

## ***Undertow***

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Emily watched Rob watch Dawn. She'd seen his expression countless times on the faces of other men who'd fallen under Dawn's spell. Dawn's face was flushed with Cabernet and kitchen heat, and her molasses eyes gleamed. A ruby, suspended from a chain around her neck, swayed slightly as she whisked anchovy paste into vinegar. When she stopped to toss a strand of dark brown hair over her shoulder, she glanced up, caught Rob's gaze and smiled.

Emily poured herself a glass of wine and left the kitchen. As she passed the dining room table, she ran her fingers along its smooth grain. She continued into the glass-enclosed living room and sat down on the couch in front of the fireplace.

Emily had watched Dawn perfect her technique for over 30 years. Dawn was nine, Emily eight and a half, when Dawn's family moved into the neighborhood, and Dawn appeared at Emily's front door, inviting her to see *The World of Henry Orient*. Afterwards, they'd acted out scenes from the movie and spent every day for the rest of the summer together, exploring the neighborhood's empty lots and stomping out a clearing in the woods behind the Catholic school for a fort. Dawn insisted on dropping by Shultz's Grocery every few days to pick up supplies—an empty crate or pack of gum—and to fill the middle-aged grocer in about the fort. Emily watched from the caddy aisle, fascinated and repulsed, as Shultz admired the tiny gold chain Dawn wore around her ankle, and affection she'd picked up from a magazine for older girls, and presented her with gifts of Archie comics or wax lips. In emergencies, Dawn kept Schultz occupied while Emily snuck into the back room to relieve herself in the dirty bathroom.

But Rob was Emily's husband, and in the six years that they'd been married, he'd never shown any interest in other women, a fact that Emily should have been grateful for but which, instead, made her think of him as a bit obtuse. It was just after the Fourth of July that she'd first noticed a heightened attentiveness between Rob and Dawn. And then, last month, while Emily, Rob, Dawn, and Dawn's husband, Patrick, were hiking, Rob had taken Dawn's hand to steady her as she stepped onto a jagged rock, and, in the split second that he hesitated before letting go, Emily read longing on her husband's face.

"Hey Em, taste this. You wouldn't even know there were anchovies in it." Rob approached, a shimmering lettuce leaf impaled on his fork.

"I'll wait." Emily was reading on the couch in front of the fire. It was warm for late September but a chill had set in by late afternoon.

"It's really good."

"I said I'd wait," she snapped. She felt him watching her and could tell he was feeling guilty. It was the effect she'd intended, what he deserved, but her

satisfaction didn't last. She didn't know how she wanted Rob to feel and couldn't yet put her finger on what she felt.

It wasn't the first time Dawn had flirted with the man in Emily's life. She'd been doing it since junior high, and as much as it annoyed Emily, she knew it wasn't betrayal as much as a convoluted show of sisterhood. Dawn would focus in on the men, flatter and cajole them into disclosing histories of depression, pending lawsuits or roving eyes, and then, dutifully, return them to Emily with her stamp of approval.

It wasn't just Dawn's looks that attracted men. It was the way she spoke to them at parties, never peering over their shoulders the way other pretty women did, always on the lookout for more promising prospects. She would focus on them, ask about their wives or girlfriends and press for details, which usually produced guilty, exaggerated praise. Her admiration for the absent women was so convincing that the men felt even guiltier for their disingenuousness. It was the way Dawn dressed; the sheer skirts that silhouetted her legs when she stood in front of lights, sweaters with wide necklines that dropped over a bare shoulder, and fitted antique blouses that revealed a crescent of skin on her lower back—clothes that were revealing in ways that seemed accidental but which, in fact, required the careful selection of underwear. Men were moved and aroused by these endearing peeks, which made them think of themselves as sensitive.

Emily was curious why, after all these years, the attraction between her husband and friend had started now. Curiosity was what had earned her two advanced degrees and an assistant professorship in political science by the time she was 35. She was curious about how far things would go, the chain of events an affair would set in motion, and what she would do about it. If Dawn and Rob acted on their attraction, would she and Patrick feel compelled to follow suit so that they could pass the whole thing off as a silly, gutsy, middle-age-defying game that would bind them all closer—that they'd laugh about later?

When Dawn called them to the table, Emily insisted she wasn't hungry.

"I'll supply the dinner music," she added, pulling her guitar out of its case and taking her place by the fire. She had just started Sevillanas when Rob interrupted. He was leaning over her.

"Dawn went to a lot of work. You can eat something," he whispered.

She glanced across the room at Dawn, who was lighting a candle. "I'm not hungry."

"I don't know what this is about, but I wish you'd can it until we get home. You're ruining what would have been a super weekend."

"Am I?" She switched into E7. When had he started saying "super"? It was a jock word: Super Bowl and Super Sunday; a child's word:

supercalifragilistic...how did that go? For Christ's sake, the man was a Fulbright scholar.

She'd met Rob at a faculty dinner party seven years ago. At first, they'd looked away each time their eyes met across the table, but they'd eventually given up and stared openly. He'd leapt out of his chair when she'd excused herself, announcing that she had papers to correct for an early class the next morning. As he walked her to her car, she'd confessed that there were no papers and gave him directions to her house.

They'd been like lovesick teenagers after that first night. It was Emily's first serious relationship, and she'd negotiated deals with herself, promising to put his image out of her mind while she met with students from her Modern Isms class if, in exchange, she let herself think about him in the car on the way home. That was until she locked her keys inside with the engine running.

It was months before she was finally able to focus on her work again, and it came as a happy revelation that she could arouse Rob's passion even as she sat in her bathrobe at her computer, eyes red and squinty, her breath sour with coffee. Her braininess and obsessiveness, which had scared off other men, actually appealed to him.

As Rob turned to go back to the kitchen, Emily noticed a single long brown hair clinging to the back of his sweater sleeve. It looped and jutted off at an angle like obscure scripts.

"That's Soleares, isn't it?" Dawn called out as Rob took his seat.

"Sevillanas," Emily replied. Why did Dawn bother? The two pieces weren't remotely alike, and yet she insisted on showing off the fact that she knew the name of a single flamenco piece. It was the same every time Emily played. *She wants Soleares, I'll give her Soleares*, Emily muttered, stopping abruptly. She sat forward, took a deep breath, and began the ode to loneliness.

But Soleares was lost on the diners, whose conversation erupted into easy laughter every few minutes. Maybe she was making too much of this. Sure, people flirted; they acted on it, or they didn't, and it blew over, or it didn't. And even if it was serious, surely she could figure out how to turn things around. She could play the psychologically evolved wife, accepting of Rob's primal impulses yet firm and direct in mapping out the consequences. She could reinforce her own position—it certainly wouldn't kill her to put a little more effort into her appearance. She could be less selfish. And, if worse came to worse, she could always initiate a face-saving, preemptive affair of her own.

But she'd dismissed all the obvious choices, choosing instead to incubate this *thing* and study it in the open. She'd never been one to shield herself from harsh truths. Even as a little girl, she'd forced herself to look at Bradley Kutchebosky's stitches and at her grandmother's nakedness when her bathrobe slipped open during her annual summer visits. She'd been the one to suggest that the two couples spend a four-day weekend together, she, who'd picked out this dreamy rental home perched on a cliff high above the northern

California coast, a veritable test-tube of infidelity with its fireplace and skylights, its hot tub and private crannies, its scent of salt air and cedar smoke.

After dinner, Rob insisted on doing the dishes. Dawn pranced around him, turning the search for Tupperware into a tipsy arabesque as she dipped and turned, letting her long, herbal-scented hair brush against his arms and hands.

Emily didn't notice Patrick approach and sit down next to her.

"Your playing keeps getting better and better. What was that piece you were just doing?"

"Which one?"

"I don't know how to describe it." He hummed and made wild strumming motions with his right hand.

Seducing Patrick would be a cinch. Of course he adored Dawn, but back before Rob had entered the picture, when Dawn, Patrick and Emily had traveled around Asia together, it had become clear that Patrick was attracted to her too. As Dawn tried on jewelry and chatted with street vendors in Katmandu and Bangkok, he would latch onto Emily or pull her into sidewalk cafés where they would sit knee to knee as she offered up her views on why Marxism had captured the Chinese imagination or how population growth declined as women's literacy rates rose in developing countries. She knew he didn't care about these things, but he'd encouraged her to talk, staring intently at her mouth, her blue-green eyes, and her raised hand as she demonstrated the leveling off of a demographic surge.

"You'll have to do better than that," she said. "I don't know which piece you're talking about."

"What's wrong? You don't seem yourself."

"I'm sorry. I just have things on my mind."

Patrick stared at the fire, expressionless, as he spoke. "Does it have anything to do with the fact that your husband is making moves on my wife?"

Emily flinched. She glanced toward the kitchen, which was separated from the dining room by a half wall. Dawn was sitting on the counter watching Rob scour the sink. She suddenly felt queasy. And angry. Of course it was Rob she should be angry at, but it infuriated her that Patrick would cast Rob as the aggressor. She stifled the urge to defend him.

"Do you want to go for a walk?" Patrick asked.

Her mouth twitched. If she refused, he'd take it as a sign that she was afraid to hear him out. If she went, it would make the *thing* more real.

As they descended the steep winding trail toward the beach, Emily watched the back of Patrick's head, silhouetted in the moonlight. He was saying something about sea lions, and she became aware of the raw, mournful sound off in the distance. Ordinarily, she might have called out to the creatures or commented on how the timbre of their bark compared to that of wind instruments.

But now she just listened, aware of the nerve endings in her lips. It was Patrick who finally spoke.

"Do you think they've slept together?" He stopped and turned toward her. His face looked young and innocent in the soft light. A bulky child.

Emily was thirsty, her throat suddenly so parched she didn't think she could speak.

"They've been getting together without us, Em. I ran into them having coffee, and Dawn admitted it was a regular thing. She says it's innocent, but it's the way they were looking at each other...and why wouldn't she have told me? Did you know?"

"I doubt it's serious," Emily finally managed to get out.

"Why? What makes you so sure?"

"I just can't believe that Rob is serious about...someone else."

"Dawn! You can't believe he'd be serious about Dawn. Is that it?"

"That's not what I meant."

"You've always thought you were superior to Dawn. Deeper or smarter. Dawn's a beautiful woman. A lot of men are jealous of me."

"I'm sure they are, Patrick. Look, I don't want to have this conversation." She started walking again, but he blocked the path. She stepped off the trail to get around him, scratching herself on a bush. She continued walking, picking up the pace.

"Talk to me, damn it!" he shouted after her.

The trail dropped over a hundred feet in sharp switchbacks. Without the benefit of the reflectors on Patrick's sneakers to guide her, she stumbled over rocks and clumps of dried grass. When she got to the beach, she broke into a run.

Rob. Unfaithful. She hadn't really believed it. It was her fascination with what-ifs and what-thens. Sure, things had cooled between them, but what do you expect after nearly six years of marriage? Sometimes now while they made love, her mind would drift to an article she was working on, and she'd make mental notes of leads to track down. If he did have an affair, surely it wouldn't be with Dawn; Patrick was right about that. Rob hadn't even liked Dawn when they first met and couldn't understand why she and Emily were friends.

"After all these years, I never think about it," Emily had explained. "I guess we're like sisters. It doesn't matter with family if you have anything in common or even if you particularly like each other."

Neither woman had many friends. Women distrusted Dawn, and Emily was too preoccupied to keep up her end in relationships. Before Rob, she'd lived by herself, spending most holidays alone on campus because it simply wouldn't occur to her to make plans. It was Dawn who'd kept in touch. When she moved to the Midwest for college, she'd called every weekend, refusing to take Emily's failure to reciprocate personally. She took pride in having a friend whose accomplishments and single-mindedness warranted indulgence. Emily was

working on her dissertation when Dawn called to announce she'd gotten married and was bringing Patrick to meet her before they headed to Asia. Emily forgot to pick them up at the airport as planned, and when they arrived at her apartment by cab, they found her so pale and exhausted that Dawn announced she was coming with them. Emily and Patrick watched silently as Dawn pulled a suitcase out of Emily's closet and started packing.

It was Dawn's loyalty to Emily that first made Rob appreciate Dawn. Later, when Patrick and Dawn moved back to the Bay Area, it was the fact that Dawn was the only one who could get Emily to agree to set aside her work for their weekend escapes. Emily didn't agree actually; she just didn't bother putting up a fight.

So this is how her marriage would end. Her husband in a pissing contest with another man over her oldest friend. It was so hackneyed, so clichéd. Emily continued running despite the tugging in her right calf. If that's what they wanted, they could have each other. All of them. This chumming around was getting on her nerves anyway. It would be a relief to be on her own again. Other people may need to couple up and face life as a team, but not Emily.

Her head pounded and her side ached. When she finally collapsed on the sand, the ground under her started to rotate. She looked up at the sky to steady herself, but instead of the familiar speckled dome, the night sky was ablaze with flickering pinpricks of light, traces of stellar bodies hurling through space at unimaginable speeds. She hugged her knees against her chest and rocked herself, eyes pressed into her knees.

She continued rocking long after the panic subsided, drifting into dreamy nostalgia. It wasn't her past she saw; it was glimpses of lives unlived, images as real as childhood memories. Making her way along a dusty road in a sun-drenched Mexican beach town wearing a gauzy white blouse and flowing skirt. Sipping coffee in a café. Shopping for groceries: a fish, a pastry picked out of a display case with long metal tongs, and a bottle of wine. She's in a hotel room now with magenta walls, unpacking a suitcase and carefully setting the contents on a dark wood dresser. They are a traveler's belongings: a slim volume of poems, sandalwood incense and nylon panties that dry in a flash.

She blinked and sat up. She'd never really given herself to Rob, not completely. She never included him in her fantasy flights and had refused to explain the separate bank account and Spanish classes. She reminded him, not infrequently, that she missed being on her own, missed the nights of being so absorbed in her work that she wouldn't notice what time it was until she saw the flush of daylight at her window, missed the sting of fatigue and exhilaration she'd feel the next day.

She pictured Rob with the expression he wore more and more often lately. He watched her the way a child watches a parent who's had too much to drink, a look that annoyed her and made her pull away. But now, she wanted to

hold him, to press her lips against his forehead, and wipe away the look. She scrambled to her feet, swiped her hands against her jeans, and started back in the direction she'd come from.

But she couldn't find the path. She followed a trail that looked familiar, which ended in overgrown brush. Another circled back to within a few feet of where she'd started. This was ridiculous. It was only a 20-minute walk to the beach. Why hadn't she paid attention?

She followed the first path again, continuing into the brush, batting prickly branches out of her way. The ground got steeper until she had to kick footholds into the sandy earth to keep from slipping backward. She made it to a narrow landing, but there, a few feet in front of her, was a sheer rock wall. The face wasn't that high—15 feet at most—and she'd done some rock climbing in college. She examined the surface the best she could in the dark, noting ledges that could support a foot and ridges to grab onto.

She started cautiously, testing each foothold before entrusting it with her weight. It felt good—the gritty rock in her hands, the moist, musky smell, and the flex and pull of the muscle. She was within a move or two from the top when the jut of rock she was holding pulled out. She fell backwards and let out a scream. When she hit ground, she continued to roll and slide.

Her left knee felt like she was kneeling in shattered glass, her right cheek scorched. She limped toward the water until bubbly foam covered the rubber rims of her tennis shoes and crouched to scoop up handfuls of water to splash on her face. She didn't notice the surf advance. Icy water washed up over her knees, drenching her thighs and crotch.

Disgust swelled within her. The first twinge of loneliness and fear had sent her back toward the cozy, warm comfort of her husband and friends like some heat-seeking homing device. When had she become such a coward, too afraid to look at her life?

She would do it now. She found a sandy log and slumped down next to it. She wouldn't make any decisions; decisions were just delusions of control anyway. She would let the universe reveal its plan for her in the crash of surf. She would ignore the hunger that was rising up in her, the pain and cold too. In the morning, she would know what to do. Perhaps she'd make her way up to the highway, flag down a car, and tell the driver a story that would come to her when the time came. She would borrow change to call her bank and arrange to have her account transferred to a place where she'd begin a new life.

As she listened to the sea lions, she had a sudden impulse to join them on their rock across the water, to tear off her clothes and run into the surf. The shock of cold would set her in motion. She would lunge into the swells, salty foam clinging to her lips and breasts, cutting through the water in delicious, delirious pursuit. She'd never experienced this feeling before, this thirst for pain and exhilaration. Is this what made people slice their wrists or drive off cliffs?

When she reached the rocks, she'd hoist herself up over the sharp, jagged surface and fight for a space among the sea lions.

"My god, what happened to you?"

Emily opened her eyes but the sting forced them shut. She rubbed until she could open them enough to see Dawn's bare feet, the swell of thigh and the fringes of her blue and purple Nepalese shawl.

Emily pulled her knees in to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. "What do you want, Dawn? I came here to be alone."

"Patrick said you were upset." She waited for a reply and finally dropped down next to Emily. "What's the matter, Em? Is it me?"

Emily didn't answer.

"I was hoping you and I would get some time alone this weekend," Dawn continued. "I miss that. It's just that Patrick's going through kind of a clingy period."

"Oh, for Christ's sake," Emily snapped. It was so typical of Dawn to come up with some ridiculous, off-the-wall non sequitur. Pretending that nothing was going on. Emily had a sudden urge to slap her. Or spit. To see, for once, an unrehearsed experience.

"Fuck you."

Dawn blinked and stared at Emily, eyes wide. Emily started back. It was Dawn who finally broke the gaze, looking down at her hands.

"Is this about Rob and me?" Dawn finally whispered. "Patrick has these stupid ideas. What did he say?"

Emily didn't answer.

"I'd never do anything to jeopardize our friendship."

Still no answer.

"You know, Em, when I said I was coming to look for you, Rob told me not to. He said you needed your space. He sounds like a broken record always talking about your space. The man's walking on eggshells."

"And you know what my husband needs!"

"He thinks he's losing you."

"This is so perfect. So like you Dawn. You've always thought you knew what I needed. Now, it's Rob. Well, I don't need your help. Leave me alone."

"Fine." Dawn got up and started walking up the beach.

Emily watched Dawn walk toward the water, turn and head down the beach. The sky was perfectly clear now; the moon and its reflection cast a shimmering gloss over the wet sand. When Dawn passed an embankment, out of sight, Emily sprang to her feet. pain pierced her knee. She plucked the fabric away to ease the pulling. She caught sight of Dawn, whose pace had slowed to accommodate hers, as she started up the path.

Nearly 30 years ago, Emily had followed Dawn along another wooded path. It was the night Emily had decided to spend in the fort. Dawn had pleaded with her to come home and warned her not to eat the berries that Emily insisted



would make a perfectly nutritious dinner despite their bitterness. It was dusk when Dawn finally gave up and ran home, returning half an hour later in the dark with Emily's nearly hysterical mother who unleashed her fear and anger with a slap to Emily's face that left her stunned and silent. As Emily followed them home, the front of her shirt stained with purple vomit, she'd glared at Dawn with hatred and relief.

She followed now, out of habit and instinct. When they got to the house, Dawn would offer to clean and bandage her cuts. She'd swear to any ridiculous explanation Emily came up with to account for her deranged state. With one practiced, disarming look she'd put a stop to Rob and Patrick's questions.

When the house was within sight, Emily stopped and turned around. She strained to hear the sea lions, but they were too far off now, or perhaps, they'd spent the last of their fury and lament. She looked up at the flickering stars, returned now to their normal state, and ran her fingers through her hair. She could still make out the beat of surf. She listened, adjusting her breathing to the gentle rhythm until it was drowned out by a sudden explosion of jazz trumpet, which spilled out of the house. Reluctantly, she turned and followed the music inside.

