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LAURA ELIZABETH  
WOOLLETT

THE  
NEWCOMER

SCRIBE

THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A PERFECT VICTIM

## OVERDUE

Just like grief, waiting had stages. And by two o'clock, Judy Novak was well and truly in the anger phase.

*Thirty years old! And still bloody selfish. Well, whose fault is that?*

The Mutineers' Lodge cabins had been renovated for high season. Marine-blue carpet. Brochures swimming under coffee-table glass. Drapes so red they hurt her eyes. 'You have to stay at Mutes!' Paulina had insisted, months back. 'I'll make your bed and serve you breakfast!'

So proud of the fact that she could finally make a bed. Making an appointment — not so much.

*Two hours late! Island time be damned. It's selfish, bloody selfish.*

Judy had called — how many times? Enough. She'd call again. Just once. On the bedside phone, so plasticky-new it looked like a toy.

### NOVAK, PAULINA

The only 'Novak' in the Fairfolk Island phone book. Almost, it gave Judy goosebumps, seeing her daughter's name so alone in that forest of Kings, Carlyles, Stevenses, Greatorexes.

*Pick up! For chrissakes, Paulina. Pick up!*

Each ring like a screaming newborn. Torture. She slammed the phone.

'Fine! You're a grown woman. So am I.'

Judy stared at the phone for a long moment, like it was a snake slithering into a bush. Then she picked up her beach bag, threw a challenging glance at her pink-faced reflection.

'I'm fine.' She swiped a tear. 'You're fine.'

‘Excuse me. If you see my daughter—’

He didn’t remember Judy, the fat clerk in the mutiny-red shirt. His smile said as much: a crocodile smile that didn’t quite meet the sea-glass eyes with their curiously beautiful dark-brown lashes. A man her age. It was one thing being invisible to young blokes, but had this man really lumped her in the same category as all the nearly-deads with their coach tours and activity calendars?

‘I’m Paulina’s mum,’ she reminded him.

‘Of course you are!’ Patronising. ‘What can I do for you, ma’am?’

Judy’s eyes wandered down to his name tag: *Bazel*.

‘Well. She was supposed to meet me at my cabin two hours ago. At least, that’s what we agreed? After her walk. Paulina said we’d go to the beach.’

Bazel cupped his chin in his hands and frowned. ‘Is that right?’

A gold ring glinted in his right ear. His desk was shaped like a prow, the wall behind it painted with half-naked Polynesian women and rogue British sailors, looking out to sea at a burning ship.

‘That one’s my ancestor, Samuel Stevens.’ Noticing her looking, Bazel pointed out one of the sailors. ‘I made sure the artist gave him lots of muscles.’

‘Which one’s his wife?’

‘Your guess is as good as mine.’ He shrugged sheepishly. ‘That one there with the white flowers is Gideon King’s bride, Puatea.’

‘Very ... historical.’ Sighing, Judy straightened the strap of her beach bag. ‘If you see Paulina, tell her I’ve gone for a drive. I’ll be back in an hour or so. She can call me then, if she likes.’

Judy didn’t wait around to listen to Bazel’s reply; she had things to do, goddamnit. Although, once behind the wheel of her rented Hyundai, she wasn’t quite sure what.

*Where are you, Paulina?*

There’d been no rental cars when she and Marko honeymooned on the island thirty years ago. Just hiking. Horseriding. Men cracking onto her every time Marko left her side — asking *what’s a girl like you doing with that old bloke with the funny accent?* Even so, Judy felt a pleasant sense of déjà vu, easing onto the sleepy palm-lined road.

The Pacific peek-a-booped from the bottom of the hill. For a moment, Judy thought the car might roll straight into it. Instead, the road twisted

and flattened out to a disconcertingly British expanse of fields, ruins, grim Georgian architecture. Pine trees tall as skyscrapers. Judy slowed as she neared King's Pier, parking behind a cluster of trucks and utes. On the horizon, dockers in hi-vis shirts bloomed like hallucinogenic flowers.

'Afternoon!' A bloke, half-hidden by the truck he was loading up, startled her as she exited the Hyundai. He was old for a labourer, with a skinned-seeming head, hair so colourless and closely cropped it looked more like a film of sweat.

'Afternoon.' Judy smiled. 'Working on Good Friday? You poor things!'

'First supply ship in six weeks, all hands on deck. See these boxes?' He motioned Judy closer, deftly sliced through the cardboard. 'I've been telling the grandkids to expect chook eggs in this year's Easter-egg hunt. Better late than never, eh?'

'I miss those days.' Judy looked down at the bright-foiled chocolate eggs. 'My daughter won't go anywhere near chocolate. She's thirty this Sunday.'

'Mother-daughter birthday trip, eh?'

'I'm just visiting. She's here on a work permit.' Already, Judy felt annoyed with herself for talking about Paulina — who, wherever she was, surely wasn't talking about *her*. 'She's ... working now, actually. So much for the easy, breezy island lifestyle!'

The bloke winked. 'You need a local to show you some of that.'

Was he cracking onto her? Judy didn't stick around to find out — just squeaked a laugh and drifted away from the pier, toward the grassy clifftops. She could almost hear Paulina cackling at her back: 'Told ya! Fairfolk men are *desperate!*'

Judy stumbled upon a plaque, bowed her head to read:

After six torturous months at sea, the mutineers and their Polynesian wives found shelter on Fairfolk's paradisiac shores, and set HMS *Fortuna* on fire.

Judy walked on, until she reached a cemetery where elderly couples were wandering around like reanimated corpses. She knew there was a beach just beyond the cemetery, a beach Paulina loved. But when the wind picked up behind her, bringing with it a fresh, earthy smell, she took it as a sign.

By the time she got back to the car, her carefully blown hair was stringy, the powder on her nose dissolved. But worst of all was the tender thought rattling through her brain:

*Wherever you are, Paulina, I hope you're safe from the rain.*

Judy drove into town. Everything was closed, including the pubs, which had been her greatest hope for finding Paulina. She parked and sat behind the wheel, hopelessly watching the miserable strip of shops being rained on. A cow wandered past. A *cow*. No people. Not for a long time — until she saw a blonde woman bustling across the road to let herself into a shop: *Tabby's Treasures*.

'Sorry? Are you open?' Judy knew it was a desperate thing, barging muddy-footed into this woman's shop on a public holiday. 'Sorry — I was just wondering? Could I use your phone?'

She could see the woman's face forming a 'no'. It wasn't a kind face. Pretty once, maybe. Young once. Still youngish in a pert, freckle-nosed sort of way — or younger than Judy's, anyway. She had the eyes Judy kept seeing everywhere: pale with dark lashes.

'I'm sorry. Just quickly, I was hoping — could I just call my daughter?'

'Is there not a phone where you're staying?' the woman asked, in that accent Judy had just now decided she hated.

'There is, but ... Look, I'll be *quick*.'

The woman relented. Judy apologised for her muddy feet, followed the woman like a sniper, eyes trained on the fat spilling over the outline of her bra. There was a scrunchie in her rain-frizzed hair. A *scrunchie*. 'What pretty things,' Judy murmured. 'What a pretty shop.'

The phone was behind the counter. 'I'm just here for some paperwork,' the woman explained. 'The supply ship's arrived. I'm expecting a big delivery tomorrow.'

Judy picked up the phone, tried to dial.

'I'm sorry. I should know it by now. My brain's not working.'

With a hissy little sigh, the woman dumped a lean phone book on the counter, stood back with folded arms as Judy fumbled, dialled.

*Hey, I'm not here. Sorry! Leave a message or see ya when I see ya. Whatever! Bye.*

‘I’m coming over, Paulina,’ Judy said, in her sternest undertone. ‘Okay? I don’t care ... what state you’re in. I’m coming over. Okay?’

The machine beeped. Judy hung up, lost her nerve. Her eyes latched onto the closest thing: a tray of pale-aqua business cards on the countertop.

‘Oh, are you “Tabby”?’ She picked one up: *Tabitha King, Custom Designs*. ‘Like the shop? You design everything, do you?’

‘Just the jewellery,’ Tabby said, in a distant voice. ‘Everything’s Fairfolk-made, though. I export, too.’

‘Oh. Lovely.’

‘Take as many as you like.’ A saleswoman’s voice edged in. ‘I’m open tomorrow. Monday, too. Please, do come back, when I’m open.’

‘Of course ...’ Judy’s eyes scanned for something else: fastened on a pendant in the nearest cabinet. ‘The angelfish! The little angelfish. Oh, I *have* to get her that!’

‘The angelfish?’ Tabby looked over her shoulder. ‘I’ll put it aside.’

‘Yes — no!’ Judy panicked. ‘Please, you don’t understand? It’s her birthday. Her thirtieth. I’ll be a terrible mother if I don’t get it now.’

In fact, Judy had already bought far too many presents: a new Sony Discman, headphones, pedometer, Reeboks, and enough batteries to last the year.

‘Cash,’ Tabby demanded. ‘One hundred and fifty, cash. Our EFTPOS machine isn’t working.’

Judy knew this woman, this *cow*, was screwing her over. She also knew she would’ve paid any amount for the little angelfish, in that moment.

‘Of course,’ Judy replied, with hysterical poise. ‘Thank you very much. And please — if you can — please gift-wrap it.’

Pulling onto the gravel-and-mud of Tenderloin Road, Judy had the feeling she was trespassing. A downcast Fairfolk flag, dripping against its pole. A bathtub murky with rainwater. A miniature plantation of palm trees, their bases sharp with rat traps. Then she noticed the letterbox: shaped like a cow, with a slot for a bum-crack. She laughed, louder than it warranted. Paulina had told her about the letterbox, and the lady it belonged to — her landlady, Vera.

Judy parked in front of the main house.

It was a white clapboard house with an olive-green tin roof. Wraparound porch cluttered with fishing gear and mismatched furniture. Judy wondered if she should knock before proceeding to the cottage. Then she spied Paulina's little blue Mazda parked outside.

*So she is home! Unless—*

The windows of the Mazda were open. Carpet drenched. Upholstery drenched. A puddle of water on the dashboard, flecked with dirt and stray pine needles.

'Oh, Paulina!' Judy cried, and shivered all over.

She crossed the yard to the cottage — a smaller, boxier version of the main house. Banged on the flyscreen. 'Yoo-hoo! Paulina!'

No answer, except the jingle-jangle of a cat, scampering out of the bushes and winding its fluffy, toasted-marshmallow-coloured body around Judy's legs.

Judy grimaced. '*You're* not Paulina.'

She tried the door. Unlocked. This wasn't *so* strange, was it? Paulina was always saying nobody believed in locks here.

The cat dashed inside.

Right away, Judy could tell two things: Paulina wasn't home, but had been. Car keys on the counter. A half-empty water glass. The cat leapt onto the counter, sniffed the water.

'Shoo!' Judy cried. 'Get down.'

She peeked inside the pantry. Canned soup. Canned veg. Alcohol — a lot of it.

'Oh, Paulina,' Judy repeated, noticing a stack of empty goon boxes by the bin.

The bathroom, though, made her proud. No dirty clothes on the floor. Only a single long brown hair in the sink. Towels hung from a rack on the door, the hooks shaped like seahorses. Even a wicker hamper for her laundry.

Judy looked through cabinets, heart hammering. Found Paulina's blow-dryer, plugged it in, and puffed her hair back to life.

Her heart was calmer, entering Paulina's bedroom. *Not snooping. Just checking.*

The bed was made. Good girl. Cobalt-blue damask covers she knew Paulina had ordered from a catalogue, waited weeks for.

A copy of *Anna Karenina* on the bedside table. Judy opened the bedside drawer.

Phone book. Birth control. Diary.

She should've known better; she'd read Paulina's diary once when she was a teenager, and they'd fought bitterly about the contents. But surely things were different now?

March 21, 2002

Hangover. Fat pig. Sick of this shit, wish I was dead already.

Judy shut the diary away, fought the tears. *Oh, Paulina!* 'Mrep!' The cat slunk into the room, pounced on the bed, and stalked toward Judy's lap. Judy jumped to her feet. Snatched a tissue from the box by the bed, blew her nose — then wondered how often Paulina used those same tissues to clean up after men.

*That's what you get for snooping!*

Crossing the room, Judy paused to check her hair in Paulina's vanity, to spray Paulina's perfume. Picked up the framed photo Paulina kept of herself, taken by her ex, Vinnie, outside Marko's village in Croatia. Judy had never seen the village. Didn't especially want to. Still, she'd envied Paulina — twenty-five and zipping off to Europe with a 65-litre backpack and the Greek boy she almost married.

'Knock, knock!' a cheery voice — not Paulina's — called from the front door. 'Fresh-laid Easter eggs.'

The cat sprinted to meet the voice. Judy followed it, face burning; she was sure the snooping would show on her face. 'Hello? I'm just looking for—'

'You must be Judy.' The woman, previously just a silhouette in the flyscreen, let herself in, and, in one fell swoop, set down a basket of eggs and scooped up the cat. 'I'm Vera. I see you already met the Queen of the World, Miss Katie. Paulina's out, is she?'

A tall woman, wide-hipped, brown as toast, older than Judy — but not so much older that she'd call her 'old', like Paulina did. *I'm renting from this old lady now. Vera, the old landlady. The old bitch next door's on at me for smoking again.* Vera's dark-grey hair was short as a man's, her clothes also mannish: boots, jeans, grey flannel. Slanted, very dark eyes. One of the few Islanders Judy had seen who looked typically Polynesian,

instead of like a run-of-the-mill sunbaked Anglo-Australian.

‘I don’t know where she is. She told me she’d meet me at Mutineers’ Lodge, but that was hours ago.’ *Don’t cry. Do. Not. Cry.* Judy looked determinedly at the couch. ‘Maybe I should go back to the hotel?’

‘Absolutely not.’ Vera’s face smoothed in sympathy. ‘Come up. I’ll make some calls.’

The cat squirmed in Vera’s arms as she led Judy across the yard. ‘I wait on Miss Katie hand-and-foot, but she prefers Paulina. Every time she hears her come in — *whoosh.*’

‘Cats love Paulina,’ Judy played along.

‘Cleopatra reincarnated,’ Vera quipped. A border collie lazing on the verandah grumbled as she side-stepped it. ‘Don’t mind Jake. He’s just lovesick.’

The house was busy with weekend clutter: a leaning mop, draped rags, splayed newspapers, and, on the kitchen table, a bowl of fish-guts. Vera dumped the cat, moved the bowl to the floor. ‘Rocky!’ she called. In response, a beetle-browed older man shuffled into the kitchen and shook Judy’s hand, shuffled out again.

‘Pacific Games re-runs.’ Vera rolled her eyes. ‘Coffee, tea, Milo? Or you can have a beer with Rocky.’

‘Milo. Thanks.’

Vera nodded toward the lounge. Obediently, Judy went and sat on the weathered navy-blue couch across from Rocky’s armchair.

Weightlifters grunted in a grainy gymnasium. Vera returned with a mug and a plate of Scotch fingers, nudged Rocky’s ankle with her boot. He lowered the volume. Sitting beside Judy, Vera reached behind the couch for a directory and an off-white corded phone.

‘Yorana, Kymba.’ Vera listened for a moment, brow furrowed — then started speaking rapidly in a funny, old-timey almost-English.

‘Sorry,’ she told Judy, after she hung up. ‘It’s just easier speaking Fayrf’k, if you want to get to the point.’

‘Oh, don’t mind me.’ Judy waved her hand. ‘You can speak Klingon for all I care.’

It was disconcerting, though, as more conversations rushed by, seemingly varied in detail and nuance, yet all with the same result — no Paulina.

‘Camel?’ Rocky suggested after his wife hung up again.

Vera dialled a new number. Judy nibbled a Scotch finger. Stale. Dipped it in her Milo. Why had she asked for Milo?

‘He’s nay home,’ Vera muttered, hanging up.

‘Eddy?’ Rocky suggested.

Vera scowled. ‘*Nay*, Rocky!’

Rocky shrugged, chuckled. Vera dialled. ‘Yorana, Eddy ...’

Miss Katie leapt onto the couch, kneaded Judy’s thigh. Vera’s face was red when she finished her call. She muttered something vicious at Rocky in Fayrf’k, didn’t translate. Rocky chuckled again, drained his tinnie, and shuffled out.

Judy finished her Milo. Vera dialled. ‘Merlinda ...?’ Jake loped into the room, followed by Rocky, who offered a cold-beaded can to Judy.

‘No. Thank you.’

Vera thrust out her hand. After finishing up the call, she cracked it open and swigged. ‘Merlinda saw Paulina driving.’

‘Oh?’ Judy perked up.

‘Around eleven am.’

Judy’s heart sank. ‘Oh.’

Jake whimpered and lay on the rug. Miss Katie’s tail lashed. ‘Toa?’ Rocky suggested, and it was suddenly horribly clear to Judy that he was no longer interested in the faded footage.

Judy stood up. ‘Excuse me. Mind if I—’

‘Right down the hall,’ Vera pointed, already dialling.

The bathroom was done up in peaches-and-cream tiles, daisy decals on the walls. Judy ran the taps. Washed her hands; washed her face; wept. Washed her face again. ‘You’re fine,’ she reassured her reflection. ‘We’re both fine.’

Lifting the fuzzy peach toilet lid, Judy unbuttoned her shorts, tugged aside her swimsuit, and peed a stinging trickle. *UTI? Wonderful.* On the wall above the toilet was a picture of a dreamy-faced fairy squatting on a toadstool, bloomers around her ankles, thought-bubble at her head:

Sometimes I sits and thinks

And sometimes I just sits.

‘Gawd!’ Judy despaired. ‘Get me out of here!’

When Judy returned to the lounge, she found Vera and Rocky huddled and talking quietly in Fayrf'k. Across the room, the mantel clock struck seven.

'Shame on me! It's your dinnertime.' Judy sucked in a lungful of stuffy air. 'Thanks for your help, but I really should get back to Mutineers' Lodge. Maybe she's left a message.'

'I tried Mutes'.' Vera said. 'Tried everyone we could think of; it's *strange ...*'

A splitting pain shot through Judy's chest. She closed her eyes, leaned against the mantle. When she opened them, Vera was standing before her, lips pursed white.

'It's real strange, I have to tell you. The sort of place Fairfolk is ...' Vera gestured. 'You sneeze in your backyard, five people shout "bless you". You buy a bunch of flowers, ten people ask who you're trying to impress. Everyone's always looking over each other's shoulders.'

Nodding, Judy tried not to think of the main street, deserted in the rain.

'And Paulina: she's eye-catching. I guess you know that. It's strange, no one seeing her in so long.' Vera glanced at Rocky. 'I hate to say it, but ...' *Don't say it! Don't.*

'I think we should call the police.'

Like a slap: this thought Judy had been avoiding, so clearly articulated.

'Oh! No. She's just ...' But Judy had no justifications. 'Please. Do you really think—'

'I *do*,' Vera cut in. 'Mother to mother? I think it's for the best.'

As Vera dialled, Judy's throat tightened. To hide her hot, broken face, she examined a little clay jar on the mantle, a line-up of framed photographs.

'Jake as a puppy.' Rocky came up behind her, pointed. 'Katie as a kitten.'

Judy nodded politely. He pointed at another picture: a beautiful girl with waist-length black hair. 'Vera as a puppy, kitten?'

'Gorgeous,' Judy mumbled. 'Are those your kids?'

‘Vera’s kids.’ Rocky grinned. ‘Nothing to do with me.’

‘He said to come to the station.’ Vera stood, dusting cat-hair from her jeans.

‘The *station*?’ Judy cried, affronted.

‘It’s close. Five minutes.’ Vera avoided her eye. ‘I’ll drive.’

Rocky went to the coat rack for windbreakers, whistled at Jake, who ran ahead to the door.

Outside, the sea breeze licked Judy’s cheeks. They hopped into Vera’s jeep: Rocky in the back with Jake, Judy shotgun.

‘Some tourists aren’t prepared for how cold it gets at night.’ Vera started up the jeep. ‘Of course, that’s how it goes when you’ve got the sea on all sides. Big temp drops.’

*You bitch, don’t you dare talk to me about the weather.* ‘I know. I spent my honeymoon here. Did they say why they want us at the station?’

‘Didn’t say much.’ Vera rolled onto Tenderloin Road. ‘Your honeymoon? Really.’

‘1969,’ Judy said, her willpower like a punctured tyre. ‘I wanted to go to the Central Coast. But Marko wanted to take me somewhere exotic.’

Only when they got to the station did Judy realise that she didn’t mind the small talk; didn’t want it to end, actually. As if reading her mind, Rocky fished a flask from his pocket.

‘That’s a good idea,’ Vera said, then waited until Judy drank.

It was cold inside the station, despite the liquor, despite the windbreaker. A pimple-faced young cop stood to attention.

‘Hank!’ he called into the office behind him.

An older man appeared: square black crew cut, square florid face, watery eyes the same light-green that so many of the Islanders had.

‘Mrs Novak, thanks for coming down. I’m Detective Sergeant Hank Turner.’ The man offered a meaty handshake. ‘I believe your daughter’s been missing since midday. Can you describe her?’

‘Pretty,’ Judy blurted out.

‘Can you be more specific? Height, weight, hair colour, things like that?’

Did it mean anything that he wasn’t wearing a hat?

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‘Dark brown hair, with a fringe; probably in a ponytail, if she was exercising,’ Judy chose her words as carefully as birthday gifts. ‘Dark eyes. Medium height — 167 centimetres, I think.’ *Don’t look at him. Keep talking.* ‘Slim, very slim ... I always tell her, she doesn’t need to diet so much, but she never listens.’

The man opened his mouth. *Don’t look! Keep talking.*

‘Thirty years old. She’s thirty this Sunday. *Hates* it. I’ve been telling her, though, she shouldn’t worry; thirty is still young. It’s still so young ...’

*Don’t look! He wants me to look, the bastard, but I won’t—*

‘Mrs Novak. I’m sorry to tell you—’

*Don’t! Bastard. Don’t you dare!*

‘Mrs Novak. A body has been found.’



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