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Annabel Blake

The consensus among those who knew her well, just enough, or even at a glance, was that Annabel Blake was born in the wrong century. She had delicate wrists, skin untouched by sun or ink; preferred upswept hair (though the tendrils fell naturally), wore gauzy pastels and floral prints, preferred sensible flats to heels, and had never once entered a gym voluntarily but could walk miles in a day without a second thought. In the hot, sticky months, she carried a parasol over her head and a light shawl rolled up and tucked into her tote, snug against the stack of books she carried for lunchtime reading, including whichever Austen was currently in rotation. Annabel's manners were impeccable and her grammar exacting (though she enjoyed a semicolon more than she should). And when baby-doll dresses were the nadir of fashion and not one could be spotted from her stop on Twenty-Third Street to her left turn in midtown, she was known to rock an Empire waist, a ribbon about her neck or hair, and a faraway smile on her naturally rose-colored lips.

Annabel Blake knew, better than anyone who knew her, that she'd been born in the wrong century altogether.

On one particular morning in early summer, believing it the day that would begin the fulfillment of her fondest hopes, Annabel

woke to the cheery *brrrang* of the windup clock by her canopy bed—yes, the one she’d had since childhood, because it was, after all, her childhood room, despite now paying her parents market rent for it. The clock’s bright reveille had begun Annabel’s every morning since she’d moved home from college. Being a creature of habit (the details of her life curated to some effect that seemed to delight only her), she liked the way it set her mind astir. Annabel greeted the little clock’s good round face with a fond *bello* and gratitude for circularity, second chances, and fresh starts.

It being a decidedly fresh-start day, she sat upright, eyes sparkling with an idea. She pulled her laptop from under a pillow, balanced it on her knees, and typed the title she’d awakened with, the one thing her just-finished novel lacked. Under it, she wrote her name in the author line, thought better of it, had another cracking idea, and wrote instead: *By Elliot Price-Bennet*. Satisfied, she pressed one last button and waited those thrilling few seconds for the printer downstairs in the kitchen to whir to life and begin spitting out pages. She sprang from the bed in her white cotton nightgown and practically waltzed to the sound of it, because almost everything in Annabel’s world seemed to go better in three-quarter time.

“We’re not made of paper, sweetie,” said her mother without looking up, when Annabel appeared in the kitchen to her parents’ grumbled *good mornings*. She didn’t take it personally; they were creatures of habit too. She was used to the way her mother sat at the island every morning poring over real estate updates on her laptop while gossiping about who was moving into the neighborhood and who was moving out, with an emphasis on square feet and social standing, not to mention the ups and downs of property values.

“Did you see the Wilsons just listed?” her mother said to no one in particular. “I pulled the comparables, and I bet they get fifty thousand over what they paid two years ago!”

“Hm,” said Annabel’s sweet but ineffectual father from his spot

at the rattan glass-top table in the kitchen nook, puzzling over the monthly bills the old-fashioned way, with paper and pen, his half-moon readers perched at the far end of his nose.

Mornings in the Blake household were mostly for worrying about money (theirs and other people's). Having recently put their two daughters through college, there never seemed to be enough of it.

Annabel collected her pages from the printer, stacked the manuscript neatly on the counter, tied a ribbon around it, and clutched it to her chest.

"I finished my novel last night!" she announced to the room. "It's called *What You Wish For*."

"That's nice, honey," said her father, preoccupied.

"Do you know what I wish for?" said her mother. "Now that you have that novel out of your system? That you'd do something practical, like get a realtor's license, like I did. People are making money hand over fist!"

"Why aren't we, then?" Her husband was leafing through the month's rather lengthy Bloomingdale's bill.

"I'm just getting started. These things take time."

"So does being a novelist." Annabel slipped the manuscript into her tote and turned on the electric kettle. "I'm just getting started too."

Her mother finally looked up. "Talk to her, Dad. Novelists never move out."

"Annabel, novelists never move out," said her father with a side wink, more to check a box than make a point. "Though it would be nice if you girls would cut up your Bloomingdale's cards, now that you both have jobs."

"I never had a card," said Annabel, as she spooned loose-leaf tea into a pot.

"Your sister, then."

“Good luck. Cassie’s always thought of Bloomingdale’s as a sort of second home.”

“Explains why we’re paying their mortgage.”

As if on cue, Cassie shuffled in that very moment, wearing furry Birks, her old university of virginia cropped baby T-shirt, and short-shorts, with a pink satin eye mask pushed up on her forehead. Annabel was surprised to see her.

Cassie was older by two years, tall and blond, an influencer whose star was on the rise, and as different from her younger sister as she could be. Where Annabel had always been quiet and bookish, most at home in her make-believe world, Cassie was born sure of herself and wildly outgoing. In their childhood years, Cassie’s lemonade stands to raise money for her mani-pedis (it even said so on the jar) raked in more than Annabel ever did selling raffle tickets for cotillion high tea. In college, where Cassie had been president of her sorority, “semi-cliquey and sorta judgy, but super chill,” Annabel had been proud founder of the Quip & Quill Book Club, topping out at five members.

They hadn’t grown into the sort of sisters who go for coffee, have tête-à-têtes. It wasn’t that they fought. There was nothing of Annabel’s that Cassie wanted, and nothing of Cassie’s that she did. They were simply mismatched—in wants, hopes, tastes. They loved each other, of course; it was just that they had nothing in common. Zero, really. Except having issued from the same loins.

While Annabel knew she held a special place in her father’s heart, she counted her mother as Cassie’s biggest fan, having adopted the view that the world these days didn’t favor books and brains in young women as much as “looks and feels.” Cassie, it seemed, had both in spades.

“I need matcha,” Cassie said, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

“Sorry, sweetie,” said their suddenly doting mother. “You should’ve given me some notice.”

