

Merry Go Round

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Chapter 1

Merry Go Round

A Primeval Short Story

Betrayal of Trust

I remember watching him die; my beautiful dark-haired, dark-eyed research assistant. So ridiculously, selflessly heroic. Some days I wonder if he dashed back into that chamber to rescue Nick because he loved him, or if he dashed in there to save Nick for me.

Sometimes I think I should have been less open, mentioned Nick less often. I remember riding him languidly in the shadow of Nick's desk one hot summer's evening, sweat glistening on our bodies. I was consumed by his eyes, by his smell, by the feel of him within me. Was he consumed by the photo of Nick and I, together, that must have gazed disapprovingly over the scene?

No matter; some things are easily changed. I just take a different turn around the loop. I remembered him telling me how he'd nearly joined the army. I gave a few nudges here and there, making sure that the brainy girlfriend he'd followed to Oxford in the first iteration dumped him just as the entrance application arrived in the second. He joined the army and there was a different research assistant to screw under Nick's desk. He was prettier but he didn't consume me and I didn't mourn when he died in Hilary's place.

The next time I saw him die it was in jaws of a beast from the future. Some portent of things to come, winding its way back through the anomalies to the Permian era. That was careless of me. I'd trusted to his instincts and quick thinking, but the creature was swifter still, with instincts honed by the competition in some

far future environment.

That death was harder to change. In the end I could only delay his posting to the anomaly team, not prevent it altogether. But I brought him back. Brought him back, tracked him down, concealed my identity; hot kisses stolen in frantic moments when we were both in the same town and the same century.

I can bring Nick back too. It was a typical Nicholas Cutter move really. Never acknowledge a viewpoint other than your own; never back down; never give anything away; never change your mind; never admit you were wrong. In the next iteration I won't make the same mistakes.

That's not what I shall say to my gallant handsome captain though. Too hard to explain; too likely to raise questions, to call my feelings into doubt. I meant to come here alone, to do what needed to be done. But moments ago I looked west and there he was, unmistakable under the harsh sun. For someone who didn't love him, perhaps he would be an anonymous figure, but I know that walk and the way he turns his head, almost as well as I know the kiss curl, and the small noises he makes as I touch him, and tease him, and bring him to climax.

And yes I did say love. It's foolish to deny an emotion. Until you acknowledge it, you can never master it.

He'll tell me why he's here soon enough, though I have no doubt it is to do with the minx at his side. Sarah Page, I would guess. Maybe Jenny betrayed me. I didn't know she had it in her. I'm busy hunting the predator children, clearing up the mess. I've turned my back on the approaching figures. They'll tell me why they're here soon enough and Captain Becker will protect me from any skullduggery Jenny's dusky mistress has in store for me.

It's then that I hear a shot.

If You Believe in Love at First Sight, You Never Stop Looking

I'm not sure exactly when I first heard the name Claudia. It must have been in those first few days at the ARC, talking to Jenny; the little conversations, back and forth, getting to know each other, checking out that we both liked each other *that way*.

Somewhere in all that cautious, flirtatious feeling of our way she must have mentioned Claudia. The woman who might have been. The woman that Nicholas Cutter loved.

I liked Jenny. I mean I *really* liked Jenny. She was clever and funny and she had a sense of sly mischief underneath all that professionalism and drive that kept me endlessly alert and interested. But, you know, when I first met her all I saw was this bossy woman surrounded by soldiers. My first impression was of someone a bit officious, a civil servant who was going to throw their weight around because they could. I got to know the real Jenny later. It wasn't love at first sight. There was no instant connection.

But Claudia? Sometimes I discussed Claudia with Jenny because Jenny was naturally curious about this strange other self. She had gathered from hints dropped by Nick that Claudia hadn't possessed that off-putting and cold exterior. Once, Nick said that Claudia had kissed him before she ever properly spoke to him, but Jenny had never managed to get him to elaborate that chance remark. I think Claudia made more sense to me than she did to Jenny. All that fun and mischief that was my Jenny, without that icy professional face, without all those barriers erected to keep the world away. I knew, I just knew, that if I'd met Claudia, the moment I saw her, I would have known. I would not have had to learn her the way I learned Jenny.

I liked Jenny, sure, but it wasn't love.

If anything, love stumbled *because* of elusive will 'o the wisp Claudia. Jenny was never really all there for me. She was never really all there for anyone. Even when her head was thrown back, hair streaming across the pillow in the throes of passion, somewhere, deep inside, you knew she was worrying that she wasn't completely real.

Sometimes I dreamed of Claudia; wild and passionate, free from the shackles that bind Jenny.

And we always came back to Nick Cutter. Jenny had thought maybe he was warming to her, just a little, before he died. She said that to me just once, before ever our lips met, but I nursed that thought. If Cutter had lived there would have been no us, but Jenny would have been happier and more complete.

As soon as I saw the map revealed inside the artefact I knew why Helen wanted it and what she would do. Lester had told me, in a short official briefing when I joined the project that everything about Helen was about control. They'd had her profiled apparently. She'd killed Cutter and it hadn't fixed the time lines, so obviously she would change that and try again. I had her notebooks. I had my own sketches of Cutter's map. I had a few notes from the artefact. I had enough.

When the artefact vanished I knew Helen had it, even though I couldn't fathom how she'd got it. I gathered from her notes that Helen had made a few tweaks before, been round a few "iterations" as she termed them. Jenny was Claudia and

Claudia was Jenny again. Becker died and then didn't and then died again. If Becker could be saved then, obviously, Cutter could be, too. It was almost a game for Helen; a fairground ride.

I considered letting her get on with it. Jenny would be happier with Cutter alive; closing my eyes and turning away seemed like a terribly good option. But, of course, in that iteration there would never have been Jenny and me. There would have been no languid mornings drinking tea on my tiny balcony, nor dusky evenings drinking wine in front of her ridiculous fireplace. There would have been no memories of smooth skin, nor gentle kisses down my spine. Although I wasn't *in* love, I didn't want to lose those memories. That meant I had to be through the anomaly with Helen. What was more, if Cutter and Jenny were brought together and happy, my gift to her, then Helen would never allow it, the iteration would get written over. After all, wasn't that why we had Jenny in the first place? No, I had to go through the anomaly with Helen, let her make her change and then stop her.

I even thought I knew where she was going. That was guesswork. I based it mainly on the notes that told me which anomalies would be opening soon and an awareness of her obsession with one particular moment in the Permian era. One of the places where one of the versions of Captain Hilary Becker had died in one of those iterations of hers. And that pretty much told me who I should take with me: Captain Hilary Becker, not so much a stranger to Helen as he often made out. That much was clear as day from the notes in her little book.

I'm not stupid. I knew that I couldn't stop Helen on my own. I was going to need someone to go with me and help me bring her back and the best candidate seemed to be Becker. I couldn't go to Lester and demand troops. I couldn't think of any reason why they should take me through the anomaly with them. So I went to Becker, I spun him a line about how Lester had forbidden me to check the anomaly out, but that I was sure Helen was there and that she was trying to resurrect Cutter. I didn't tell him until the last minute so there was no time for him to think about checking out my story and I said I was going to go anyway and he could either come with me or take responsibility for whatever became of me all alone in the Permian.

Helen would be allowed to bring back Cutter, my gift to Jenny, for good times and no regrets and then she would be stopped. That was the plan. I hadn't counted on the extent of Becker's own hurt and jealousy.

And when we returned through the anomaly? Well Cutter was alive and well but Jenny had gone.

Claudia is, indeed, wild and passionate and gentle and soft in ways that Jenny always tried to hide. She tells me it was love at first sight.

I miss Jenny.

There is only one real sin, and that is to persuade oneself that the second-best is anything but the second-best.

Doris Lessing

Since I joined the ARC I've been cursed with second best. I'm second best for Cutter, chasing his elusive Claudia and I'm second best for Sarah, chasing some romantic ideal. It is not a situation I handle well. I was best at school. I was best at university. I'm one of the best PR people around. I dumped my fiancé because I realised he was only second best. Being second best took a bit of getting used to, especially when first place has gone to dreams and phantoms. I thought I had got used to it but in the end second best is the refuge of the second rate.

I've never been one to mope. I decided that if I was cursed to be the second best, I was going to be the best second-best there was. If I was going to be trapped in an ersatz life, I would make the best of it. I would play to the illusions other people held. That's what a PR person does, emphasises one thing, tones down another, builds an impression of the world that pleases someone. It's all an illusion. I was best at that professionally, the only difference was that now every part of my life was an illusion.

I asked myself, who was best? Nicholas Cutter was trapped chasing some phantom woman. He was intelligent and unyielding, no holds barred, no prisoners taken in the quest for truth. He fucked like he lived; intense, confident, focused. But afterwards I could see the distaste in his eyes, the realisation that he had settled for second best. I only fucked him once. I didn't want to see that look again.

Sarah, on the other hand, has his keen intellect and thirst for knowledge, but she lacks that supreme confidence. Her phantoms are less concrete and her distaste non-existent. Dark-eyed, sensuous, beautiful Sarah; lips brushing across my breasts, trailing down my body, hot passion and cool demeanour. I may not have been her perfect woman but, if I was perfectly honest with myself, she wasn't my ideal either.

He was a bastard and I was better off without him. But I withheld and in withholding I let Sarah drift away. That was stupid. I let lust over-ride good sense. I mistook second-best for best.

And then he died. In a way it was my fault. I should have spotted that the duplicate wasn't him. That might have made a difference. Claudia would have spotted it wasn't him.

I'd lost Sarah. Oh we were still together but the end was in sight and approaching with a kind of sick certainty. I wasn't... well I wasn't whatever it was she wanted. She may not have looked at me with angry distaste in her eyes but the endless grind of the second-best was wearing her down.

I was not being the best at being second-best. Being the best isn't about being content with your lot. It isn't about making-do. It's about making a difference. It's about putting things right.

And I am more than second best for Cutter and second best for Sarah. I am the second best. I am the pale imitation of someone who was best, in the correct version of the world. The more I talk to Connor. The more I think about what must have happened. The more my life appears a kind of lie. I have memories of growing up and going to university, applying for jobs, making friends. But those memories aren't real. What really happened was that someone called Claudia grew up, went to university, applied for different jobs and made different friends and then one day I appeared. I popped into existence and wiped all of that away with a fake life.

Once I realised that, my course of action was surprisingly clear.

I met Helen in a grimy little cafe off the M25. I didn't even realise such places still existed. She looked amused to see me there but Helen nearly always looks amused. It's one of the ways she manages to convey that she knows more than we do. She does, of course, but not as much as she'd like us to believe, otherwise she would reveal more and obfuscate less.

I offered her the artefact. I knew what it was for and I took some pleasure from cutting through her bullshit and saying, "It's a map." Sarah has talked of it often enough and I've seen her notes. Of course, there's no such thing as a free lunch, so I put it to Helen that I wanted to bring Nick back and let her draw her own conclusions. I then dropped that small piece of self-recrimination into the conversation, "I'm sure Claudia would have spotted the difference," and watched the idea take hold and bloom.

Helen knew which change had replaced Claudia. I had no doubt she could put that back any time.

I've always got a thrill out of spinning a line, of creating a story where the details all hang together. You could almost see the wheels turning in Helen's head as her brain leaped from my desire to bring Nick back, to sexual jealousy, to her plan to both bring him back and thwart my advances at one and the same time.

Sometimes it's the really complex people who are easiest to deceive. You don't have to work so hard to get them to join the dots.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not doing this to win his heart, or make amends or whatever reason she ascribes to me with that secretive smile of hers. I'm through with being second-best. I'm putting right something that was wrong. Setting the world back to best because that's the only thing worth doing.

She'll return Claudia to the time lines and I'm sure the two of us are enough alike that Claudia will prove a match for her.

The Difference Between Love and Lust is that Love is Always Deadly

I know my duty. 'King and country' my grandfather used to say, as his brain slowly rotted away in the tight confines of an old people's home. My duty is clear. Helen has to be apprehended. Helen has to be stopped.

I remember the first time we met. It was almost as if she'd been waiting for me; almost as if she knew I was there. Laura had just dumped me, with a fucking cruel little text message "Gng out wth Simon nao. Stll frnds?" and I was consumed with a dark, angry bitterness. I was working shifts, late night at Tesco's, making some money to tide me through university. I thought "fuck it" as I read that message and I left aisle fucking 5 with 43 fucking tins of fucking chopped tomatoes still to stack, and walked out of the store. It was midnight and the carpark was empty and dark. Helen was there, somewhere, in the shadows. She must have gauged my mood as I approached because her hands were upon me almost before I registered her presence, lips hot and wanting. She rode my anger like a surfer rides a wave; one word "Nick" hanging on her lips as she came in response to my inexperienced and hungry thrusts. She left me confused, strangely comforted and wanting more.

Down the years it's always been the same. In the black moments, when body and soul are exhausted, when my anger is burning brightest, she's been there: sun-tanned body, all muscle and sinew, lean and purposeful, nothing unnecessary and nothing wasted. A mind that can look into your own and tear it apart, see deep into your soul, and put you back together again fresh and new: ruthless, determined, unstoppable. She's never lied about Nick, never dodged a question, never explained why she returned to me time and again. Something about me, perhaps, reminded her of him.

There have been quiet times too, but Helen shrivels in the peace and quiet. She

becomes a shrewish older woman, dissatisfied with her lot, chafing at the bounds of propriety. She is in her element at the heart of the storm, riding events and passions. She is a cruel mistress, but her cruelty is the cruelty of clear sight and the dagger-like sharpness of a mind that questions everything and misses nothing. You can't resent an intellect like that. You can only fight where you can and submit where you must and learn and strive to be her equal.

To arrest her would be true cruelty. It would be like caging a wild animal. I read once that some creatures will gnaw their own legs off to escape from traps. Cutter once told me of a polar bear at a zoo that rubbed its head repetitively at the glass; again and again and again, until it had rubbed a patch bald. Nothing left to do, nothing left to want, in three feet of earth with bars around it. Helen would be like that. She would tear out her heart, kill her soul, die a hundred deaths rather than remain captive. It would be kinder to kill her than to capture her.

I have no idea why Sarah told me where she was. No, that is not quite true, I have some idea. I've seen Sarah and Jenny dancing around each other and around the artefact and it would not surprise me if one or the other of them were responsible for Helen getting hold of it. I don't believe Sarah's story of a forbidden investigation. But I have no choice. Either I go with her after Helen, or Sarah will go to Lester and the whole pack of dogs will be after her.

Helen has seen me approach. I can sense the alertness in the lines of her body. It's like an electric connection, arcing between us. She doesn't just talk with her mouth, but with her hands and her hips, the thrust of her jaw and the incline of her head. She has turned her back. So fucking like her, so fucking dismissive, I have only ever been a bit on the side to her, a quick fuck. I don't consume her the way she consumes me.

And it isn't like I don't know what she's fucking doing. I'm not so fucking stupid that I can't work out why she should return to this particular place and this particular time, where Captain Ryan died. She is going to change history again and I know the exact reason why.

For her it has always been Nick.

I shoot.

Epilogue

The pain is intense. It burns. My mouth is parched and dry under the unforgiving sun. When I look back I can see the trail of blood I am leaving behind me. In an hour I have pulled myself barely ten metres.

I will survive. The sun will burn me. The predators will come and I will devour them. The wound will bleed, then scab, then heal. Only a scar will remain to remind me of the betrayal.

I will not die. This is survival of the fittest and I will survive. I will heal. I will learn. I will grow. I will return and when I do I will have my revenge on Captain Hilary Becker and Dr Sarah Page.