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In her face, Bernadette St John had all the necessary symmetry, all the youthful indicators and hyper-feminine features so revered by the opposite sex. But these delights masked a mind riddled with a poisonous bigotry: a profound and very real contempt for men that extended beyond anything reasonable or healthy. It was a prejudice formed slowly, over years of disappointment.

This defeat was as much a part of her as her arresting face, with its pointed chin, retroussé profile, and high cheekbones. Her eyes were hazel; copper-coloured in some lights, witch-green in others, rarely just brown. No man who looked in those eyes ever guessed at the hostile feeling behind them; instead, most were left with an impression of a genial sensuality, a soft femininity, the promise of an understanding love.

She was used to arriving at parties alone, and only slightly afraid of it, but on the evening of Tim Bazier's annual Christmas drinks, her usually stoic persona betrayed definite signs of unease. She was nauseous. The thin material of her dress, what little

there was of it, clung coldly to the sweat that had formed across her back and under her arms. Most disconcertingly of all, tears were threatening to form behind mascara-clad lashes.

Bernadette, unfortunately, believed herself to be in love with the host of the party, who was too diffident and unassertive for practical romancing. Her belief though was quite unshakeable, and her misandry extended to every man except this one.

Of course, Bernadette was not born into the world with a fully formed pathology; as with all deviants, there were reasons for her prejudice, a narrative that could go some way to excusing her contempt. Her father had been very handsome, tall and dark, and charming when it suited him, but equally malicious when the mood struck.

He had a habit of making profoundly unsettling and undermining remarks that could shift Bernadette's whole reality. He would say to his wife and daughter, 'The only reason you are emancipated as women is because men in the West have decided it should be so. But we could change our minds at any moment. Most of the world is not like this! Remember, you are dependent on the benevolence of men.' Or he would tell Bernadette that her lovely mother was a whore, that 'all women are whores. It just depends whether you take them on a short-term or long-term lease.'

The abuse was insidious and constant, and it would have been difficult to escape such an overbearing environment unscathed, but Bernadette was a precocious infant, with her sire's stubbornness, and once she realised that her father's beliefs were not absolute truths and could be questioned, she turned her back on him. She knew empirically that the words he chose

to describe her mother – ‘ungrateful’, ‘demanding’, ‘complaining dependant’ – were not accurate.

‘But Daddy, I’m your dependant too,’ she pointed out, once he had explained the word to her.

Her father had laughed heartily and drawn her on to his lap. ‘You get right down to it, don’t you? You know where your bread is buttered! Worried you’re as expendable as your mother, eh? Well, don’t worry. There’s always more leniency for the pups. As long as you’re a good girl. You belong entirely to me, you see.’

As an antidote to her unfortunate beginnings, she immersed herself in fictional romance and prospered, finding friends and heroes between the covers of books. Her inner monologue was framed by Victorian fiction, and her habits and speech became a peculiar mix of the old-fashioned and poetic and the unashamedly forward-thinking, with a healthy disregard for the patriarchy. She might have been tempted to be a supporter of the archaic regime, which seemed quite benign in Arthurian legend, but she knew from real-world experience that it was a dangerous and unstable thing.

She developed a romantic ideal of what a man should be from fictional characters, which were more often than not created by women, and gave her an impractical expectation of romantic love. It was this divide between reality and fiction that contributed to her misandry as an adult; she had placed all her childhood faith in an ideal, and men continually fell short.

Bernadette had chosen to drive herself to the house party, rather than be driven, as the latter presupposed irresponsibility. She was frequently irresponsible, but always prepared for her better

self to triumph. But as she pulled up to the valet stand, and gazed morosely at the large Brentwood house, which was luminous with festive cheer, intoxication seemed suddenly inevitable.

There was always the option of driving on and avoiding the evening altogether, but a number of cars had formed a line behind her, and the young Mexican valet was hovering hopefully by her door. She emerged, and flashed him a quick, apologetic grin as he handed her a pink ticket, thanking him in her most pronounced English accent. There was a definite advantage to having an English accent in Los Angeles, and Bernadette was keen to flaunt her distinction. It added at least twenty points to her perceived IQ, and she could relax in conversation, knowing that her imperious tone was tantamount to actual knowledge and experience in the ears of her listeners. Unless they were wise enough to know better (and few people were), at first glance it was easy to mistake Bernadette for a young trustafarian, a struggling actress or, worst of all, a model. She moved with a Saturnian grace, startled as easily as a colt, and her wide eyes, which slanted slightly at the corners, looked as clear and trusting as a child's. It was a constant battle to be taken seriously, but the accent helped a little.

Tripping slightly on the uneven tarmac (damn LA and its poorly maintained surface structures!), and disguising the stumble as a jaunty hop, she passed in front of her car and smiled quite flirtatiously at the line of uniformed valets. This, to Bernadette, practically equated to a good deed, and she strode onwards with new purpose, buoyed by the happy knowledge of having done a selfless thing.

The house was large and beautiful in the dark, set back from the road behind high hedges. It was exactly the sort of place

Bernadette would like to call home. New England in style, kitsch and pretty, with a well-planted garden and welcoming porch, it appeared to be a beacon of domestic felicity, and signalled everything she equated with a well-lived life. Tim Bazier was no less attractive than his house, a blonde-haired, blue-eyed, straightforward man, lean and tall. Bernadette had wanted him instantly, from the first moment of their acquaintance. Before he spoke, she had correctly divined his superior nature, and her thieving, broken heart hungered for his subjection.

He was, in fact, the only man Bernadette was currently capable of admiring, the only man beyond reproach in appearance, behaviour and consequence. She had never been allowed close enough to find fault, and it was this remoteness, his lofty contentment, that allowed her so-called love to flourish unchecked. Tim was a shining ray of light in Bernadette's dark, man-hating world. With all other men, at the slightest sign of weakness, the merest hint of an innocuous moral failing, she extrapolated to the worst conclusion, and labelled them monsters. It was a matter of self-preservation.

Tim, however, seemed to have jumped from the pages of her beloved romantic novels, so steadfast and unassuming was he – it was as if he had been pulled from her childhood's imagination into the real world, and was finally with her as a real-life companion.

She remembered the first time she had seen him, the way he had looked up as she entered his office, how young he had seemed for a man in his thirties, so boyish and kind. And he was wearing glasses! Who actually wore glasses any more? His wonky grin and the bashful way he stood to take her hand were absolutely the most heart-wrenching gestures she had ever seen,

and her breath caught in her chest painfully. 'So,' he had said, 'you're the Man Whisperer.'

She had wanted him then as she had never wanted anything before. It was a rapacious need, a strength of feeling that seemed to explain her very existence. It was unaccountable and unexpected and thoroughly beyond her comprehension, a heady chemical rush that overpowered every other impulse. It was a relief, in fact, to believe that there might be one redeeming male.

Tim was unlike the others because he didn't use the fact that she was a woman against her. He seemed completely disinterested in her as a woman, almost oblivious to the wide chasm between them. He treated her as a friend and fellow human, and asked nothing of her. Equally, he didn't make allowances for her – Bernadette had long ago learned to use her seductive charms to gain favour and preference, but Tim had rebuffed every advance she had ever made with gentle redirection and good humour. It was intoxicating.

He had been the first to coin her moniker, 'The Man Whisperer' – and what an enterprising suggestion! To address her as such at their initial meeting, to use that as his opener, so respectfully and with so much polish, appealed directly to her feminine pride. It defined a power she had as yet left unnamed, and excused the sexuality she had a hard time controlling. Bernadette quietly imagined his love and forgiveness, as evidenced in that one sentence, and couldn't have found more comfort had he been a priest explaining the promise of resurrection.

The party was already in full swing. Through bright windows Bernadette could see people moving around, laughing and

talking, as waiters offered trays of dinky holiday-themed canapés. A Bing Crosby track wafted out from the open front door, which was bedecked with an evergreen wreath and a big red bow.

Mounting the faux-rickety wooden steps, having successfully crossed the cobbled driveway in extremely high heels, Bernadette wondered where in the house Tim would be, and her body tensed in anticipation. She remembered that she felt sick.

The Christmas party was the perfect place to make known her true feelings, because what was more romantic than Christmas? When she had received the invitation in November, she had had an uncanny, premonition-like feeling that something extraordinary would occur. Tim had told her very pointedly that he looked forward to her attendance.

Almost as soon as she entered the house, she saw him. He was standing with his back to her, talking to a couple she didn't know, and miraculously his blonde head bobbed and nodded under an audacious bunch of mistletoe that had been pinned to a low archway. She took a shaky step towards him, mentally planning dialogue, and deciding whether to kiss him on both cheeks, or to try and accidentally-on-purpose catch the corner of his mouth. The mistletoe surely offered a whole world of kissing potential. But before she could reach him, she felt small, gentle hands on her waist, and, turning, was caught in a sincere hug, a tight, clinging embrace that communicated genuine friendship.

'Elizabeth! How lovely to see you,' Bernadette lied. She tried not to freeze in the other woman's arms, tried to ease away without signalling her distaste.

Elizabeth Wentworth was Tim's girlfriend, and the thorn in Bernadette's side. Elizabeth was exactly the type of good-hearted,

guileless female that Bernadette refused to believe existed. She was convinced that behind the front of sweet-tempered liberality lurked a cynicism even darker than her own.

Elizabeth was looking up at Bernadette, nodding and smiling as though she had been asked a question that required a yes answer. Tim's attraction to Elizabeth was a source of infinite puzzlement. She was not particularly pretty, nor especially smart; she didn't light up a room, she'd never been known to crack a joke, and she never put a foot wrong. When Bernadette looked at her, phrases like 'bookish and plain' and 'solid and dependable' sprang to mind. Elizabeth was thirty-three, of average height and average weight, never wore make-up, and always dressed appropriately. She was the type of person Bernadette occasionally wished she herself could be, conspicuous only by her inimitable ordinariness.

'Come and say hello to Tim,' Elizabeth said. 'He'll be so happy to see you.'

To Bernadette's horror, Elizabeth linked arms with her, and chaperoned her towards Tim and the mistletoe. Catching their approach out of the corner of his eye, he excused himself from the conversation, and turned with a smile. Bernadette couldn't stop herself from smiling back like a fool, and felt the familiar hot chemical rush.

Tim was undoubtedly the most sublime and perfect person to ever grace the planet. He was over six foot and gangly, slim-built and angular, and his hair fell in a sandy mop across his forehead. He never wore cologne, but always smelt freshly washed, like soap.

'Hello, Bernie,' he said, and hugged her. She pressed herself into his embrace, whilst trying to make it look informal. 'It's

not a party without you,' he continued. 'You look fantastic.' He stood back to admire her dress, holding her left hand and smiling in appreciation of the effort she had made. Bernadette felt an almost imperceptible squeeze of his fingers around hers as he dropped her hand.

'Thanks,' she managed. 'You look fantastic too.'

Tim always appeared shiny bright and perfect, but particularly so that evening. He was wearing a red plaid shirt – a cool, comfy plaid, Bernadette was pleased to note, not a weird lumberjack one – which seemed appropriately festive in a Hogmanay-ish sort of way. His jeans were not fashionable and he was sporting a pair of dark blue Toms. He always looked like he was ready for some type of outdoorsy adventure, even at formal events or business meetings. Bernadette had him pegged as a hiking/biking/save-the-world-by-recycling type.

Elizabeth had stood silent and approving for the exchange, clearly waiting for her turn to speak. There was an uncharacteristic air of expectation around her as she smiled up at Bernadette. 'I think there'll be a lot of people here you already know,' she began, 'but there's someone I'd really love to introduce you to!' She exchanged a blushing glance with Tim, who rolled his eyes in a humorous way and grinned his lopsided grin. 'A friend of mine from medical school,' she added.

Elizabeth was a doctor at Cedars-Sinai, specialising in livers, or kidneys, or some other organ that made Bernadette think of urine. The last person in the world she wanted to meet was some do-gooder, mortality-obsessed workaholic who smelt of cheap cleaning fluid and latex gloves. She gave a visible shudder. 'Well, I'd really like a drink first,' she said, turning to Tim with a please-save-me face.

‘Sure!’ Elizabeth fluttered. ‘You know your way around, right? There’s a bar out back. Do you want me to show you?’

Bernadette bristled at Elizabeth playing hostess in Tim’s house. It seemed quite ridiculous, given that they’d only been dating for a year. Tim had been Bernadette’s literary manager for three years, which, chronologically at least, was a more substantial relationship. ‘No, I’m fine. I have been here before,’ she said, pointedly.

Bernadette moved through the house, observing the other party guests and making a note of any women who were better-looking than her. It was an ingrained habit on entering a room, or any new place. She looked first for men she might love (there never were any, as men were bastards), and second for any threateningly beautiful girls (there were always far too many).

Bernadette’s father had been very particular about the way his daughter should look. He had an eye for detail, and her physical flaws had seemed to genuinely hurt his feelings, her gawkiness an affront to his superior genes. He used to take a ruler and measure the symmetry of her facial features down to the millimetre. She would stand in front of him in her gingham school dress and white socks, shifting in subdued discomfort from foot to foot as he measured her face and recorded the results in a notebook. ‘What a waste!’ he would sigh. ‘I only married your idiot mother because I thought she’d produce decent-looking offspring, and now look at this! Thirty-four millimetres! Preposterous! And the ratios are all wrong!’ Then he would ruffle her hair in a kindly, paternal fashion and say, ‘Let’s hope you have a little of my wit, at least, to distinguish you from the other unattractive girls. Poor little poppet.’ Bernadette had been disappointed to learn that she wasn’t beau-

tiful. She wanted to be worthy of a literary romance in order to encounter a man more loving than her father, and all her favourite heroines were described as being impossibly, other-worldly attractive.

As an adult, she had received enough compliments on her appearance to counter her father's low opinion, but she still disliked being defined by her looks either way, and didn't feel secure enough to be able to withstand honest competition. She spent her life surreptitiously checking out legs and boobs and butts, with more vigour than a horny adolescent boy.

It was a typical LA house party, full of agents and clients, financiers, hipsters, artists and philanthropists. Bernadette slunk around alone, nervous and disdainful, always keeping a watchful eye out for Tim. The apprehension of seeing him, the dread of an evening spent lovelorn in his company, had given way to a more practical, scheming instinct. Her overactive mind began to concoct numerous plans for the night ahead. Being in Tim's house was too good an opportunity to miss, after all, and something positive had to come from the tedium of the party. Perhaps she could feign sleepiness and slip off to his bedroom, or encourage him to dance with her in the moonlight. At the very least, she could corner him under the mistletoe, which seemed to hang at every doorway, taunting her with plump pearls of promise.

They were unsophisticated plans, but then Bernadette was entirely juvenile in her self-centred pursuit of love. Real love must be possible, because people had written about it – and made it sound so wonderful in the writing! All really was fair in love and war; love itself was often war, and made otherwise inadmissible behaviour entirely noble. And love was a concept

that didn't need to be too closely examined: *wanting* was enough of a definition. Bernadette had learnt, from prior, painful experience, that men took what they wanted. She would be no passive female, destined to put her own desires aside. She would pursue her whims at any cost.

She found the bar out on the back deck, stepping from the warmth of the house and marvelling, as she still frequently did, at LA's Mediterranean climate. The smell of oiled pine rose from the boards under her feet, and mingled with lavender and quince from the thicket bordering the ample garden. Fairy lights strung around lemon trees provided a drowsy and romantic half-light, along with hanging lanterns in an arbour, three crackling fire pits, and the pinpricks of cell phones, whose owners preferred virtual life.

She ordered a lychee martini, which the unemployed-actor bartender insisted on dusting liberally with ground cinnamon. She downed it and immediately ordered another. The bartender winked at her, and she bristled at his impertinence.

As she stood at the bar, drinking alone, a pleasant-faced man about her own age approached and smiled. 'Hey,' he said. 'How's it going?'

'I'm sorry, I don't speak American,' she reproved haughtily, and left him to think on his mistake.

When she was younger, Bernadette would smile welcomingly at unknown men who approached her, and would happily engage in friendly conversation, treating them as fellow human souls, and secretly hoping to find a romantic hero. She had put so much faith and trust in the concept of one exceptional male. These men would be kind, jovial and complimentary, but when she politely declined their romantic advances, the mask of kind-

ness would slip, and underneath would be anger. She had experienced too often the shock of a pleasant conversation turning violent, of a seemingly normal man becoming a frightening opponent. It reminded her strongly of her father's double nature. No longer did she smile when men approached her.

House parties always made Bernadette feel slightly wretched, but she never dared refuse an invitation for fear of dying alone. Generally, every attempt at having an interesting, exciting night out turned out to be an exercise in self-loathing and despair. No one ever behaved as she wished them to, and she was never able to rise to the standard she set herself.

Yet there still remained the dim and secret hope that something wonderful would happen at a party. Nothing wonderful was likely to happen in everyday life, but the dark rooms, the heightened atmosphere, the libations, the strangers . . . Bernadette could be convinced that unusual and brilliant things did sometimes occur at parties. Someone might fall madly in love with her, or save her life in some other way. It had never happened to date, but she was unwilling to let go of the fantasy. And Bernadette lived for fantasy.

She wandered around the garden in large circles, trying to look like she had friends in some other area of the party anxiously awaiting her return. She had no one to talk to, nothing to say for herself, even if she did have an audience, and her feet were already extremely sore.

It was then that she witnessed the pleasant-faced man from the bar being rejected by a no-good piece of baggage in her early twenties. The man had only given a friendly salutation, but the girl had rolled her eyes and turned away with a sneer.