

Andrea Carlisle
Choose Your Partner

“He’s too cute to kill anybody.” Glory pointed to the television set at Hyland Puckett. They were showing footage from before his trial. This clip was of the arrest. I put down my beer, lit a cigarette, and took a good look. Face round as a cookie with babyish features. Dark hair and that scrub that looks half beard, half dirty face that every other man under thirty sports these days, pretending they’ve just crawled out of a foxhole. Boxy jeans and a blue tee shirt tight as Saran Wrap across his chest. A cobra tattoo coiled around his left arm. Before they put him in the patrol car, he looked straight at the camera and smirked.

A year later he wore a baggy orange jumpsuit in the courtroom. He stared at the floor, hair shaved off, left shoulder twitching. When they pronounced him guilty of murdering his wife, his head jerked up like a dead man on a rope. Smirk gone.

“Cute if you like dumb looking,” I said. “No surprise they found that puppy guilty with all they had on him.” Here’s my twenty-year old daughter Glory thinking this murderer is good to look at. She’s not interested in courtroom shows but I am, and I’d watched a bit of Puckett’s trial before giving up when it got so obvious he’d done it. If I’d been on that jury I’d have found him guilty just by seeing the way he sat with his arms folded, glaring up at the ceiling half the time. He didn’t want anybody looking into his eyes. You don’t get to be a cashier at Freddie’s for thirty years and not know people. Some guys can stand there at the checkout with a steak stashed in their backpack, the code ripped off and the meat tucked in a Ziploc bag, and they can look right at you and pay for just a pack of gum. But not that many. I admit to taking a few things myself that weren’t paid for, but only when they were way overpriced.

A news reporter stood in the courthouse now, telling us how new evidence showed Hyland Puckett might get a new trial.

“Next thing you know he’ll be on *Dateline*,” I said.

“Mmmm...*Dateline*’d be cool.” Glory scooted down on the couch and laid one hand over her pregnant belly, and with the other she reached for one of my cigarettes. I slapped her wrist. Smoking’s bad for babies. When I carried her, I cut way back. Maybe my daughter’s no *Jeopardy* contestant but she’s so pretty it scares me sometimes to look at her. Where did she come from? Wide hazel eyes in a perfect heart-shaped face. Eyes like a fawn’s, my husband Greg used to say. Delicate little hands and feet. Glory’s got a birthmark under her left ear, a little rose-colored blossom she got self-conscious about when she started school, but Greg told her it was the mark of a real princess. She believed him.

Ben Townsend got her pregnant. She worked at the realty office in Hillsboro. Ben’s an agent there. He’s married and doesn’t want her. It’s better for the baby and her if they live here with me anyway. Ben might have been a Hillsboro soccer hero once, but he’s as big a loser as Hyland Puckett, in my opinion. Tell the truth, I’m happy about this baby. I’ll spoil my grandchild and be loved mightily in return. Lost my job at the grocery store, but that could come around again when times get better. The house isn’t much. It’s on a cul de sac with some foreclosures standing empty on either side, but it’s paid for. Between Glory’s part-time job at Lowe’s and Greg’s pension, the bills get paid. Plenty of time to play Grandma.

“You don’t like *Dateline*,” I reminded Glory, but she had closed her eyes. Being pregnant made her either sleepy or hungry, and it was starting to make her fat, which she whined about all the time.

“What did you expect?” I’d asked her one day, even though I knew the answer. She expected to look like all the cute movie stars who gallivanted around with their baby bumps and their boyfriends. Married or not, those guys were always looking out at America and telling us how they couldn’t wait to be daddies. Glory cried that day. She was starting to understand that she was a prince-less princess turning into a pumpkin.

I let her drift off to sleep even though she should have gotten up and helped me clean the house. I leaned back and picked up the Pets classifieds. Poor old Tumbles, our poodle, had died two weeks after Greg did, and missing him was getting tiresome. It might sound wrong to miss a dog more than your dead husband, but some things that sound wrong are true anyway, and when you’re fifty-seven you don’t bother to fool yourself any more. For years, Greg shuffled out to the garage every day and night to make birdhouses and other junk. Then the computer comes along to suck him into another black hole. I can go for a game of computer poker occasionally, and once I ordered a pair of 9-wide Hi-Steppers online rather than drive across town to Dixie B’s Dance Shop. I’ve never been a woman of any ambition. I’ve never planned on doing anything big, but I can’t see wasting what time I have sitting in front of a machine. Or dancing, for that matter. First thing after the funeral I sold our square dancing clothes at a garage sale. End of *choose your partner*. I’d chosen the wrong guy. Or at least Vietnam turned him into the wrong guy. It was my misfortune to fall hard right before he got drafted. Anyway, all that dancing and the laptop probably saved the poor man from going completely bonkers. It took six months before my feet got halfway back to normal. Hi-Steppers are hell on the arches.

Now what I needed was a dog. My grandchild should grow up with a dog as company, as should all kids when their moms and grandmoms are relaxing in front of the TV or cooking dinner. Finding the right one seemed like a huge task.

Over the next couple weeks, I met lots of dogs. Tumbles was so old and crippled by the time he died that these dogs seemed like they came from another species. Wiggly, jumpy critters that were either too big or too small or part pit bull, a dog I feared, even though Greg once told me they’re just like other dogs only with bad press. “It’s cocker spaniels that do most of the biting,” he said, claiming he read it on the Internet. “Read it on the Internet,” I mimicked him, “so it’s got to be true!”

He shrugged. Greg wasn’t a fighter. I always thought a good fight might clear the air, but it never happened. Rages came and went for a while after the war, but that’s not the same as an argument where you both get to yell and then make up. He did all the yelling and it scared me the way his eyes got sometimes. My father had drunk tantrums where his eyes turned fierce red like that, like hell burned inside him. I escaped one mental case and ended up with another. No babies, I told Greg, until that raging stopped. I was about out of eggs by the time he shaped up. I swear he finally took the pills the doctor ordered because he wanted to love somebody and he’d be damned if it was going to be me.

While I was driving all over Hillsboro and Forest Grove and even out to Newberg looking at dogs, it didn’t occur to me to wonder what Glory might be doing. And go figure, because I knew by this time I should always track what that daughter of mine was up to. At Lowe’s every afternoon she did the accounts on the computer. She sewed baby clothes or shopped for baby stuff on her off time. It was only after hearing on TV how I might find a dog on craigslist that I got my first notion my daughter was in trouble.