

Klondike

by Kelli Trapnell

"You can tell me that you feel fine all you like," Clyde had said to her after calling her into his office at Lloyd's of London. "But you've just been mugged, Elaine." Elaine crossed her ankles more tightly and tugged at the hem of her gray pencil skirt. She did her best to look unruffled in front of him, as she always did, but she had wanted to look particularly in control on that day, given that it had already been two weeks since the attack at Piccadilly. She wasn't weak, and she had wanted Clyde to see that. Instead, all he seemed to see was a wounded, irrational female. She often wondered if that was all anyone would ever see in her, if her past somehow radiated from her body like a glowing neon sign.

"Like I said, I think that the best thing would be for me to continue working," she said, feeling how he was trying to hold her together with his brown eyes, his brown forehead creased.

"Listen to me, Elaine," he had said, crouching next to her chair and taking her hand so suddenly that she flinched. Her attacker's ice blue eyes, his screaming yellow teeth, the quivering gun in his hand flashed to mind, and she had to blink the fuzzed, static images away. Clyde held on to her, though his body softened. "As an employer, I am merely trying to do what is best for one of my most overworked employees, and therefore what is best for the company as a whole. As a friend, I am trying to keep you sane." He rubbed a thumb across the back of her palm, and he stood up, hands in his pockets. "Just take the holiday. I'll see you in a month."

It had only been a week. Steam snaked from the polished silver showerhead as Elaine Brooks arched her back against the surge of water that drummed against her fair, thin skin. The small, tiled bathroom at the Hotel Zenit wasn't exactly luxurious, but the shower was reliable and hot, and right now that was all that Elaine needed. As she let the water spill over her head, she imagined her scraggly blonde-brown hair turning into fine, heavy ropes of gold yarn; she

could almost feel the weight of the water pressing into her skin, rolling smooth the premature wrinkles on her face, chasing away the struggles of the past ten years. The friendly, impersonal water pounded against her eyelids, against her ears, against her brain, eliminating everything but the feeling of it streaming down her body.

When Elaine stepped out of the shower, the mirror had completely fogged over, and she smiled to herself. Then she twisted her wet hair into a quick bun on top of her head and pulled a towel off the rack before slipping through the door into the bedroom. Elaine got dressed quickly; the foreign air bit at her bare skin. Before leaving the hotel room for the day, she stopped at the mirror on the wall and surveyed her reflection flatly. Her skin was pasty, but that was true of most Londoners--at least most Londoners she knew, anyway. She straightened the grey pencil skirt she had put on.

She frowned and tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, then she turned away from the mirror. As she left the hotel, she grabbed a worn pack of playing cards off the side table and tucked them into her purse.

At the end of the block, Elaine made a right onto Calle San Jacinto. Today, as usual, the street bustled with life, reflecting the daylight in shades of orange and pink and indigo blue. Elaine pushed her way through crowds of middle-aged women, gabbing to each other in Spanish and pulling small, wire carts stocked with groceries behind them. The young men, full of teeth and hair gel, called out to each other from the opposite side of the street and whistled at the swinging blonde ponytails of teenaged American tourists without shame. The pack of cards seemed to throb in Elaine's purse, and she did her best to disappear, ducking her head but never slumping her shoulders, thanks to years of Catholic school instruction. She marveled at the Spanish girls, who wore enough makeup to entirely coat their eyelids, and who traipsed through the cobblestones on spindly, towering boots that came up past their knees, talking and laughing with each other, their eyes fixed on their cell phones. Elaine didn't understand why none of them had the decency to

maintain good posture, but then again, considering those shoes, maybe staying balanced was more important here.

As she walked through the smell of freshly baked bread that perpetually hung about the Paneria Jacinto, Elaine decided that this particular part of her day, around two, was interesting. Elaine didn't mind the crowds in London—their seething masses could swallow her whole and make her insignificant in a way that nothing else could—but here, it was the eyes. The eyes of the Spanish men made any crowd instantly dissolve into nothing, leaving Elaine feeling jagged, bare, and exposed to the world. As she walked to the Parque Maria Luisa every day, their dark, hungry eyes bore into her; they—all strangers—stared at her with the same intensity that Alan had.

Alan. Even though it had been almost ten years since she'd left him, memories of her ex-husband trickled into her brain like the music on a carousel, taunting her, bringing her back to the days of darkness, the nights dotted and soft like Impressionist paintings. She shook her head and picked up her pace as she crossed the bridge over the Guadalquivir River and headed toward that towering, Moorish mass of brick, the Torre de Oro. Just thinking about him was enough to make Elaine want to start running.

“Oye, rubiaaa!” Elaine heard some Spaniard yell out and whistle. Feeling sharp, she concentrated on the slap of her faded black flats on the concrete.

“La mimada, la viejitaaa!”

Her flats flicked the sidewalk like cards, like memories.

“Que rica, la chica!” Elaine heard one of the men suck his lips in to make wet, pointed kissing noises.

“Oye, mami, oye reina, princesa!”

“Queda conmigo, mi Inglesa!” The men fell into laughter, but the catcalls were never ending, even following her to the park. She crossed the street, but still they came, taunting, yelling at her.

“Rubiaaaa, bonitaaaa!”

The voices swarmed, stung her. They increased in volume and rattled against her ears, morphing into a sharp buzzing, no

longer Spanish words, but becoming English, familiar and slurred, the way that Alan and his friends had sounded on the night she filed for divorce.

“GLORY, GLORY MAN UNITED!” The thunk and jingle of the key in the lock.

“What's the matter, Allie? Can't get your key in the slot?” Bubbled, fermented laughter from the street.

“Aw, piss off, Mac! Sodding wanker!” Alan's retort. The peel and crack of the door opening.

“Lanie-loo! Guess who, ya fuckin' slag?” His voice crashed around the room, punched her in the eye. Then a slammed door, a breaking of glass.

“Ah, fuck. Your art shit fell over here, better get down and see.”

The shakiness in her chest. The surprise at seeing her hands also shaking. Remembering the bruises on her arms. The dread in the steps down the stairs, normal as the creaking noise they made. Elaine was dimly aware of the sound of her flats on the Seville sidewalk, of the paddleboats on the river to her right, but they were the memories—her reality was ten years ago, written on her arms in bruises, solid in the banister she clung to on that night and other nights that were the same.

“Jus' got back from the match... AND THE REDS GO MARCHING ON, ON, ON!” Alan bobbed around to the Manchester United chant, off-balance, his brown hair sticking up everywhere, his red jersey soaked in sweat and beer. His brown eyes were closed and his hands were in the air, limp.

Then she remembered seeing her last colored amphora, the last trace of her artwork, in pieces on the floor in the entryway. The air became iron. She remembered sinking down on the steps, letting her heavy head fall into her trembling fingers, her breaths coming in shudders. From so far away from him, she toyed with the yarn of the hat she had knitted him that day.

“Hey, ‘Laine, hey,” Alan said, his voice suddenly close to her ear. His fingers yanking her chin out of her hands. His whiskey breath foul, but his words sweet. He glanced down at the hat in her hands. “You and your knitting. You are beautiful, you know?” He kissed her, and the air was air again, and clean.

She looked at his bloodshot eyes, as red as his shirt, and searched for him, for the *real* Alan, despite the alcohol swirling in his pupils. Somewhere else, her flats tapped along on the sidewalk, until they came to a stop. His eyes deepened and then they changed. He threw her head away, hard enough for her to hit the opposite wall. “Now clean up your shit, bitch.”

Elaine squeezed her eyes shut against the bright Seville sun, fighting against the memories. When she opened them again, she was facing the imposing cast-iron gate that surrounded the famous Parque Maria Luisa, the site of the 1929 Worlds' Fair, and Elaine's daily haunt during siesta, when all the shops closed down and the people disappeared into their favorite café or bar for a few hours. Elaine preferred the little games library that was tucked into the far corner of the park itself, hung with sprawling trees, whose gargantuan roots stuck out from the Spanish soil like thick veins and broke up the little half-moon shaped patio area where Elaine liked to sit and play cards.

Today, the park seemed luminescent; pushing Alan from her mind, she focused on the way the sunlight shimmered through the leaves on the gigantic trees, patterning the cobbled ground with splotches of gold and black that danced with the wind. Smells of lilac and orange blossom landed softly on her shoulders, holding her down, keeping her from floating back to those places that she had buried deep, deep down, as she walked through the dusty afternoon sunlight. Elaine crossed the patio as though it were filled with broken glass, passing a wide, cracked, circular fountain on her way to the table she usually occupied. She hardly noticed the old Caucasian man sitting on a bench next to a remarkably fat cat, or the little Spanish games librarian, who was rolling dice and smoking

a cigar in the small, square room where anyone could rent games. Instead, she kept her eyes on her table and pulled her own pack of cards from her purse. The sounds of broken glass and drunken words reverberated in her skull, along with the images of the yellowed teeth and blue eyes of the mugger from the attack at Piccadilly.

With a sigh, Elaine sank onto the bench and leaned over the table, shuffling the cards and then placing them in seven different stacks of increasing increments. Solitaire was one thing she could go to. She had picked up the habit shortly after she left him and filed for divorce, so he hadn't tainted the simple comfort of sorting cards one by one, of controlling the order of things. She thought that it was almost as good for relaxing as knitting had been, but she would never touch another pair of knitting needles again, not after what she had done. No, Solitaire, Klondike to be exact, was a perfect substitute. Elaine would sometimes assign memories to each card, black for bad memories, red for good—the higher the value of the card, the more persistent and significant the memory. Today, as she put each card on top of another one, she rattled off the assigned memories in her head.

King of Clubs—the night that he told her that her art was stupid, that nobody cared, the night that he smashed all but one of her hand-blown glass vases right in front of her. She cracked a wry smile. *My Kristallnacht. My night of broken glass.*

Queen of Hearts—the evening he had taken her out to the last carousel he'd repaired, after the carnival had long-since closed. The one horse he had repainted just for her, in a swirled pattern like the pattern on her last vase, orange and navy and lime.

Jack of Spades—the fight in front of her parents, the one time they had come to visit her at home in London. The way he'd thrown his coat at her, right at her face. Seeing him having to visibly restrain himself. The fact he had never restrained himself when it was just the two of them.

And on and on the cards played out, drawn from the deck and rearranged into a sequence of buried memories, until she came

to the King of Diamonds. A sudden warmth filled her. She smiled and put the card aside while she shrugged out of the slate grey suit jacket she had on. Arms bare now, her pale skin seemed to slowly burn in a gentle caress of the sunlight, of the growing happiness inside of her. She let this particular memory flood her, spill over into her every corner, just as the water in the fountain bubbled and gushed over the rim.

The bartender of The White Horse pub plunked another pint of Guinness onto the bar, and Elaine watched as the swirling, dark liquid foamed over the rim of the glass. Alan wrapped both of his hands around it and brought the glass to his face, throwing back his head and sucking in the coffee-colored drink greedily. Elaine took a sip of her gin and tonic. It fizzed through her nose and burned the top of her mouth, but if that's what it took to be with Alan, it was certainly a small price to pay.

Alan smacked his lips together. "Ahh," he smiled blearily at her. "Such a nice feeling, having a little drink in your belly, eh, Elaine? Especially after repairing such a bitch of a carousel tonight." He dragged his tanned forearm across his face, wiping up the foam that the Guinness had left on the little stubble that had grown back since his last shave. At least he had changed out of his coveralls. "Yes, I'd say having a little drink is almost as good as seeing your little face, my beautiful, gorgeous wife."

He reached over and touched her cheek, and Elaine blushed. Alan blinked and a smile crept onto his face. "What's this?" he asked, touching the hat she was wearing. He pulled it off her head and examined it in his hands, bemused. Billy Joel's "She's Got A Way" played softly in the background, and Elaine shook her blonde hair out in the yellow bar lights. It was a Saturday night, and the traffic of people in the bar was steady without making it feel too packed for a private conversation.

"Well, I don't know, it's just something I made today," she said. "My mom used to knit, so I thought I'd pick it up. I like creating things, you know"--Alan snorted into his beer and rolled his

eyes—“and knitting, well, it means I can create things that people will actually use, things that are less breakable.” She took another sip of her drink and watched him examine the knobby yarn. The hat, which was multicolored and floppy, was a good first effort, especially for only a day's work, and Elaine was proud of having made it. She smiled and tilted her head in Alan's direction. “What do you think?”

Alan raised an eyebrow and turned the hat over in his hands. “Well,” he said. “It's better than wasting our time and money on making flimsy little ‘ornamental vases’ that no one will ever use.” He smacked his lips together, looking for words. “It's definitely one of a kind... I don't think a machine could have produced something this... colorful.” He tried to stifle a laugh, but it pushed past his lips. Elaine looked away, and Alan stood up next to her, his hand on her shoulder.

“No, no, don't take it that way,” he said, traces of the smile still tucked into the corners of his mouth. “I only mean that I can tell that you made it, that you actually created this entire hat out of nothing.” He pushed a stray piece of hair out of her face and she looked up at him. He seemed to be laughing at her, but in a gentle, loving way. She smiled back at him.

“Well, I did use yarn,” she said, her voice small. “That's not really nothing.”

“From a leprechaun's sheep, from the looks of this thing,” Alan joked. “It's like a rainbow exploded into the dye.” She laughed, and he kissed her roughly, his hand wrapped around her neck, pressing her head against his face. When he pulled away, Elaine felt a joy expand within her lungs, pushing away all of the air she had left and suffocating her with its weight. She watched as Alan smashed the lumpy, lopsided hat on his head, then jumped from the barstool to the bar itself.

“Hey, Allie, what do you think you're doing?” boomed the bartender, but Alan didn't listen. He stood squarely in the middle of the bar and stomped his boot on the bar top three times.

“HEAR, HEAR!” He yelled. “That's right, attention everybody!” The whole place quieted and Elaine stared at her husband, wide-eyed.

“I'd like to just introduce you all to my lovely jewel of a wife, Elaine Brooks!” He motioned for her to stand up, so she did, uncertainly.

“Sit down!” Someone yelled from the back.

Alan didn't seem to hear, but Elaine felt watery under the gaze of so many strangers. She looked at him, willing him to just get down and stop making a fool of himself.

“Now, I love my Elaine, don't get me wrong. More than I can even express to you fine crowd,” Alan continued. “But do you know what she showed me today?” He downed another quarter of his pint. “She showed me today that my wife--Elaine Brooks, everybody!—that she is amazing, because this!”—he pulled the hat off his head and swung it around in the air like a banner—“is what my wife can do! Why should she need a real job, anyway? She is a creator of things, of terribly ugly things, but a creator still, and THAT, ladies and gents, is why I love her.” Elaine looked up at him through tear-filled eyes, her smile wider than it had ever been, ripping the seams off her face. *He loved her. He loved that she made things. And he loved those things enough to tell the world about her.*

“To Elaine!” he yelled, glass in the air. “And her terrifying artistic ability!” Then he slipped off the bar and crashed to the floor in a heap. The pub roared with laughter, but Elaine didn't care. Alan loved her, he had been proud of her tonight.

A gust of wind sent some of her cards flying off the table, but when she got up to retrieve them, a little Spanish boy was already bent over, collecting them as well as he could, his small, tanned hands already full of two glasses of water. Elaine rushed over and scooped up the rest of the cards, then returned to the table.

“Um, gracias... Mon cartes...” She held up a card and pointed at the other cards sticking out of the boy's fingers. One of them was her precious King of Diamonds, the other was the King of

Spades, which glared at her, accusing. She quickly looked away. Meanwhile, the boy was climbing onto the bench on the other side of the table with some difficulty.

"Oh, I speak English, don't worry," he said with a smile. Though his words had a slight accent to them, his grammar was excellent. Elaine looked at his bright brown eyes, surprised at his confidence. "I'm Marco," he said. He plopped down the glasses of water and held up the two cards. "These are *cartas*, in case you lose them again." He reached across the table, and she took the cards from him. His hand was tiny compared to hers.

"Well, tell your mother I said thank you," she said, and immediately started to shuffle her cards again. The boy didn't move.

"I don't have a mom because she's dead, and my dad is never around because he's a professional journalist. He says being gone is important if you're a journalist," Marco said matter-of-factly, bouncing in his seat. "I brought you some water because you looked thirsty."

He stood up and carried one of the glasses over to her side of the table. Elaine looked around the park for some sign of a babysitter or nanny, but there was only the old man, the games librarian, and a young couple sitting at another table across the patio. The girl had her back to Elaine, talking, but the man, dressed in a pastel oxford shirt and slacks, was staring past his partner, directly at Elaine. She tried to say something, but then Marco stepped into her line of view, hiding the staring man from sight.

"I got you two straws because I like using two straws," Marco said, sliding the straws toward her on the stone table. He smiled. "Two straws is way better, because then I can share with Raimundo." He gestured over his right shoulder at the patch of air that was apparently "Raimundo" and continued to speak. "He has bad breath because sometimes he breathes fire, but he can't really help it, so I try not to make him feel bad. But Claude is fine, so we share a straw." A few moments went by with only the ripping sound of paper to fill them.

“What's your name?” he asked, shaking the straw wrappers off of his straws and plunging them into his glass of water. He swung his legs back and forth under the table, and Elaine straightened up.

“My name is Elaine,” she said, and smiled as politely as she could. The boy kept staring at her, so she pulled a glass of water over to her side of the table and took a drink from it obligingly.

“So you don't use *any* straws! Cool! I still can't do that without spilling some.” He paused for a moment, then turned to his right and said, “Callate la boca, Raimundo.” To Elaine, he explained, “He likes to make fun of me, but he's a skeleton, so what does he know about manners?”

Elaine looked at the strange boy, who was lanky, but healthy, rambunctious-looking, but clean. His mop of brown hair fell into his eyes ever so slightly, and his mouth was small, framed by thin lips. He wore a bright yellow collared shirt and a pair of navy blue shorts with a belt. Not knowing what else to do, and unsure of how to respond, Elaine dealt out another hand for herself.

“Why are you so lonely?” Marco slurped out of one of the straws in his glass.

Elaine stopped dealing and looked at him. “I'm not lonely,” she said.

“Well, then why are you by yourself?”

“I like to sit alone sometimes,” she said, connecting one stack of cards to another. “That doesn't always mean that someone is lonely. And it's not polite to ask someone that, you know,” she added as an afterthought.

“Oh. Sorry,” he said, and looked down at the table. “I'm lucky. I'm only nine, but I already have two best friends that come with me everywhere.” He twirled a straw around his finger. His face grew serious. “But people always think they're imaginary and not real, so sometimes it is hard for them.”

“I could see how that would be difficult,” Elaine said, keeping her tone flat. It was hard to concentrate on her game when this obnoxious little boy was interrogating her.

“Yeah,” he said. Then he looked over toward the fountain. “Your son doesn't talk much, does he? How old is he? Nine, like me?”

Elaine's heart froze. Fingers trembling, she flipped over the next card, and there it was, her King of Spades, the worst memory in the deck. She struggled to keep her voice even.

“I don't know what you're talking about,” she said, lining up the two straws so that they were perfectly straight. When she spoke, her voice felt distant and shaky. “I don't have a son.”

“Really?” asked Marco, genuinely surprised. “I thought that that was him, over there. That boy standing on top of the fountain. He looks a lot like you, and he keeps looking over here.”

Elaine looked where Marco was pointing and nearly fell off of the bench. There, playing in the water of the fountain, was her spitting image in the form of a nine-year-old boy. His sandy blonde-brown hair was short like Marco's, and he had Alan's tumultuous brown eyes.

He couldn't be here. He hadn't even been born—she had made sure. But then how was he here, so alive, so vivid and tangible? Her eyes widened and she caught her breath. A circle the size of a cigarette burn scarred this little boy's left cheek, left a gaping hole in his otherwise perfect face. Elaine started to cry.

“See? You do know him!” Marco exclaimed happily. Then he noticed her tears, and his face fell. “Wait, why are you crying? Don't be sad! Come on!” He grabbed her hand and pulled her off of the bench. Her deck of cards scattered everywhere, but she barely noticed.

“Let's go talk to him!” Marco continued, practically dragging her toward the fountain. “I bet he will be really happy to see you.”

Elaine was only aware of her heart pumping blood through her veins, to her organs and her brain, and back again, was only aware of her feet moving dumbly across the tiled ground.

As they moved closer, Marco cocked his head, then exclaimed proudly, "Hey! He has the same lonely as you do! That kind of niebla..." Then he lapsed into Spanish, discussing the coincidence with Raimundo or Claude, presumably.

This can't be happening. Elaine felt her son's eyes bore into her skin like needles, asking her impossible questions, asking her to explain. But she couldn't, she couldn't—she wanted him to understand, but the past was too heavy, too great to convey here, now.

Then a craggy voice to her left, nearby. "Excuse me, ma'am?" It said. She tore her eyes away from her son and saw an older man, holding Marco by the shoulder in one hand, and holding a leash that was connected to a hideously obese cat in the other hand. Behind her son, the strange man in the pale oxford shirt continued to stare at her, as though he were somehow able to see right through her, as though he were blaming her for what she had done so long ago. She felt as though she were falling into an enormous black pit, filled with spades and clubs and never ending darkness. She wanted nothing more than to scream and run all the way back to the hotel, but she couldn't, this old man was asking her something. She needed to pull herself together.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?" she managed, incredibly.

The old man licked his lips and repeated, "Yes, is this kid bothering you?"

At the mention of the word "kid," Elaine felt herself falling back into that pit, so she just shook her head and pushed past them all, past Marco and past the old man, out of the games library, out of the park. As she left, she thought she heard the old man saying, "But there *is* no one on top of the fountain."

Just to be sure, she glanced back, but her son was still there, standing tall on the very top of the fountain, the hole in his face blaming her for everything, for Alan, for the needle on that night. Without checking to see if it was occupied, she pulled open the door of the nearest taxi and demanded to go immediately to the Hotel Zenit.

Once she was back in her room, she undressed and stepped into the shower for the second time that day, letting herself cry wholly for the first time since she had been mugged in the attack at Piccadilly earlier that week. The shower pounded against her skin comfortingly, drowning out the barrage of sounds in her head, coaxing her back out of the black pit of despair she had fallen into at the park.

I am not crazy, she reminded herself, letting her own voice echo calmly across the chasms she had dug into her mind long ago. *I didn't see anything. It was just the Spanish heat. And I am tired.* She pulled her tree branch fingers across her scalp and tilled her head back into the water. *I should probably just forget about the whole thing.* On the other side of the glass shower door, steam crawled up the slick mirror and peeled away, hanging in the air like the clouds of gnats that formed above the paths in the Parque Maria Luisa, as though it were waiting for something. Everything here seemed to be waiting for something. Like she was waiting for the memories to fade. Like she had been waiting for someone to find out what she had done, for someone to care enough to notice the stains in the carpet, the knitting needles in the trash. But she couldn't think this way, she told herself, she couldn't blame herself for what happened.

She tried to just listen to the hiss of the water breaking against the tile square she stood on, rushing down the shower drain. She tried to think about where that water would speed off to, carrying tiny bits of her into the river, into the wide oceans, to blend with every other thing in existence.

Then, without warning, the shadows of the pit stirred within her once more, provoked by these fluid thoughts. Suddenly, the shower was suffocating, the droplets that crashed into her skin, onto her lips, were drops of blood, streaking her pale, frail body with lines of red, pooling at her feet like they had in the darkness so long ago. There in her hand was the knitting needle; there in a place below her stomach, in a place so hidden and sacred, a terrific pain throbbed. This pain returned to Elaine now, searing and icy and

smudged out and sharp together, swollen with loss and guilt and shame. Amidst this horrid pain, standing in the scarlet of her unborn son's blood, of her own blood, Elaine held her eyes wide against the scalding stream of water and cracked a stained glass smile, a smile that chipped and faded and shattered almost immediately.

But I protected him, she wanted to scream, as the teardrops slid down her face and mingled with the water from her shower. *I sent him where Alan could never hurt him. How could he be back here in the horrible world where he could know his father and where he could be hurt? I wrapped him in yarn and made my child invincible. How could anyone say that I was wrong, that I was crazy?* These thoughts scraped across her mind and tore open the reasons she had knitted herself into over the years. The water from the shower brushed against her bloody legs like so much yarn unraveled. She buried her face in her hands, her guilty, murdering hands, and slid slowly to the floor of the shower, crying.

Somewhere across the city, maybe from the Cathedral, where gypsies scraped out a mournful circus ballad on their rusted accordions, the man with the oxford shirt picked his way back from his girlfriend's apartment, staring up at the stars with a smile, and Elaine heard as clearly as her own heartbeat the tolling of bells, the coming of the Spanish night.

