

UTAHNA FAITH

ANGELS, FRIENDS, LOVERS

MEET GABRIEL AT THE MANDELA TAVERN, and we drink bushwhackers, those fluffy, creamy concoctions, more dessert than drink. I have not eaten dinner. I poke my tongue into the whipped cream and collect milk-chocolate shavings the color of Gabriel's skin. I've worn my hair up tonight because I know he likes it. He plays with a strand that falls loose over my left eye; it feels good and I try not to notice. My hair is turning golden-pale from the Caribbean sun, and it frightens me.

Blond Jim Morrison walks in. I wave to him, and he joins us. He pretends to be my husband, saying, "Honey, you're out with your lover again." I play along, telling him I am glad he is so understanding. I drape one arm around him and the other around Gabriel. Blond Jim Morrison is small and wiry with wild hair and blue, Northern-European ice eyes like mine, eyes that have warmed and melted only through a triumph of the soul. Gabriel's shoulders under my arm are broad and sturdy. He is taller, stocky, and his eyes, almost black, radiate a warmth he was born with but also had to fight to keep. A security guard approaches us and tells Blond Jim Morrison he must leave because he is not wearing shoes. We would accompany him in protest, but tonight we have planned to be alone.

Gabriel and I talk. We tell one another things we are afraid to tell.

"Adopted...parents...DUI...night in jail..."

“Artist model...curious...girls together...Los Angeles...”

Lips and ears close. A gauze of secrecy falls around us. Sunburnt tourists stare, but we don't mind.

We leave the Tavern and walk to another bar, Nico's. It is on the water, high up, open and breezy. We sit in a corner looking out at the boats. Three drunk men dare one another to jump into the water below. One jumps. People crowd around to watch as he splashes to the dock, laughing. Another one jumps, but the novelty has already passed. The drinkers wander back to their tables.

I let my hair down, and it tumbles over my shoulders, a release, a relief, a small joy. Gabriel looks at me, his face like a cherub come to life, the cherubs he gave me for Christmas, sent over on a boat from Tortola, dancing and flitting over my bed. He reaches for me and tangles his fingers in my newly freed hair, pulls me toward him gently and slowly as though I might disappear. I stop only inches away. He closes his eyes, like a child becoming invisible.

“Why not?” he asks me softly. “Why not?”

I want to fall into him like I fall into the clear blue ocean on a hot day; I want to forget why not. “Our friendship,” I whisper, trying not to further awaken my other, reckless self. “We both need our friendship much more than anything else we might want.”

WE WALK BACK TO MY CAR in a languid, serpentine pattern. We link arms and I think of the strong but delicate chain on my great-grandmother's antique watch. I decide to start wearing it; if I wear it and lose it, I will be as I am now, but with the experience and pleasure of having worn the watch. So it is with material things.

I start my jeep and flip on the lights. Gabriel is leaning in the window. As always, we hug when we part. This time, as we pull away, our cheeks brush. Then lips, soft and lush, first light then firm, and I forget everything. My other self is free. She seeks joy, she seeks pleasure, but does she or doesn't she really care about me?

Through the falling and floating I remember one thing. My car is running because I had once considered it very important to drive away. I pull back, warm and faint.

"Good night," I breathe, my smile saying entirely something else.

And I drive myself home. I, strong and correct and determined and proud, drive myself, sulky and dizzy and breathless and hot, home.