

Caramel

By Peli Nghiem Xuan

Tiny paws balanced on the open window ledge, a step away from plummeting into a pool of distant shadows. Two hands wrapped around the supple caramel fur, snatching it away and settling it on the TV box, airing that new movie from theatres, *West Side Story*. The apartment's age freckled the stucco walls brown and the floor was crowded by boxes teeming with designer clothes, either stolen or bought through a week's worth of starvation. Annie found the tabby outside her apartment six years ago, two blocks from Hyde Park and it has lived with her ever since. Poor slob. Poor slob without a name. It was a little inconvenient, not having a name, but Annie felt she didn't have the right to give it one. They don't belong to each other, at least not until she found a place she and things could really belong to.

Annie ran her fingers through the caramel fur, slowly drifting to sleep before realising the time. Her eyes, tired from batting her eyelashes and her ears, throbbing from last night's party. Hours of patiently listening to uniformly suited men rave about green filled wallets. She grabbed a pair of strappy heels and rushed out the door... but not before stopping at the mirror. Gloss on the lips is the measure of a woman's worth, or so she would say. Her silky brown hair was precisely sprayed into a neat updo leaving behind a naked neck. She was adorned in a ruffled black dress cinched at the waist by a radiant gold belt. The spotlight, a head-turner, the centre of attention.

She was on her way to Long Bay to meet Mario Peroni. He was a sweet old man, terribly pious. A true shame he was locked up. Annie was scheduled to meet him once a month to teach the Italian some English. Each time, he would say something about the weather; Sunshine in Cuba, cyclones in Vietnam, to which she would report back to his brother's answering machine, proof she was visiting and not some shifty scam. This all sounded a bit peculiar to Annie. She did many odd jobs to keep up with her lavish life, not all of which she was fond of, but she grew a liking to Mario.

Across the prison table, she faced two innocent caramel eyes holding a sunny smile across his face. He wore a soft brown jumpsuit and smelt of a wispy sea breeze. He resembled her brother, Andrew. They used to call Andrew dotty, his crazy obsession with caramel liquorice. But, confined between the steel walls of the orphanage, he was the only one that hugged her in the darkness of the night time sea giving her his blanket when mother nature was being particularly cruel. Annie gave Mario a warm smile, something she hadn't found herself doing in a while. At least not since Andrew was carried away by the cruel clutches of chance. Taken to the clouds, leaving her estranged.

“Five more years. Then I'll be sipping Tequila on the beach,” Mario simpered slyly.

“You should come with me. Unless you like it here, with all your friends and family.”

Annie's shiny rose lips curled into a curt smile.

“I wouldn’t be leaving behind anything... I’ve always wanted to escape someplace. Belgium, I hear they’ve got the most scrumptious caramel liquorice.”

Sombre clouds drifted clear from Annie’s eyes leaving a smaller glimmer. “Andrew would have loved Belgium.”

A chilled Arctic like gust settled over Annie’s apartment. The bustling vibrance of day time only lasted so long. The cat scratched her paws against the glass window, a pointless attempt to capture the ambered street light across the hollow road.

Two harsh knocks against the door interrupted Annie’s cereal dinner, causing a spill on her Tiffany scarf.

“You are under investigation... We need to take you in for questioning...,” the words dissipated through the air as Annie was whirled away in a scene of maniac confusion.

She sat on the cold steel seat, right across from a man wearing a badge obnoxiously hung around his neck.

“Mario’s been running shipments in and out of the harbour from the confinement of his cell. What’s a pretty girl like you doing visiting a man like him?”

“He pays me. To teach him English. We ain’t guilty of anything.” Annie replied.

“It’s him we want. Not you. We can offer a deal, get you out of this mess Mario put you in.”

Annie stood her ground, refusing to turn on the one man that had been so dear to her. She knew Andrew would do the same.

“He’s a good man, pious and wrongfully accused. Nothing short of holy!” Annie snapped.

The man pursed his lips, *stupid girl*.

Behind the man was a reflection in the two-way mirror glaring back at her. A face of fear, blindly battling the harsh reality alone. A fool she was and a criminal he is. He was no Andrew. Sooner or later she was going to be stuck in Long Bay right next to the bastard.

Giving up, the man let her leave. Waving around her hand, she hailed a yellow taxi.

“Take me to 182nd Gravestone Avenue. Then the airport!”

It wasn’t long before she had packed up her belongings leaving the apartment an empty canvas. Only the cat was left. Cradled in her arms she carried it to the end of the street.

“What’d you think, huh? Rats-galore, trashcan sanctuary, plenty of slobs to be with. Maybe you’ll finally find a friend.” She placed it down, nudging it away. “Go off now, get lost!”

She walked away. It wasn’t hard for her to let go. No promises were made. It didn’t belong to her and she didn’t belong to it. They never-

Her heart filled with dread letting an overbearing coldness consume her body. Flyaways feel down her face soaking her messy hair in tears. The cat’s warm caramel fur and innocent eyes,

sipping away at leftover milk flashed through her mind. She raced down the street, crying out with a croaking voice.

“Cat? Come back here!”

Her words echoed down the hollow void, fading into the wind. Alienated on her own street. Flickering, the street light’s bright spark tarnished into permanent darkness.