

Summer Break

By Denise Holbrook

Rob recited the code for our security gate and hung up the phone. “The circus is in town,” he said.

That’s what Rob called Rachael and her dogs, Freud and Maslow.

“She’s my only sister,” I said, my reply coming out an octave higher than I’d planned.

“I just think she’d be more comfortable in a hotel,” he insisted. “There are two in this area that accept pets.”

His pretend concern annoyed me.

“I know you’re worried about the house, but what could they possibly hurt?”

Outside, our home could have passed for an authentic Frank Lloyd Wright. Its low-slung, horizontal design was striking from every angle. The lawn was merely a pedestal for the house, stripped of unnecessary foliage. Every perfectly-green blade of grass was immaculately trimmed at all times. Rob made sure the lawn service attended to every stray leaf that blew in.

Inside, the expansive masonry living area was a minimalist’s dream. A smooth, slate fireplace on one wall opposed a kitchen of white cabinets with gleaming black countertops on the other. To the rear, floor-to-ceiling windows revealed the extended roofline and slate floor of the outdoor terrace. Beyond, the verdant valley wall fell away for miles before stretching up again to touch the darkening summer sky. This live mural was my favorite part of the house.

“Hannah, those sofas are top grain Brazilian leather,” he said, as if I weren’t aware. I was very aware. We had argued bitterly over the price the day he had them delivered. They had cost the equivalent of three months of my salary as a high school science teacher.

“Have you ever seen Freud or Maslow on the furniture?” I knew he’d hate having to admit that he hadn’t.

“The rugs are antique oriental,” he parried.

“Which,” I reminded him, “looked exactly the same after Rachael and the dogs visited last summer.”

“I had to have them cleaned,” he corrected.

“Of what? Those dogs don’t slobber. She walks them in the park and keeps them brushed. I’ll still vacuum every day if you want. Please, Rob, it’s just for a week.”

The doorbell ended the round.

“She’s here. Please be courteous,” I begged.

Rachael and I squealed in unison, wrapping each other in a long embrace. Over her shoulder, I opened my eyes to see two German shepherds sitting patiently behind her.

“Hey, boys, did you come to see Aunt Hannah?” I called to them.

They wagged their tails, but remained where they were.

“Come,” Rachael said, and they trotted up onto the landing.

I dropped to my knees and stuck my face between their giant heads. Their fur was long and soft. They smelled faintly of my sister’s perfume.

“Come in,” I invited. Rachael removed her sandals. I knew she thought the practice was extreme. I did too, considering we had polished concrete floors and twice-a-week maid service.

Rob leaned against the kitchen counter, his hands in his slacks pockets. He was a surgeon, but I never saw him in his scrubs unless we had lunch at the hospital. We hadn’t done that in a long time.

“Hi, Rob. Good to see you again.” Rachael crossed the distance, arms outstretched.

“Hey,” he said, giving her a one-armed hug.

“Have you eaten?” I asked my sister.

“We stopped and ate on the way, thank you,” Rachael said, looking at the dogs, who now sat just inside the door.

“I’ll help you bring in your things,” I offered, and saw the flicker of anger cross Rob’s face.

“I just have a couple small bags,” Rachael said. “I’ll get them in a bit.”

“I have an early case tomorrow,” Rob excused himself. “I’ll let you two catch up.”

I forced a laugh. “Yes. I’m sure you don’t want to listen to us gab all night.”

“Good night,” Rachael called to his back. She looked at her watch – it was just seven o’clock – and then at me. “If this is going to be a problem, I can stay at a hotel.”

“No, we want you here,” I said, hoping he couldn’t hear me.

We sat on one of the sofas and took each other in.

“Come,” Hannah called softly to the dogs, and they padded over. “Good boys,” she crooned, rubbing their faces. “Down.”

They lay on the rug, watching us talk.

“I never cease to be impressed,” I said.

“I work with high school delinquents,” she chuckled. “These guys are easy.”

Rachael held a doctorate in psychology, with clinical, counseling and forensic certifications. She was currently employed as a high school guidance counselor, but she performed hundreds of hours of volunteer work each year in juvenile detention centers.

“How are Mom and Dad?” I asked.

“Well and happy,” she smiled. “They miss you and send their love.”

The truth was I missed them, too. But every time we talked, I could hear the disappointment in their voices. Our relationship had become a sparse series of conversations about my job and the weather.

“What about you?” my sister asked in her counselor’s voice. “Are you happy?”

“Are you asking as my big sister or as a therapist?”

She grinned. “Is there a difference?”

“I’m still trying to decide whether I’m glad the school year’s over or not,” I answered.

“If you don’t have any plans for the summer, you could always come home with me,” she invited.

“I tried to talk Rob into going somewhere,” I said, “but he holds down the fort for the practice during the summer. Most of the other surgeons have young families, so they all take time off.”

“Speaking of families, do you have any plans to give me a niece or a nephew?” my sister asked.

“Are you kidding? Mom and Dad are freaked out enough that Rob and I moved in together before we married.”

“So, what’s stopping you, Hannah? You’ve been wearing that engagement ring for a year. I’d make a great maid of honor, and I know you want children. You’re not getting any younger,” she teased.

I shook my head. “I never expected the ‘ticking biological clock’ speech from you.”

I’d actually been thinking about it a lot. The trouble was, I couldn’t picture Rob as a father. It wasn’t that his hours were horrendous, although they were. But when I imagined us as parents, I thought about trying to keep a crying baby quiet so it wouldn’t bother him. I never

pictured him relieving me after sleepless hours of rocking a colicky infant. I couldn't fathom him tenderly changing a dirty diaper or casually wiping spit-up off his starched collar.

“Could we talk about something else?” I asked.

“Why don't we go for a run instead?” she answered, “I need to exercise the dogs.”

Rachael brought her bags in from the Yukon. I showed her to her room and went to change into my jogging clothes. Rob was watching television with the volume turned down low. He looked up and frowned.

“Where are you going?”

“We're taking the dogs for a run,” I replied, tying my shoes.

“You need to put those on outside,” he said.

“Sorry. I was in a hurry and didn't think.” I untied my shoes and pulled them off.

Rachael and I stretched in the driveway and then headed down the tree-lined pavement, with Freud and Maslow close behind.

“Who lives there?” Rachael asked as we approached our nearest neighbor.

“I have no idea. We don't exactly have block parties around here.”

“Ah,” she nodded.

We ran for two miles, let Freud and Maslow romp in the park, and then ran back. Rachael gave the dogs water and they settled on the terrace to cool off. I pulled two bottles of vitamin water from the fridge, wrapped a cocktail napkin around each and handed one to Rachael.

She selected a glass strawberry from the sculptured arrangement on the counter and pretended to sniff it. “Hmmm,” she exhaled dramatically. “Mom would be so glad you’re using Grandma’s fruit bowl.”

I had forgotten about the wooden bowl my grandfather had carved, and winced at the memory of it lying in the bottom of one of the cabinets. “Rob thought it was too organic,” I explained. “This fruit never spoils, and there are no fruit flies.”

“It’s also not real,” she said softly.

The next morning, I woke to Rob’s sighing and complaining about the dogs being in the guest room, the dirty shoes outside the front door and the uncapped water bottles in the recycle bin. And I knew.

“Rob, I can’t do this anymore,” I said to his handsome reflection in the bathroom mirror.

“Do what, Hannah?” His image looked sternly back at me.

“Live in a piece of art. And follow all the rules.” I swallowed, determined not to cry.

“You’re being petulant. Grow up,” he said dismissively, returning to his shaving.

I slipped the ring off my finger and set it gently on the vanity.

“I don’t have to,” I said, “I’m joining the circus.”