

12: Stella at the Picnic

Stella got out of Aunty Del's hover-ute and Aunty Del passed her the hummingbird cake. *I should drop it accidentally on purpose while Del clambers out. I want to.*

If she didn't do something to change the irrevocable unfolding of the day, she'd scream. The minute her stupid father stopped by the Reefarium to pick up the stupid fart called Joe Loreno hiding a magnum of swirling silver under his coat, Stella let her anger off its leash.

Last night, when she practiced her controlled shivering, an experiment she'd signed up for, for pocket money, she'd trembled for hours longer than normal. She had her anger to fuel it, she'd written in the notes.

"Stand still, Petal," her father said.

She could turn that trembling on and off now. She would like to smash the damned cake into his face because he put the ignition unit into the backpack. Did he even listen to Del telling him that Lilly was okay with it now?

After Del took the cake back, Stella trailed at the rear of the group. She had the picnic pack on her back and the champagne flutes swaddled in wraps in her hands. What she intended for this picnic was to work at finally seeing her Uncle Joe in one of his so-called *towering rages*. She smirked.

Joe's rages were legendary, her father often said. Stella despised her father for his weakness where her Uncle Joe was concerned. This anniversary was her best and probably last chance to witness her uncle in full spate.

Uncle Joe didn't like Stella uncle-ing him. It made him feel old, he said. *Suck on the dummy, old man.* Stella grinned. Pan didn't like her calling him Pan. He would like her to call him "Dad". She liked Pan for its permutations. A pan to cook in. Panic. Pan handle. Pancakes. The day after tomorrow, she intended to move to her mother's house and never see her stupid father or her stupid uncle ever again.

Del, right in front of Stella, carried the hummingbird cake on its special plate as if she'd like to ... what? Yeah, what'd Del even think that was out of the ordinary? *I don't like her. And why should I even respect her? The way Uncle Joe treats her is terrible. Why doesn't she just leave?*

Next in the line was Uncle Joe carrying Lilly on his shoulders to keep her from the laser-slasher beam Stella's father Panic swept from side to side to clear a path through the weeds.

I don't hate Lilly. A little kid is even more helpless to change things than a big kid. But Stella hated the anniversary celebration with a vengeance. How was this little plot of land worth all the useless dreaming and conniving?

And she hated her family name: Loreno. What kind of name was that? Italian, Panticle said. She should be proud of it. The Italians were the real pioneers he often said.

She had to wait two more years before changing her name. But she'd be out of here way before then. On her birthday a few weeks ago, her father said that since she enjoyed science and did well in it, he was sure Joe would help her get a place at the Reefarium in a few years.

Start as a lab assistant and work your way up, he said. Because his brother said that. Pantoffel never listened to anyone except his stupid brother, she realized. *No way. I'm going to be a doctor.*

To punish Pandoreus, Stella celebrated turning fourteen with a couple of thousand calls. And, ha-ha-ha, he was still fielding some of the jokers she had sent that pervy picture. Just a stupid cluck-chick she found on the pole-webs because she still didn't have the figure.

Which was his fault, too. All her friends had their augmentations since they were twelve! She said he could go and jump with his ideas for her future. All he meant was to be kind and fatherly, he said after he cancelled her phone account.

Uncle Joe of course had insisted bringing a flagon of his magic mixture. First it dangled in a net hanging from his wrist. Where it was too heavy, Stella saw. *Hope it cuts off his blood supply and his hand drops off.*

But he let the net's handles slide down till he held them with his fingers. Lilly kicked her father and pulled his hair as if she were riding a pony. If there ever was a child that crowed, Lilly was it. "Giddy-up, horsey! Make like you're going to trip, Daddy!"

The clearing was made by a bulldozer scooping a shelf in the hillside, long ago, so Panda said. Stella planned her moves. Flap the picnic cloth and let it settle. Set out the glasses. With an easy sleight of hand, she transferred the ignition bundle to the slack of her hoodie. Ha-ha-ha, she was going to love the final scene in this idiotic drama.

"Oh!" Del said. "I love how the afternoon sun makes the clearing into a fantasy picnic place."

Duh, Stella thought. *How icky!* In a minute her aunt—by marriage only, Stella reminded herself—would start recalling all the really good picnics she ever had. As if Stella, or anybody else for that matter, couldn't read between the lines as to what Del thought about this picnic.

But Del only stood waiting in the middle of the clearing, cake in her hands, silent on the subject of picnics.

She needs help getting started? "Like an outdoor concert?" Stella said. "Fairy family picnics?" No reply. "Pony picnics?" Not even a surprise glance from Lilly about her cousin knowing anything about pony picnics. *Boring.* Stella dared to verbalize a bit of Del's dream that the stupid woman had once told her. "Box lunch picnics along the river in Brisbane?"

Finally Del glanced a question at her.

Was that a hunted expression on Del's face? Stella smirked.

Del set the cake in the middle of the red-and-white checked picnic cloth.

"Yum," Lilly said. "Can I eat first and spray-play after?"

"Suits me, munchkin," Uncle Joe said, returning from having set his precious flagon by the well. He sat cross-legged down beside Lilly and pulled the cake toward him. "I don't mind having some with you." Typically, he cut just two generous slices, never thinking there might be more people also too hungry to wait.

Del set out the cake plates and the mugs for a cup of tea after the games. Stella handed Panter the champagne flutes one at the time for him to pour. The last one was hers.

Her father hesitated.

“Go on,” she said. “Remember it’s the reason I agreed to come.”

While sipping her first-ever champagne, and even though that should’ve been a special occasion, Stella watched Del for cues. Sooner or later, Del always escaped to do her so-called *obeisance* at her cliff. Del obviously didn’t care how embarrassing that sounded?

But this time, Stella would help make it easy for her because Del would unknowingly help Stella make her mischief.

Lilly sprang up. “I’m going to fill the spray bottles! You watch out, Daddy!”

There was peace and quiet to enjoy a couple of sips. But then Uncle Joe started his spiel. Stella didn’t listen. When she was still quite young, Pan and Joe would tell stories about the times when they were that young. Now it was only ever Uncle Joe talking about his future.

“That stuff,” he nodded into the direction of the trough, “is going to be the ants-pants in fertilizer. I’ve got a good mind to take some of my vacation time to see what happens here in the valley.”

Uh oh. Del is getting restive. In a minute she’ll be up and away ...

“You mean you don’t know what will happen?” Pantomime said.

“I know what I saw in the lab,” Uncle Joe said. “I need to do a broad-scale trial, don’t I?”

“Aren’t you supposed to first get permission, deeds, go-aheads, whatever, from Environmental Management and Baseline Re-engineering?” Pan Panicle said.

“The EMBers?” Uncle Joe sneered. “What would I say to them? Please may I trial this amazing alien quick-grow substance I engineered in the Reefarium? They’d rip it out of my hands in three minutes in case it was bad for the environment.

“No. This will be my own personal trial that I will write up for my own personal good. If I’m here to record it day by day, that data will do very nicely.”

An anonymous call to the EMBers would put a stop to Joe’s plans. Not that Stella had had the opportunity so far with her stupid father cancelling her phone account?

Lilly called from the well. “Dad? Can I move the pretty water? It’s in my way a bit.”

Stella noted Del covertly studying Uncle Joe as well as looking past him at Lilly leaning against the trough, tilting the flagon this way and that on the rim of the well, as if trying to make it catch the sun.

Del started to get up to go to Lilly when Uncle Joe touched her knee and frowned. “You watch her too much,” he said. “She needs freedom to explore and discover.”

Del subsided.

What is wrong with her? Stella thought. *I want her to go and stop Lilly. The stupid father of the child won't and the kid will have the same problems as me. Pan never stopped me doing anything until it was too late because by then I already did the thing. All those calls I made?*

Uncle Joe turned back to Pan Pantser. "Where was I? Ah yes. As soon as I get a bit of credit, we'll move the Red Hill house up here—"

"When she's quiet like that she is often doing something that needs watching," Del said, showing a bit of backbone finally. "And she *is* only four."

Uncle fucking Joe turned on Del. "Meaning what? My daughter may be only four years old but she is as smart as ..." He grabbed Del by her foot as she passed him on her way to the well to stop a disaster unfolding. Uncle Joe twisted Del's foot and she fell. Then he made a throaty threatening sound at her, warning her not to move or else.

Del froze.

Stella froze too, watching the interplay. She was astounded and she seethed because her father, who was Uncle Joe's equal in strength, said and did nothing? *And I never wondered why Del was always so dampened down? Uncle Joe bullies her? What does he do to her when we aren't here?*

She rethought her intentions. Witnessing Uncle Joe's temper tantrum was a childish goal. What was she thinking?

Lilly had the flagon open and was tipping it. A thin stream of the mixture joined the water in the well. Uncle Joe wasn't concerned so he probably tested it before he brought it home, Stella thought. *The way he acts towards Del, though, is not all right.*

She hid a ferocious grin by tilting her glass and sipping up the last of her champagne. "Seconds now or later?" she said extra brightly. "I'll take that as a now?" she said after less than thirty seconds. As she poured herself a second helping, she glanced toward the well. The flagon lay empty and on its side on the stones encircling the stone coaming.

She looked at Del. Del concentrated on Lilly with big eyes in a wan face. Like she risked her life to be looking at all? *Surely I'm dramatizing. Go on Del. Go take a break.*

"To our next anniversary, may its trees be tall already," Uncle Joe said in his pretentious way. He leaned down on Del's ankle and Del pulled her leg loose and scuttled backward. She thrust her champagne glass into Stella's hands. "Thanks. Good vintage. I'm going to do obeisance at my cliff."

Only Stella's stupid father laughed, and that was the last straw for him where Stella was concerned. Three spray bottles lay ready among the rocks surrounding the well. They swirled with silver even though no one held them.

As Del walked to the back of the clearing, Stella walked toward the well. Uncle Joe of course didn't even look at her. "Whatcha doin, small fry?" Stella said.

Lilly rubbed silver water from the well over her elbows and knees. "Making myself pretty," she said. "See the leaves in my hair?"

Stella touched a leaf and a flower, pulled to free them. Both *grew* from Lilly's head?!

"Don't touch," Lilly said. She twisted away. "Hurts when you pull." The pointy bits of Lilly's elbows had green nubbins growing from them. Her poor heels had started to grow brown roots nubbins.

Stella gasped, shuddered. "That's enough prettying, Petal," she said with an ordinary voice as she could manage. Then her fury won over her fear. Uncle fucking Joe Loreno had *not* had the pretty water tested before he brought it home!

Lilly grabbed up a spray bottle and turned on Stella.

"No! No! Not me. Spray your dad!" Stella cried. Every drop stung—and drew blood. She wanted to disbelieve. *It can't be! This isn't happening!* While she ran to evade Lilly, the stuff pricked through her skin and tattooed her unprotected muscles. Her nerves cringed. *Remember all this when you're a doctor!*

Joe encouraged Lilly. "At them, girl! Give them everything you've got!"

Lilly ran spraying toward Stella.

"You stupid fucking gasbag!" Stella screamed. She walked into the needling spray and wrestled the spray bottle from Lilly's innocent hands. She put her own finger on the trigger for a full blast on Uncle fucking Joe.

Her stupid father stepped toward her with his hands outstretched to take the spray bottle from her. She sprayed him next. "Are you burning yet? Is this stuff needling you? Your wonderful brother cooked this up and you didn't even try to stop him, you blather-head! What kind of father are you?"

Her feet didn't want to take the next step. She looked down. They were stuck in the ground! A smooth brown woody skin rose up her legs. Dimples that were protrusions on the inside pressed into her flesh. She whimpered.

She twisted her torso with the last of her strength. Where was Lilly, poor muffin, so much younger than herself?

Lilly kneeled in the center of the clearing with her hands over her eyes.

Just in time, Stella remembered how to do the trembling. The tree skin hardened around her but she stayed soft inside it. "I will be a doctor," she shouted. That same, but thinner, dimpled chocolate brown crept over her arms. Smaller dimples, thinner protrusions, successively stabbed the sensitive backs of her arms, inner elbows, and forearms.

The cattle trough, the log across the back of the clearing, Lilly, Joe and her father circled her as dizziness overcame her. The spray bottle fell as her arms raised themselves. She shrieked as her joints popped and separated. Her hands and her clever fingers elongated. Buds unfurled from her finger joints.

She fainted but was kept upright in her armor.