

The Revolving Door

WHEN HE FIRST SPOTTED HELEN CHANDLER in Baggage Claim at Atlanta-Hartsfield, something strange happened between them. A strange reckoning occurred, and he gazed at her, as though the notion of facial familiarity was the most painful thing he'd ever experienced, and she looked back at him with sympathy, extending her arms to reach for him.

He crashed into her open arms, and they hooked around him tightly. He exhaled, letting the anger subside. He wanted to cry – there was still a connection there. After all of these fucking years.

And he felt Natalie there, too.

The busyness of the airport died around them, as he closed his eyes, falling into his Mother-in-Law's unexpected embrace.

"I'm so sorry, Boy," she whispered. "I am so, so sorry."

Then, he laughed. Harder than he had in awhile. She pulled away from their embrace and gazed up at him. Tears brimmed her bottom lid.

"What on God's green earth are you laughing for?"

"You called me 'Boy'. For the first time in months, I feel like I'm...*me*...again. And it's fucking funny."

She tried to temper her smile. "Well, it won't be too funny if you don't watch that mouth, Boy. Come on, let's get you something to eat. You're lookin' far too skinny."

IT DIDN'T TAKE VERY LONG AFTER HELEN CHANDLER DROVE OUT OF THE AIRPORT LOT, that he realized how long it'd been since he was in Georgia.

At least a couple of years.

The very last few days he spent there, he was packing away the five or so years worth of existence he'd collected in the house on Trent road, cataloging out the things he wanted to take with him into his future, and the things he wanted to leave behind.

And he remembered being happy about this exercise. He'd finally gotten what he wanted: a new life, a fresh start with the woman he'd love more than he could ever love himself. Suddenly, he was presented with a chance to make things better for them, and for himself.

He gazed out of Helen's car window and sighed.

"Where's your head at right now, Boy?"

"Not sure," he replied weakly. "I haven't had a fluid thought in months..."

"Sounds like you need to pray on some things...prayer fixes things that we can't...gives us peace of mind..."

"I haven't prayed since I was a little boy. I don't even know how to."

"You're serious?"

"My parents stopped being practicing Catholics years ago. I'm sure they've forgotten how to also."

"Hmm."

He chuckled, glancing over at his Mother-in-Law. "That's one sound I haven't heard in awhile."

"What sound is that, Boy?"

"That sweet, southern, patronizing grunt of judgment. Natalie did it quite often."

"Well, it's good to know that she learned *something* from me."

"Another thing's funny, too..."

"What's that?"

"That's the first time I've said her name since she left..."

"SHE WAS ACTUALLY BORN IN SAVANNAH. THAT'S WHY I NAMED HER SUCH."

He stared at the mother of his estranged wife, his breath held, as they stood outside on the porch of the Chandler house on Green Hill Street.

“I had her in the backseat of my mama’s car just beyond the riverfront. We were young and stupid and I panicked. And instead of going to the hospital in Savannah like a good, smart girl, I have Rafi drive me all the way back to Decatur in the same night. I was in so much pain. Blood everywhere. A three-and-a-half car ride from hell.”

Helen reached into her purse for her keys, sighing. “As far as anyone knew, Natalie was born in DeKalb Medical right down the street. It made so much sense at the time...but now...who knows.

“We were having some issues, Raphael and I. I even tried running away at some point. We weren’t even married until Sidney was almost two.”

She opened the front door. Brandon remained silent, tempering his breathing, heart thumping against his chest.

She dumped the keys on an end table in the foyer and hung her purse on a hook just by the door. She looked back at him. “Here, Boy, just put your bag down somewhere and follow me into the kitchen. I’ll fix you something to eat. My girls and the lawyer will be over in a couple of hours. That’ll give you time to rest and recollect yourself if need be...”

He placed his bag just within the wide entryway to the den. He paused for a moment, staring at the longest sofa against the window, and pictured Natalie sitting there, waiting almost impatiently, as though she’d anticipated his arrival and had a ready speech for him. He eerily fantasized the notion that Helen’s invitation had been a genuine effort to facilitate reconciliation between the two of them. His body even warmed to the idea of it, as if it were palpable, realistic.

Once he blinked, she was gone. Just like that. Over and done with. And Helen was calling for him from the kitchen.

He entered, and like instinct, washed his hands. He was still robotically trained to the play the part of a man vying for the love and approval of his girlfriend’s family. The air of failure loomed around him jarringly.

Setting himself at the kitchen table, Helen started up the stove and went toward the fridge, glancing at him briefly before reaching inside. She then voicelessly placed a bottle of beer in front of him. “I knew you were comin’. And I knew you needed it.”

He smiled.

She cleared her throat, rolling her eyes. “That’s the smile I was waiting to see.”

He popped off the cap and took a huge gulp. “Few and far in between these days. And the beer has...helped.”

“Well, I can’t tell. Skinny as you look. I’ll never forget the day Nattie brought you to church that Sunday. You should’ve heard the way all the young girls were fawnin’ over that big, strappin’ white boy, Nattie Chandler brought to service.”

He chuckled. He remembered how nervous he was. He remembered how out of place he felt. He remembered how Natalie never let go of his hand.

He took another big gulp, as Helen brought water in a pot to a boil.

“I’d never seen her so passionate,” Helen said. “About anything other than school, I mean. She was always so smart, so focused...such a good girl. I never worried about my sweet Natalie. Ever. So consistent, reliable, loyal. She looked me dead in the eye one day, and said, ‘Mama, one day, you won’t have to worry about a thing...I’m gonna take care of all of us...you’ll see’.

“But she could be a firecracker, you see. It’s my fault, I gave it to her. I taught all of my girls how to take care of themselves. And I was worried that her independence would get the better of her...hold everyone at arm’s length, you see...and then...well... then she brought you home...and...well...my Nattie was in love...in *real* love...”

He cleared his throat. “I’ll take another beer, please...”

Helen moved toward the fridge again. “Are you ready to hear a story, Boy?”

“After this beer, yes.”

Helen handed him another beer. Popping the cap off swiftly, he took two big gulps and slammed the bottle down on the kitchen table. He hadn’t meant to, though. His hand trembled with anticipation and it merely slipped right through his fingers.

Licking his dry lips, he watched Helen Chandler sit opposite him at the table with a steaming mug of coffee in her grasp. “I’m so very glad you’re here, Brandon.”

“Are you really, Helen?”

She lowered her eyes bashfully. “I may not always show it the way you deserve, but, yes, I am glad. I’m glad you walked into my daughter’s life when you did. She needed you. She *really* needed you. You have absolutely no idea how much.”

He scoffed loudly, unintentionally, throwing his head to the side, as though the mere notion of Natalie Chandler needing him as much as he always needed her seemed...*foolish*.

Helen Chandler bounced her shoulders up and down irreverently. “You don’t have to believe me, Boy. I know my daughter. Probably better than you...probably better than she realizes I know her. I could see the way she looked at you. Like you were a dream of sorts that she couldn’t imagine had come true. I make no mistakes about what I see, Brandon Greene.

“And when I saw you two together...”

He felt sick, then, shutting his eyes to collect himself, gripping the beer bottle tightly. “Helen, please.”

“I make no mistakes, Brandon. And God makes no mistakes. Remember that. When I saw you two together...I *knew*...I knew that something big had happened...”

“I ruined us both, Helen. When I got to her, she was so...*pure*. So focused. She had everything going for her. And I...I was the sick fuck who decided that she needed my love. That she needed to learn love. I was the guy who couldn’t stay away from her, who wanted every piece of her. I was...I was sick for her, Helen. I was desperately in love with her...so fucking...”

His voice broke. She placed a hand atop his.

“I pushed her to this. It’s my fault.”