

Behind the Blue Door

By Susan Weber

"Pick a card, Hannah," Sherry demands.

"Hey, Li'l Sis, I'm hosting this bachelorette party. I'm exempt from the games," I reply. But Sherry is drunk. Sherry is like a terrier on speed when she's drinking.

"I'm the bride and I say pick one, or I'll give you a wild card and then you'll have to do whatever I want." She waves the deck in front of my face.

"In your dreams."

Someone turns up the music. The floor vibrates to the beat of a disco song I hate.

I glare at Sherry, but even my most evil look has never succeeded in deterring my sister on a mission. Her goal tonight is either to pull me out of my doldrums or to embarrass me so much I won't have the energy to be depressed anymore. I'm not sure which.

I pull a card from the center of the fanned deck, glance at it and groan.

"What?" Sherry asks, bouncing like the aforementioned terrier. She downs her shot and grimaces, dropping the cards. They flutter to the floor like confetti.

I bend over to pick them up, and also to hide my suddenly red nose and damp eyes. "I have to French kiss a stranger. Since the only

stranger here will be the stripper," I glance at my watch, "in five minutes, I guess it'll be him."

Sherry giggles. The doorbell chimes simultaneously.

Kill me now. I'd promised Sherry that I'd host this party long before my world crushed me like a cigarette butt under a boot heel. I should've begged her best friend, Carly to take the responsibility off my hands. I should be celebrating my own marriage, not wallowing in despair. "Pull yourself together," I mumble to myself. I can't spoil Sherry's party. It's not her fault my fiancé, Tom, ran off and left me.

Exactly two months ago today.

Without a word.

Rage and hurt wells up in my chest like an alien being pounding to escape. I grab a shot glass from the counter and toss back the unidentified contents. Fire burns my throat. I choke and wheeze. Oh, no. Tequila. I know better than to drink worm juice. It makes me mean. Still coughing, I yank open the front door.

Great. The stripper. He's built and dressed in a suit and tie. Heavy, black framed glasses finish off the nerd look. Sherry has a thing for geeks, so she should like him. I'm not sure how the other ten girls will feel.

"Hello, I'm looking for..." he starts.

"Shut up. Let's get this over with." I grab his tie and ignore the shock shooting his eyebrows toward his hairline. "Sherry, are you watching? I'm only doing this once!"

Thumbs up, Sherry hollers, "Woohoo!"

I cringe, still clasping his tie, and press my lips against his. If my hormone-crazed algebra students could see me now. This is so wrong. I shove the man away. "Tell them I Frenched you and there's another twenty in this for you."

Eyes narrowed to slits, he adjusts his tie. Why the hell is he scowling?

"I'm looking for Hannah Shores."

That voice sounds familiar. Dark hair. Olive complexion. Take away the glasses and...oh, God, he could be Tom. The pressure in my chest erupts like Vesuvius.

I study his face and see subtle differences; an old scar bisecting his eyebrow, a hardness to his features that Tom didn't possess. The air seizes in my lungs. This can't be Phil.

"I'm Hannah. Who are you?" Please not Phil.

"Tom's brother, Phil Ballard," he says, as if he's been sucking lemons. The disgust apparent as he looks at me sends chills rippling over my body.

"Sorry. I thought you were a stripper."

"Do I look like a stripper?" His voice escalates in offended horror.

"No, but it's my sister's bachelorette party..." I clamp my mouth shut. Words tumble out like an avalanche when I'm nervous. This man is making me uncomfortable, but why am I scrambling for excuses? His brother left me, not the other way around.

"Take it off!" Sherry screeches. Ten women join the chorus, chanting. "Take it off!"

I spin around. "Hush. He's not a stripper."

"What are you, then?" Sherry calls out.

"An insurance agent." He shakes his head and stares at me. "I need to talk to you, but I hate to interrupt your fun."

It's probably the liquor but his accusatory tone inflames me. "You've got nerve insinuating I'm enjoying myself." I grab the tequila bottle and swallow a gulp of the evil stuff. It doesn't burn as much as last time. Not a good sign. "Pretending to have fun instead of crying is the hardest thing I've ever done." Just then, I realize the music is silent. I turn to see Sherry's crestfallen expression. Damn. I've spoiled my sister's party.

And it's all this idiot's fault. I take a deep breath preparing to lambast him again.

"I'm sorry." He blinks. The sheen of tears in his eyes reminds me that this man can't find his brother. Pain stabs me like a knife in the heart.

I glance behind me. "Carly, please make sure Sherry's having fun." I pull a wad of bills from my pocket. "Give this to the stripper when he's done."

"Sure, Hannah." I read pity in her expression. I've seen that look hundreds of times in the last two months.

I tug Phil by the elbow through the throng of drunken women toward the den.

Hoots and hollers echo behind us. The music escalates again. I glance over my shoulder. A man dressed as a policeman enters the

front door swinging his hips, dancing to another horrible disco tune. Who brought this music, anyway?

I pull the den door shut, trying to lock out the pounding beat and the voices of women cheering the half-naked man in my living room. "Why are you here?" I ask Phil. "Don't you live in St. Louis?"

"I'm looking for my brother."

"You and me both," My barked reply draws an anguished expression from Phil. I wince. It's not his fault Tom left. It's mine, though I can't figure out what I did.

"What happened the day Tom disappeared?"

The question evokes swirling images seen many times, but they still leave me confused and angry. "I don't know. We were happy, I thought. Then Tom vanished. He didn't even have the guts to tell me."

I can't admit that we'd argued that day as we had several times before. About my best friend, Roy's harmless flirting. I'd accused Tom of being jealous. He'd left for work without kissing me goodbye.

"I called the police. They searched the house, found no sign of foul play, said there was nothing they could do." I recall the Detective's condescending platitudes and snort. "Apparently, an adult has the right to come and go as he chooses. Who'd have thought? Anyway, after making a fool of myself with the police, I received Tom's letter."

"Do you still have it?"

I do, though God knows why. I've read it hundreds of times searching for some explanation for the inexplicable. When I finally realized there was no mystery—Tom had just tired of me—I imagined tearing it to shreds and burning it on a bonfire of his clothes, his Planet of the Apes DVDs and all of the cards he'd given me in our nine month relationship, but I couldn't do it. "Yes."

"May I see it?" Phil asks.

Feigning nonchalance, I shrug, open the top drawer of Tom's desk and remove a sheet of paper as innocuous-looking as an invitation to tea, but containing words as toxic as rattlesnake venom. I hand it to Phil without a glance. I know every hurtful word by heart. 'Dear Hannah, I'm sorry. I can't take this lie anymore..'

Phil's expression rolls from shock to bewilderment. "This is typed. With Tom's hunt-and-peck method it would have taken him an hour to write this."

"It's not like he didn't know how to use a computer," I argue.

"It's not signed."

"It obviously wasn't personal to him."

"Or he didn't send it."

Chills run down my spine. "You think someone I know would play such a sick joke?"

"No. I think..." His Adam's apple bobs. "My brother was murdered."

Every instinct screeches, "No!" I force myself to breathe. "Why would you say that?"

"The police blew me off," he says. "I couldn't come until I found someone to run my business, so I hired a private detective to start the search. She's found some things."

I didn't think I could feel any worse, but now my chest aches like someone's cutting my heart out with a butter knife. "What?"

"Were you aware a large withdrawal came out of Tom's IRA a week before he disappeared?"

"No. I didn't have access to his accounts. But that doesn't prove anything. He could have been planning to leave even then."

"His account hasn't been touched since he left. Nothing's been paid. You know how anal he is about paying bills on time."

He's right! Tom paid bills every Friday, like clockwork. "Could he have another bank account?"

"Not likely." Phil's gaze meets mine, pain etched on his face. He believes Tom is dead.

"It can't be true," I whisper.

"Do you have anything with Tom's Jeep's vehicle identification number on it? I want to check DMV records to see if any activity has posted for it."

Hope flares. I refuse to believe he's dead, but maybe he's changed his address. I pull the fire safe from under the desk, open it, shuffle through the contents and pull out the title to Tom's Jeep.

"Do you have access to DMV records?"

"The P.I. has resources. I'll give this to her tomorrow."

My heart sinks. I need the information this instant. "Can't you do it now?"

"Now? It's eleven o'clock. What can you possibly do with the info tonight?"

"I won't be able to sleep until I find out."

"Sorry. If I wake her up, she might double her already exorbitant rate."

Knock. Knock. "Hannah? You aw right?" Sherry calls through the den door.

Guilt hits me. I've gone A.W.O.L. for over an hour. Phil pumping me for information seemed preferable to the piteous stares I've tolerated from Sherry's friends. "I'd better go check on things," I say, heading for the door. "Come get something to eat."

Giggles erupt from the living room. Phil shakes his head. "No way. I'll stay put."

"They're not going to bite." Men are strange creatures. They'll jump into a bar fight or rush to war, but turn chicken when faced with a group of drunken women.

I open the door. Sherry leans against the frame. "I'm a selfish bish." Tears stream down her cheeks. She licks the ones from the corners of her lips, probably comprised of pure tequila. I should have cut her off an hour ago. "I shouldn' a made ya do this. I'm a bad sis'er."

"It's okay." I hug her.

She sobs, murmuring nonsense. Dampness soaks the front of my shirt. Please be tears.

"I unnerstan' ya not wantin' to be my maid-a-honor."

I pat her back. "That's the Cuervo talking. I wouldn't give up my post for anything. I'm sorry I've been so self-absorbed."

"You're great." She wipes her face with her sleeve.

I glance over my shoulder. Phil rolls his eyes.

"Be right back." I wrap my arm around Sherry's shoulder and lead her, zig-zagging, to the living room. Near the entrance to the kitchen I drop her into Tom's old massaging recliner and switch it on. Two guests are passed out on the sofa like bookends. I turn down the awful music. "I'll make coffee," I say.

Two women have gravitated to the kitchen, but the party is winding down. Thank God.

"It's barely midnight. Where are the rest of your friends?"

"Left. Have to work Sunday breakfast shift at the hotel," Sherry says through a yawn. "It was a great party."

Keep telling yourself that, Sis. I go into the kitchen. "Coffee?" I ask Carly and Amanda, who are leaning against the counter chatting.

"No thanks. We have to go," Carly says. She sounds sober.

"Are you the designated driver?"

She nods and points to the couch. "I'll take the sleeping beauties home."

I prepare the coffee maker. Once the machine starts gurgling, I fix a plate of cheese, crackers, veggies and dip. I carry it to the den and peek through the door. "Want coffee?"

Behind the desk, Phil stands, eyes wide like a cat burglar caught in the act. "Sure." His hips move. I hear a squeak. Good thing Tom never oiled that drawer as I'd requested. Phil's cringe confirms my suspicions, but I decide to give him a chance to explain. Maybe he has a splinter and is looking for tweezers?

"What are you looking for?" I demand.

"Anything that might lead me to Tom." He's amazingly unapologetic for the invasion of my privacy. The challenge in his eyes tweaks my subconscious.

Tom had worn an identical expression the night we met. Pain steals my breath and threatens to pull me into the swampy abyss of memories.

I'd been at Jillie's Grill with my best friend Roy. He'd been begging me to dance. I'd turned him down for the tenth time. If Sherry's a terrier, Roy's a bull dog. He won't take no for an answer.

"Why?" he'd wheedled.

"I don't feel like it," I'd replied, but the truth is, the last time we'd danced Roy had been too touchy-feely. His crush on me was ancient history, but I didn't want to repeat those days of fending him off without bruising his ego.

I'd felt a tap on my shoulder and spun my stool to face a dark-haired stranger. "Tom Ballard," he'd said, shaking my hand. "Dance with me?" The challenge sparking in his blue eyes had captivated

me. I'd barely heard Roy's protests as I'd jumped down from the stool. Tom had glared at Roy and led me to the dance floor. That had been it. The end of my single-ness. Or so I'd thought. I shake my head to banish the memory.

"I'm sorry about searching the desk. I'm just so frustrated," he says.

"You should be sorry. Invade my privacy again and you're out of here. Now, I'm going to the kitchen. And you're coming with me."

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I pour three mugs of coffee, cream and sugar and hand one to Phil. I nudge Sherry. She opens her eyes and takes her cup.

She blows on the steaming brew and sips. Her eyes drift shut.

Only the three of us remain. I sit on the couch beside Phil. "What did you expect to find?" I ask. "A map marked with an X? 'Here I am' in Tom's handwriting?"

He shrugs. "It was an impulse. I thought I might find something to indicate he'd had a dispute with someone."

"Don't you think I'd have told the cops if he was arguing with someone?"

"I don't know anything about you except what Tom told me."

"And what was that?" I ask, not sure I want to know.

"That you're the woman of his dreams, the love of his life. He couldn't wait to marry you."

My nose burns. My vision blurs as my eyes fill. I sob, then take a deep breath to compose myself. I ignore Phil's piercing stare and

glance at Sherry, sleeping in the massage chair, the mug balanced precariously on her chest. I grab the half-filled cup and set it on the end table.

"I'm exhausted. I need sleep," I say, though I haven't had a full night's sleep in two months. "We'll have to continue this tomorrow."

Phil stands up. "Tomorrow's out. I'll be back Monday morning."

I'll never make it until Monday.