as an equal. Because I was a reflection of her, as Madeline often said, it was her responsibility to select my clothes, my activities, and my companions.

Sculpting me into a debutante was her ultimate goal. By age seven, I understood the social graces of the upper class. I spoke French fluently by eight. While other children played outside, I studied piano. As if I were a Barbie doll, my mother created my thoughts and opinions.

Back in the hotel room and preparing for bed, Sam insisted we watch *Criminal Minds*. I tend to have realistic dreams and avoided stories about serial killers before sleep. Instead, I

viewed gorgeous photographs in a newly purchased book on ancient Greece. Before long, I drifted into a dream...

Wearing a tunic and an outer cloak, I sit in a small boat. The night air is unpleasantly cold. A rough, unkempt seaman holds his ferryman's pole. We float across the River Styx. A coin for passage leaks a metallic taste in my mouth.

The ferryman points to a castle in the far distance. "The king looks forward to your arrival."

"Me? Why would the king be interested in me?"

The ferryman eyes me suspiciously. "Have you forgotten? The king is your father."

"I'm going to see Daddy?" I jump up, and the boat rocks precariously. The coin falls from my mouth and vanishes in the murky river.

"Sit down or I'll throw you off." The ferryman's voice is gruff.

Back on the bench, I say nothing.

"For the sake of your soul, do you have another coin? You must have the fare or I head for the riverbank."

"Please, take me to the castle. I promise Daddy will pay once I arrive."

"Not according to Madeline," he says and rows the boat toward shore.

When the alarm blared, Sam was already on the floor. Three hundred sit-ups. One remark by Frank at the office—*Put on a couple of pounds, Sam?*—and since then, Sam exercised daily.

Good for him. I stayed in bed reviewing yesterday's brunch. A lusterless rock wedged between diamonds, I'd sat at the table heaping whipped cream on muffins.

How many had I stuffed in my mouth? Three? Four? It was hazy. I fell into a trance when uncertain or ill at ease. The brunch, a perfect example.

Today was Thursday. The twenty-four-hour Road Runner respective was on the cartoon channel back home and I was trapped in Chicago. *The wives can meet at the club* and Sam had said I'd be thrilled.

As usual, Sam's schedule trumped mine. Last month, without warning, he changed his office hours. Before the shift, Sam was out the door by seven and home by five thirty. That schedule suited me—no interference with my daily agenda. As the front door closed, I'd pour a bowl of Frosted Flakes and start the day with cartoons.

Eight fifteen. What kind of hour was that to leave for the office? It was a fiasco—setting the recorder like a common thief, using espionage to keep Sam from noticing the blaring red, record light.

“What are you recording this early in the morning?”

Oh yes, I could imagine that conversation. What could I have said? Magilla Gorilla?

As Sam did his sit-ups, I stepped over him in a blubbery heap.

“Goddamn it, Constance! Two hundred-one. Two hundred-two. Step back over me, you know I'm superstitious,” Sam snapped between huffs.

Stepping over Sam without stepping back meant he wouldn't grow anymore. I discussed this with Sam's mom, an expert on superstitions. She'd said this particular superstition only applied to children. Even so, Sam refused to take a chance.

I waddled around him, yesterday's whipped-cream jiggling in my thighs. Squish with one step, squash with the next. And Sam—*two hundred-eight, two hundred-nine*—curled up and down on the hotel room floor.

The full-length mirror had no mercy. Was it a fat mirror or a thin mirror? At the Kenwood Mall in Cincinnati, in fact in other malls as well, the best mirrors, the ones that made you look thin, were in Macy's. Women drove to Macy's just to make themselves feel better. No matter the distance, the Macy's mirror was worth the trip. This was not a Macy's mirror, and I looked huge.

"Do I look fat?"

"Nope," Sam huffed.

"I look like a five-foot-five-inch sausage."

Why was I distracted and unaware of the amount I stuffed into my mouth? I had asked Sam to check if there were any superstitions to control eating, but as far as he and his mother knew, there weren't.

If I focused on my eating habits, self-hatred scratched at my psyche like a vampire outside a bedroom window. Hungry. Desperate. Awaiting the slightest breach. I used my ability to numb and an occasional Ativan or two to boost my resolve.

"A size eight isn't fat," Sam said. Breath. Huff. Breath. Huff. "You've got that body dysmorphia thing."

"I do not! The size on the tag is a lie. Clothing companies play games. The more expensive an item is, the smaller the size. When women feel good about themselves, they buy more clothes. At Chanel, I wear an eight. At Target, a ten." I turned for a side view of myself. A mistake. "Except, of course, Victoria's Secret, where the more you spend, the bigger the boobs."

"You look great," he said, not hiding his irritation. Two hundred-thirty, thirty-one. But if you're not happy with yourself, exercise more."

"So you're saying I'm fat! I knew it!"

In the mirror, I suddenly inflated to blimp size with my face stretched across the top.

I had a complicated relationship with mirrors. As much as I preferred not to see myself, I felt compelled to peek whenever I saw one. I'd see my reflection and, disappointed, turn away. Nevertheless, I always checked just to be sure. I lost my best friend, Rose, to a mirror, and maybe, one day, she'd return.

From the time we were married, Sam constantly jabbered about having babies. I tried to accommodate him—in my own way. One unfortunate miscarriage followed the next. Eventually, he stopped talking about it, which was fine with me.

Sometimes a woman has no choice but to pretend. Pretend pregnancies. Pretend miscarriages. Pretend grief. Madeline convinced me that pregnancy was the first crack in the marital cement. “The huge belly, the scars,” she'd said. “I can only imagine if I had nursed you! Well, it's too much for most men to bear. Before long, a husband strays.”

It's not that I didn't want children. I desperately did. But the prospect of losing Sam was too much to bear. Was it because of me that Daddy left Madeline? Imprisoned by Madeline's caveat, I secretly used birth control. My marriage supposedly was secure, but *I* felt wrung dry.

Having a fake miscarriage every so often kept our marriage balanced—made sense of our childlessness. It was the *real* pregnancy and the subsequent loss of the baby that tested our commitment.

Months after our loss, Sam took the initiative by showing concern for me. “You've become a loner,” he'd said one evening, interrupting our usual silence.

“Are you worried that I have an arsenal of guns, as well?”

“Ha, fucking, ha.” His slow clap had been deliberate. “You know what I'm saying. You need to get out. Try something new.”

“This is who I am now. I’d rather be at home. Why can't you just accept that?”

The one person who appreciated authenticity was Daddy, and he was in heaven. “Burning in hell,” Madeline would argue.

“He's in heaven,” I'd screamed when she wasn't around. “Asking God to rescue me.”

Sam’s mother had confided that although they made the best husbands, Jewish men had three flaws. They were bad handymen, good hypochondriacs, and hopelessly spoiled.

When I spoke to Sam's mother about his request, she suggested placating Sam. “He was a pampered child. He'll *nudge* you until getting out looks good.”

And who knew? Maybe they were right. Maybe I needed to try something new. So for Sam’s sake and my sanity, I tried.

I started with a Chinese cooking class, Tuesdays and Thursdays. I liked it—I did. However, it was a short-lived adventure. While the rest of the class mastered the appetizers, egg rolls, and pot stickers, I learned what happened when an egg roll explodes. They made pot stickers. I made miniature Chinese hockey pucks.

Knitting class wasn’t much better. Photography? Not so great.

In spite of that, one day, I found my niche. With uncertainty developing in Sam’s position at work, we had to let our housekeeper, Tilly, go—*tightening our belts*, as Sam so elegantly put it. Since I had no professional skills, by a vote of one to nothing, I was elected household manager.

Not eager to start, I procrastinated until Sam spotted a splotch of dried spaghetti sauce on the kitchen floor.

“Jesus, Constance, we had spaghetti three weeks ago.”

“Lighten up, Sam. It's only been two.” I thought I was funny. Sam, on the other hand, failed to see the humor.

“It's disgusting,” he snapped.

“Let's get a pet,” I laughed. “It will clean any spill in three licks.”

“I'm serious. Dried food on the floor for weeks isn't funny.”

“No, absolutely not.” I tried to sound solemn. “Point taken.”

Without much choice, I had to mop the kitchen floor. Yes, I spilled the bucket of water and okay, I slipped, skidded, and dropped to the floor with a hard smack. Once the white stars vanished, I saw plenty of dirt marks the mop hadn't removed.

Wanting to impress Sam just enough to get him off my back, I scrapped the smudges with a knife. It seemed like a good idea at the time. It took an extra hour to get the job done. The good news? All the marks were gone. The bad? Twenty-three Italian ceramic tiles had to be replaced.

“It would have been cheaper to have kept Tilly,” Sam muttered.

“Let's get her back,” I replied, not blinking an eye.

“No, Con. Take the time to read the labels, don't veer from the directions, and you'll do fine.”

Was Sam being sarcastic? *Take the time to read the labels.* I studied his face and tried to interpret his expression. Did everyone have as much trouble figuring out what people *really* meant?

“Ah, read the directions. Brilliant.” I was sarcastic and hoped he knew it.

Here's the real issue. Where in the directions were specifics on cleaning techniques? Precautions, yes. Do not swallow. Keep out of eyes. But important rules like don't scrape the floor with a knife? None.

There were cooking shows, building shows—a TV show for everything. It made sense that I'd find a housekeeping show. Day two, while flipping through the channels, everything changed.

The Road Runner.

Have a predicament with someone? Paint a door on a mountainside, and splat, a black silhouette is all that remained. Mop in hand, I stood there, intoxicated by cartoon problem-solving techniques. Bugs Bunny. Ricochet Rabbit. Straight through to noon, cartoons.

A schedule developed. A bowl of cereal. Every half-hour, fabulous cartoon shows. I even saw Heckle and Jeckle a time or two. Exercise. Shower and lunch. Heavens to Murgatroyd, Snugglepuss. Tom and Jerry and all the classics joined me while I straightened the house.

Even though I was accompanied by my cartoon friends, it didn't take long to realize that being the household-manager-elect was not my milieu. I lost interest on day three when, overwhelmed with boredom, I quit cleaning midway through making the bed.

I began to cut corners. I dusted Sam's hangouts, vacuumed the rugs, wiped the mirrors, and washed clothes. And yes, they were serious about washing with like colors.

Eventually, Tilly would be back—she'd have to be—and she'd take care of the rest. And Sam? Whether he noticed or not, I didn't care.

Every day, I kept the same routine. My cereal, my shows, and bingo, I had a schedule—somewhere I was expected to be at a certain time. The cartoons depended on me as much as I did them.

As I awoke in the hotel room in Chicago, I felt unsettled and downhearted. What would I do without my cartoons?

Chapter 2

When I look back now, I'm certain that everything was part of her overall plan. The edginess. The burning curiosity.

"You're going out alone?" Sam sat on the edge of the hotel's king bed, polishing his shoes to a black sheen.

"I thought I'd get some air."

I knew how uncharacteristic this sounded. I'm not one who takes to new adventures, especially in the streets of a black-hearted city like Chicago. But an invisible energy nipped at me like a relentless puppy. *Let's go out. Let's go out. Let's go out.*

Sam looked up from his shoe. "In downtown Chicago, by yourself?"

“I’m working on my anxiety issues,” I said, aware that this was the first thing that popped in my mind—and nothing more.

The ring of Sam’s cell phone broke his concentration from his shoe. Thank God. His relentless polishing was maddening.

“Sam Jacobson here.” He glanced at me and lowered his voice. I pretended to look in the mirror but watched him move to the window.

“Yeah, yeah ...” He walked behind me into the bathroom and locked the door. I tiptoed to the door and strained to hear.

“Okay, Saturday. That late, huh? Tricky but doable. Sure. Good. Yeah, yeah. You, too.”

A quiet rustling and Sam sniffed a time or two. He had recently developed allergies and often complained about his runny or stuffed nose.

“He’s a hypochondriac,” is what Sam’s mother often said. “They all are.”

The toilet flushed. I hurried back to the mirror and grabbed a tube of lipstick. I added more blush. Trying to avoid the fact that I looked stuffed into my tailored pants, I concentrated on my reflection from the neck up.

Sam was back on the bed, his shoe in hand. A month or so ago, he would have put down the shoe, walked over to me, and whispered, “I love those curves.” But today, he was a thousand miles away.

“Business?” I asked nonchalantly. He didn’t like meddling.

“What else would it be?”

“Why talk in the bathroom?”

“Jesus, I peed.” Almost obsessively, he zoomed the brush back and forth across the black leather. “What, you don’t trust me now?”

“I just wondered ...”

We both knew he hadn’t peed, and that was that.

After the pregnancy incident, Sam and I had made an amnesty pact. No secrets. No lies. Obviously, something was up, and his reneging on our pact infuriated me. Did he take me for an idiot? Well, he was wrong. Sam wasn’t a multitasker. Pee and hold the phone simultaneously? Not Sam.

“You’re going to start a fire on that shoe.” My teeth were clenched.

Sam stopped, glared at me, and put on his shoes. He tapped a pen on the nightstand, clicked the TV on then off, got up, and walked to the window. After a glance, he closed the blinds and returned to the bed. Tap, tap, tapping again.

“About your walk.” Sam clicked the pen. Ready to write. *Click*. Not ready to write. *Click*. Ready to write. *Click*. Not. “Window shop if you want but don’t come back with something you had to have.”

“Not even a trinket?” I faked a pout.

“Don’t start with me.” *Click. Click*. “It’s not like it used to be. You see. You want. You buy. I’m working my ass off to keep a roof over our heads.”

I wanted to fly across the room, grab the pen, and stomp it into bits.

Sam put on his sport coat, checked his watch, walked to the window and back to the bed. What was with him these days? Not like it used to be? It hadn’t been like it used to be for a while. Those days when Sam adored me. Those days when his affection was strong.

Was this unexpected company merger worrying him? Usually unaffected by job stress, lately he was antsy and confrontational. The pacing—new. The quick rise to anger—new. Peeing while he held a phone—new.

Sam rambled on about the shopping restrictions. Not paying attention, I nodded in agreement. Didn't he realize that I had more complicated things to consider? This new lip color—was it too red?

“Constance? Are you listening to me?”

Suffocated by the thick scent of his cologne, the impulse to run to the window and stick my head out was strong.

“Are you, Constance?”

“Hmmm?”

“Are you listening?”

“Oh, yes. Absolutely,” I said, blotting my lips. Nice color, *Sunset Red*. It looked fabulous.

Chapter 3

As if someone had moved me from Park Place to Boardwalk on a Monopoly board, one roll of the dice and I landed on the corner of Michigan Ave and Oak, Chicago's shopping district.

The sky was overcast, with occasional spurts of sun. The breeze held no chill. People strolled from store to store. Street workers shouted orders. Everyone moved with purpose. These were people with somewhere to go—and today, I was one of them.

I was far from the hotel when I noticed storm clouds heading toward downtown. Like hungry predators, they consumed the last of the gray sky. Crinkled leaves rode gusts of wind. A storm was brewing; the rain-scented air guaranteed that. Distant thunder growled, each time deeper and angrier. Sporadic lightning flashed.

Trains on elevated tracks added their grumbling to the oncoming storm. Taxis wrestled each other for fares. Tourists anxious to avoid the storm climbed onto trolleys.

I should have turned back then, before the storm, before the trouble, but instead I hurried halfway down an otherwise desolate alley to the shelter of a canopy.

Why I didn't grab a cab, I'm not sure. Perhaps, trapped by the rain, unable to get back to the hotel on time, wasn't a bad thing.

"You're late," Sam would say.

"It's not my fault. I was trapped by the storm," I'd reply.

A way to annoy Sam without taking the blame. The idea evoked giddy pleasure. If my schedule had to be disrupted, why not his?

A victory is a victory, no matter how small. Classic Madeline.

I glanced at my watch. Tightened the sash on my jacket. If I was angry, why didn't I just tell him? Why aggravate him—especially since his reactions were impossible to gauge? Yet today, for the first time, the thought of a thorn in Sam's side delighted me.

Contradictions like this often plagued me.

Thick, singular drops of rain haphazardly sliced the humidity. The drops came faster. Too late, I was stuck. I giggled nervously, tucked my hands into my jacket, and glanced in the storefront window. An arc of black letters spelled *Curios* across the glass.

In the center of the display, under the light of a bare, yellow bulb, sat a mannequin dressed like a gypsy. A tattered, embroidered tapestry stretched unevenly behind her. Flashy scarves hung on the sidewalls.

The floor was a mishmash of junk. Shoes looked stepped in and tossed aside. A broken caboose lay near an old train set. A pair of bronzed baby boots. Dulled rhinestone jewelry.

The clutter in the window made me nervous—would make anyone nervous. I rechecked my watch, loosened and retied my sash. Perhaps it was best to head back to the hotel. Sam was under pressure. I should be sympathetic.

You make a big production out of small things. That's what Mother always said. Or was it Sam?

The storm had stepped up. The wind whipped rain in all directions. If I ran to the corner, could I catch a taxi without staining my shoes? Splotched Guccis? The thought appalled me.

I blamed Sam. I'd be out of the rain, watching *The Retrospective* this minute if it hadn't been for him. He strong-armed me into this Chicago trip, and now, if I was late, it was his fault.

On impulse, I wheeled around and peered into the window. As if someone had pulled the tapestry aside and let it drop, it swung slightly. A sales-hungry shopkeeper peeking out the window? Had he felt me as I had felt him?

And that mannequin—whose idea was it to put a gypsy in the middle of all that junk? Seated at a small, brocade-covered table, the gypsy's dark, daring eyes followed me. Red lipstick glimmered on her thin lips. Around her shiny, black wig, a sequined gold scarf sparkled. Gold hoops hung from her ears and chains of charms from her neck.

A hazy memory: the booth in the back of the old movie theater. Oh the excitement! The flashing colored lights! The choppy movements of the mechanical gypsy each time a lucky child put a quarter in the slot.

Standing like a little lady, I had politely asked, "Mother, can I please have a quarter for the gypsy?"

"Mother, *may* I please." Madeline's pronunciation of the word *may* was exaggerated. "When you speak properly and stand with nice posture, people will be more inclined. Did you

notice the word I used, *inclined*? Do you see how it adds flavor to the sentence? People will be more inclined to respond in a positive way. *Can* was the wrong word, wasn't it, sweetie?"

"Yes," I'd mumbled. "Mother, may I please."

"Connie-con, sometimes you do things on purpose to make Mother unhappy, don't you?"

"No," I said. I knew where this conversation was heading and held back my tears.

She lowered herself to my eight-year-old height and looked me square in the eye. "Did you say *can* on purpose?" her eyes as kind as a rabid dog's. "Say it merely to displease me?"

"No!" I blurted. My hands automatically tighten into fists. Digging my nails into my palms soothed me.

She often accused me of what she called "having ideas," trying to control her with childish games. I thought she was wrong but questioned myself constantly.

"Well, I think you did, and therefore am not inclined to give you a coin!"

Madeline's veto had stung then, and in an odd way, still did. No matter how far from her I fled, she had a gift for assaulting my thoughts.

Regardless of the distance, a mother stays with her daughter. One day, you'll realize this, and you'll come home. Madeline's foreboding hung like an albatross.

For God's sake, leave me alone.

The overhead awning flapped viciously. The Open sign swung like a drunk trapeze artist. A streak of lightning snapped and thunder pounded. Within seconds, rain overtook the alley in thick sheets.

The wind sprayed a mixture of rain and grime onto my shoes. If this kept up, they'd be ruined. Water-repellent shoes, the warranty had boasted. Guaranteed not to stain. Oh yes,

designers make plenty of claims, but when it came right down to it, no one could be trusted, not even Gucci.

I raised my collar and peered down the narrow alley.

Unsettled weather, an ill-kept street. Why had I ventured this far?

I sensed someone watching me and spun to look in the window. This time, the tapestry swung recklessly. Why didn't he just open the door and beg me to come in? I had disappointing news for him. No sale today.

My attention drifted from the makeshift curtain to the gypsy. Had her hands always been on the table? And the vase between them, I was certain that wasn't there a minute ago.

The shopkeeper must have put the vase onto the table. I'd underestimated him. It was a clever move; after all, the vase did draw the eye.

In one of Bugs Bunny's madcap cartoons, he'd found a small oil lamp in a cave. He removed its lid and out popped a carrot-laden genie. *What's up, Doc?* To a genie locked away for centuries, *that's* what Bug's said. The thought made me smile and then instantly pout.

The Retrospective.

My intent was to shove away my frustration, but when I looked back at the vase, I fell into its hypnotic pull. All morning, in store after store, I exercised remarkable control. Channel's Coco Mademoiselle had a new body moisturizing spray. The Michael Kor's gold purse? A must-have. The Elsa Peretti pink pearls in Tiffany's—it was a challenge to turn away. Had I purchased anything? No. As Sam instructed, not one measly purchase.

I had difficulty seeing the vase clearly, what with the dim light, what with the soot-layered window. Yet it had a curious familiarity to it. A vague *déjà vu*.

Over the last few months, I'd become preoccupied with burdensome rituals. Maybe for a week or two, I'd have to check the stove three times before leaving the house. Occasionally, the towels had to be refolded and stacked perfectly before closing the linen closet door. Rituals came, bullied me and vanished. My fascination with this vase—a migratory quirk and nothing more?

I wiped the window with a tissue and pressed my forehead against the glass for a better look. What I saw stunned me. My legs caved. My heartbeat ran rampant. I staggered a few steps back, closed and reopened my eyes repeatedly, and took a second look.

On the vase stood a ferryman. He held a pole in his right hand and received the deceased onto his boat with his left. In one image, the dead crowded his boat. In another, outcasts cried for salvation from the bank. And the images on the other side of the vase? Did the ferryman cross the river with only one passenger? Was the king her father?

I huddled close to the window. Ever since Sam's calm disposition had shifted to temperamental, I'd tucked in my resentments and zipped my mouth. A compliant wife, I did my best to keep the peace.

A purchase today—I might as well spit in Sam's face. He'd be livid. It felt as if I had no choice; my dream proved that. The mystifying vase held me spellbound. And the upcoming reprimand? Well worth it.

I glanced down at my sacrificed shoes and back to the treasure. I came to Chicago and I deserved a present. How long since I'd purchased something special? Didn't that fact alone warrant a gift today? I checked my watch and then pushed my hands back into my pockets.

Don't come back with something that you had to have. First Madeline. Now Sam.

I wrapped my jacket tighter, knotted the sash, and rechecked my watch. Fidgeting, that's what Madeline called it. In my opinion, I simply needed the freedom to move.

It was suddenly quiet. The pouring rain had retreated. A gentle rain tapped lightly on the awning.

If I had turned away then, hurried back to the main street and not looked back ... but to speculate is useless.