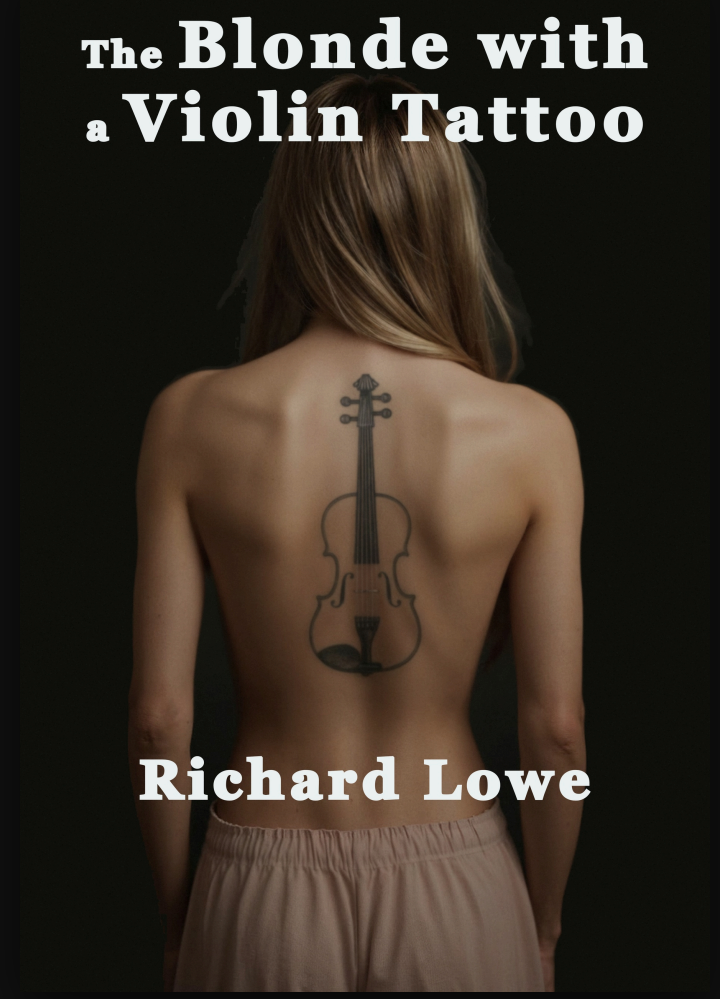
A FREE COMPANION TO THE BLONDE WITH A VIOLIN TATTOO

The Corner Table

A year and a half before the lobby, five friends squeeze around a table built for four, and Rosaria has to decide what her room is worth.



RICHARD LOWE

The Corner Table

The card had been propped against the pepper grinder since Tuesday, and every time Rosaria reached for the pepper she had to move it.

Cream stock, heavy, the kind of card that cost more than the bread it sat beside. GILBERT PRESCOTT, it said, and under that a company name with the word Hospitality in it, and under that a phone number in blue ink with the word Monday beside it. Gil had written the Monday himself, at her counter, smiling the whole time like a man doing her a favor.

She moved it again and peppered the short rib.

The kitchen was hot already at five. Hector had the burners going under the stock and the pasta water, and the oven on the left was holding the ribs at the low heat she'd started them on at eleven that morning.

The whole room smelled of garlic and wine reducing and the brown butter she had burned slightly at three and had to start over. That had not happened in two years.

"You're quiet," Hector said.

"I'm cooking."

"You cook loud. You've been cooking quiet since Tuesday."

He didn't look at her when he said it. He was cutting fennel with the long knife he'd brought from home nineteen years ago and never let anybody else touch, and he kept his eyes on the fennel. Hector had come to her at twenty-four with no English and a cousin's recommendation, and he had learned the English from her and the cooking from her, and somewhere in there he had learned her.

"Mind the fennel," she said.

"The fennel is fine."

"Then mind something else."

He grinned at the cutting board and kept going.

* * *

Gil had come in on Tuesday at three, when the room was empty and the chairs were still upside down on the tables. He knocked on the glass like a salesman, which was what he was, and she let him in because Sal had always let them in. Sal used to say you never knew which knock was the one.

He was forty, maybe, in a vest with no jacket under it, and he said the word concept four times before he sat down. His group had eleven restaurants. They had a building in Frisco with a ground floor that needed what he called an anchor, and they had eaten at Rosaria's twice, him and his partner, a woman named Shelby who had taken photographs of the plates with her phone.

"We want to bring you north," he'd said. "Your name. Your recipes. Your room, as close as we can build it. We handle the lease, the staff, the systems. You consult. You come up twice a month, taste, approve, go home."

"And this place?"

"This place stays exactly as it is. This is the flagship." He'd spread his hands on her counter. "Rosaria, you're sixty-two. You've been doing this for twenty-seven years, the last six of them alone. How are the knees?"

She hadn't answered that. He'd named a number for the license and another number for the consulting, and the two numbers together were more than she had cleared in the last four years combined.

“There's one thing we'd need,” he'd said at the door. “Everything written down. The short rib especially. Measured, timed, so a cook in Frisco can do it on a Tuesday without you standing there.”

“It doesn't work like that.”

“Everything works like that,” Gil said. “That's what a system is.”

He'd smiled and written Monday on the card and gone.

That night she had sat at the bar after close with a legal pad and tried. Short rib, she wrote, and under it: brown it until it's right.

She looked at that a long time. Then she wrote: until it smells like the color it should be, and crossed it out, because a cook in Frisco would read that and call Gil, and Gil would call her.

She got as far as the wine. She always put in the wine when the onions went sweet, and the onions went sweet at a different minute every time depending on the onions, the pan and the weather. She sat there until after midnight with the pencil and the pad and the empty room, and the room was the problem.

The room had been Sal's.

Twelve tables. Sal had built the banquette along the back wall with his own hands the summer they opened, and the round table in the corner was the one he'd found at an estate sale in Highland Park and carried in on his back because the dolly was broken.

He ran the front for twenty-one years. He knew every regular's wife's name and every regular's girlfriend's name and never once mixed them up in front of the wrong one.

When he died she kept the room as he'd kept it. She learned to do the front and the back both, which was why she took orders herself now, and why she listened to half of what people said and brought them what they wanted.

Sal had taught her that, without meaning to. People told you what they wanted in the first three words and spent the rest of the sentence being polite.

On Wednesday she had told Hector about Frisco.

He'd listened all the way through with his arms folded, and when she finished he said, “Do you want to?”

“I want my knees back.”

“That's not what I asked.”

“It's what I answered,” she said, and he let it go, because he knew when to.

* * *

At six-fifteen on Thursday the phone rang and a woman asked for a table for four at seven.

“The corner is open,” Rosaria said. “It's round. It takes four.”

“Four is perfect,” the woman said. “Melissa. We're four.” Then, off the phone, to someone: “Are we four? Is Diana coming?” Then back. “We might be five.”

“Five is a squeeze.”

“We're good at squeezing.”

Rosaria wrote it in the book in pencil. Melissa, 7, corner, 4 (5?). She left the question mark where it was.

The room filled as it filled on Thursdays, slowly, with the regulars first: the Abernathys at the window, forty years married and still holding hands across the bread, and the two old men from the Methodist church who argued about baseball over the same veal every week. A young couple on a third

date, if Rosaria read them right, the boy ordering for the girl and the girl letting him and then changing it.

Rosaria changed it back in the kitchen without telling the boy. The girl got what she'd wanted.

Her knee was bad tonight. It was the left one, bad since the winter Sal got sick, when she'd slept in a hospital chair for six weeks and come home and gone straight back to the stove.

Cold made it worse. February in Dallas didn't know what it wanted, warm one day and gray and damp the next, and today was a damp day.

She took a breath at the pass and went out.

* * *

The first one arrived at five to seven.

She was older than she sounded on the phone, early thirties maybe, in work clothes, with the face of a woman who had a babysitter on a clock somewhere. She kissed Rosaria on the cheek, which nobody did on the first visit, and said, “I'm Melissa, I called, we're the corner,” and sat in the chair with its back to the wall, where she could see the door.

“Wine?”

“Whatever you'd drink.”

Rosaria brought the Barolo. Melissa tasted it and closed her eyes for a second, and Rosaria went back to the kitchen pleased in a way she did not let her face show.

The second came at seven exactly. Indian, a sharp face, a phone in her hand that she was still typing on as she came through the door. She typed while she sat and typed while she said hello, and then she put the phone face down on the table with a decision that looked like it cost her.

“Priya,” she said to Rosaria. “Sorry. Work.”

“It's Thursday.”

“Work doesn't know that.”

The third Rosaria didn't see come in. She looked up from the Methodists and there was a woman at the corner table who hadn't been there a minute before, tall, dark-haired, in a coat she didn't take off until she'd sat for a while.

She didn't say where she'd come from. Melissa said, “Diana,” in the voice you used for someone you were relieved to see, and Diana said, “Hi,” and that was all Diana said for twenty minutes.

Rosaria liked her immediately. She couldn't have said why.

The fourth was the blonde.

She came through the door at ten past and stopped inside it, for less than a second. Most people wouldn't have caught it. Rosaria caught it because Sal used to do the same thing, stop in a doorway and take the room before the room took him: who was where, which table was loud, where the kitchen door was.

The girl was young. Twenty, Rosaria guessed, younger than the others by years, and dressed older than her age in a good blazer and low heels, with her hair pulled back.

She had a pleasant face. She'd put it on before she came in, and she kept it on.

“Annabelle,” Melissa said, and waved.

The girl crossed the room and sat in the last chair that faced the door, the one Melissa hadn't taken. Then she looked up at Rosaria and smiled, and the smile was correct in every way, and Rosaria tasted it as she'd taste a sauce that had been seasoned by a careful person who had never once been hungry for it.

“Thank you for fitting us in,” the girl said.

“You're not fitted yet. There's still one more.”

“Kayla,” three of them said at once.

“Kayla is late,” Priya said. “Kayla is constitutionally late.”

“She texted,” Melissa said. “She's parking.”

“She's not parking,” Diana said. “She's leaving her apartment.”

Rosaria went to get the bread.

* * *

Kayla arrived at seven forty-one.

She came in at speed, coat half off, bag swinging, talking before the door closed behind her.

“I know, I know, I'm sorry, there was a thing with my landlord and then my car made a noise and I had to sit there and decide if the noise was a real noise.” She dropped onto the fifth seat, a stool Rosaria had pulled from the bar and wedged between Melissa and the blonde. “Is this the place? This smells incredible. Why does it smell like this?”

“Garlic,” Priya said. “Butter. Time.”

“I want all three.”

Five was a squeeze. Melissa's elbow touched Kayla's and the blonde moved her water glass two inches to make room for Kayla's bag, and Rosaria watched the table rearrange itself around the new person like water closing over a stone.

Rosaria came to take the order.

“Okay,” Priya said, and opened the menu. “So I've got until about nine. There's a thing. I can do the pasta and skip...”

Rosaria looked at her.

It was the look Sal used to call the stove, because it came from the same place the heat did. She didn't plan it. It came on its own whenever someone sat down in her room already counting the minutes until they could leave.

Priya stopped.

“I don't actually have a thing at nine,” she said, after a moment. “I have an email at nine. Which can be an email at ten.”

“Or tomorrow,” Melissa said.

“Or tomorrow,” Priya said, and closed the menu. “What should we have?”

They all started talking at once. The tagliatelle, somebody said, and a salad, and Melissa said she didn't want the vegetables but Kayla wanted the vegetables, and did they do a burrata, and was the short rib on the tagliatelle or beside it. Rosaria heard the first three words of each of them and let the rest go by.

“Okay,” she said, and went back to the kitchen.

“She didn't write anything down,” she heard Kayla say behind her.

“She doesn't need to,” Diana said.

* * *

In the kitchen Hector had the ribs out.

He'd lifted them from the oven at the time she'd told him, and he stood over the pan with a fork and didn't touch them, because the touching was hers. She came over and pressed the side of one with the back of the fork.

It gave. It didn't fall apart.

She stood there with the fork and the pan and the heat coming up off it into her face. Nineteen years Hector had watched her do this, and he watched her do it now, and neither of them said anything.

“Another twenty,” she said.

“It's been nine hours.”

“Another twenty.”

He put them back. She went to the walk-in and stood in the cold for a minute with her hand on the shelf and her weight off the left leg. The cold helped the knee and did nothing for the rest of her.

Gil would want it written down. Nine hours at this heat, then twenty minutes more if the fork said so. A cook in Frisco would ask what the fork said, and she would not be there to tell him, and the ribs would come out on a Tuesday at nine hours exactly because nine hours was what the paper said.

They would be good. People in Frisco would eat them and say they were good.

She came out of the walk-in and made the burrata plate herself. She tore the basil instead of cutting it because Sal liked it torn, and poured the oil in a circle, and broke the pepper over it from the grinder, moving Gil's card again to do it.

* * *

When she brought the burrata the table was arguing about a man.

Not one of their men. A man at Melissa's office who had sent an email to forty people that should have gone to one, and the one it should have gone to was his wife, and it had been about a hotel.

“No,” Kayla said. “No. In a work email?”

“In a reply all,” Melissa said.

“What did it say?”

“I'm not going to tell you what it said.”

“You have to tell us what it said.”

“It said,” Melissa began, and stopped, because Rosaria was setting down the plate.

Rosaria had heard worse at that table over the years, and at every other table in the room. She set the burrata in the middle and didn't look at any of them. The room had a rule Sal had made and she had kept, which was that whatever got said under the lights stayed under them.

“Oh, wow,” Kayla said, looking at the plate. “Okay. Hello.”

“It glistens,” Priya said. “Why does it glisten like that?”

“Good oil,” Rosaria said, and went.

She heard Melissa finish the sentence behind her, and four women made four different sounds. The loudest was Kayla.

The quietest wasn't Diana. It was the blonde, who had laughed, and the laugh had come out half a second after the others, as if she'd checked first that it was a laughing moment.

Rosaria went to the Abernathys and refilled their water and watched the corner table from across the room.

The blonde was listening. The other four were talking, and she listened so well that none of them caught that she hadn't said a word about herself in half an hour.

She asked Priya a question about work. She asked Kayla a question about the car noise. She asked Melissa whether the man still worked there, and the question was so exact that Melissa laughed and said, “Yes, the poor fool, he's in the next cubicle,” and the girl smiled and offered nothing of her own.

She ate the burrata like a person who liked it. She ate it carefully. Every bite was the same size.

* * *

Gil Prescott came in at eight-thirty.

Rosaria saw him through the pass window, and her stomach went tight. He had Shelby with him, and Shelby had her phone out already, and they stood inside the door looking at the room as a man looks at a house he's thinking of buying, at the ceiling and the floor and the walls, and not at the people in it.

She dried her hands and went out.

"Rosaria." Gil kissed the air beside her face. "We were in the neighborhood. We wanted to see it on a weeknight. Full room. You don't mind."

"You didn't call."

"That's the point. We wanted it real." He looked around. "There's a two-top open by the bar."

There was. She sat them there, because Sal had always sat them, and because sending a man out of her room on a Thursday night would cost her more than sitting him.

"Just a glass," Gil said. "And whatever you'd recommend. We won't stay long."

She brought them the Barolo and two plates of the vegetables, because vegetables were quick and she wanted them gone. Shelby photographed the vegetables. Gil turned his chair so it faced the room and took out his own phone and set it on the table screen up, and Rosaria saw the screen as she poured.

It was a stopwatch. It was running.

* * *

The tagliatelle went out at eight-forty.

The ribs had given at the twenty-minute mark, all the way, the meat coming off the bone in long soft pieces before the fork was halfway in. Hector had looked at her. She had said, "Now," and he'd turned away so she wouldn't see his face. She had pulled the meat by hand and folded it into the pasta with the sauce from the pan and a spoon of the brown butter, the second batch, the one she hadn't burned.

She carried the big bowl out herself. Her knee told her about it every step.

"Oh," Kayla said, when the bowl came down. "Oh no. I'm going to cry."

"Don't cry in the tagliatelle," Melissa said.

"I'm going to cry near the tagliatelle."

Diana leaned over and looked into the bowl. Then she looked up at Rosaria.

"Thank you," Diana said. She said it like a person who meant to be held to it.

Rosaria went back toward the kitchen. On the way past the bar she saw Gil type a line into his phone, glance at the corner table, and type again.

* * *

At nine-fifteen the corner table had been sitting for two hours and twenty minutes, and nobody at it showed any sign of standing.

The tagliatelle was gone. Melissa, who had said she didn't want the vegetables, had eaten most of them and was now denying it.

Priya's phone had lit up four times face down on the table and she had not turned it over once. Kayla was telling a story about her landlord with her hands, and the story kept getting longer because Diana kept asking one-word questions that sent it somewhere new.

"Why," Diana said.

"Because he thinks the dishwasher is a personality test."

"How."

“If you load it wrong, you're a bad tenant. He told me that. He stood in my kitchen and told me that.”

“Did you load it wrong?”

“There's no wrong! It's a dishwasher!”

Diana took a piece of bread from the basket and put it on her plate and did not eat it.

Rosaria brought another basket, warm. She did not ask if they wanted it. Sal had never asked whether anybody wanted more bread, because asking made people say no to be polite, and then they sat there wanting it.

“We didn't order this,” the blonde said. She said it in a careful voice, as if she were checking the bill in advance.

“Bread isn't ordered,” Rosaria said. “Bread arrives.”

The girl looked at her. For a second the pleasant face slipped, and under it Rosaria saw surprise. It was the face of somebody handed a thing she hadn't asked for and could not price.

“Okay,” the girl said. “Thank you.”

* * *

Kayla threw the bread at nine-thirty.

Diana had said one sentence, low, that Rosaria didn't hear from the pass, and the table went up in a shout of laughter. Kayla, outraged and laughing both, tore off the heel of a roll and threw it across the table at Diana's head.

Diana put up a hand, late, and missed.

The bread bounced off her shoulder, hit the edge of the table, rolled off onto the floor, and came to rest against the toe of Rosaria's shoe. She had come out with the water pitcher. She stood there with the pitcher in one hand and looked down at the bread.

The table went silent.

“Oh no,” Kayla said. “Oh, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I didn't...”

Rosaria bent, which cost her, and picked up the bread. She looked at it. Then she looked at Diana.

“You have to watch it come,” she said. “Not your hand. The bread.”

Diana looked at her. Then the corner of Diana's mouth moved and stayed moved, and she said, “Noted.”

Rosaria put the bread in her apron pocket and refilled the waters and went back to the kitchen, and behind her she heard the table come apart into laughter again, louder than before, Kayla's voice over all of it saying, “She gave you notes. She gave you notes on catching bread.”

In the kitchen Hector looked up.

“What happened?”

“A girl threw bread at another girl.”

“In the dining room?”

“At the corner table.”

Hector waited. She took the heel of bread out of her apron and set it on the counter by the pepper grinder, next to Gil's card, and looked at the two of them side by side.

“Sal would have caught it,” she said.

Hector didn't say anything. He went back to the dishes Luz had stacked by the sink, and Rosaria stood at the pass a while longer with her weight on her right leg.

* * *

The blonde came back toward the restrooms at a quarter to ten.

The restrooms were down the short hall beside the kitchen. The kitchen door had a round window in it, and anybody walking past could see in if they turned their head.

Most people didn't. The girl did. Rosaria saw her see the stove, the pass, Hector at the sink, and then Rosaria, standing at the counter with her hand flat on it and her left foot off the floor.

The girl went on to the restroom. A few minutes later she came back down the hall and stopped at the kitchen door.

She didn't come in. She stood in the doorway with one hand on the frame, as she'd stood inside the front door when she arrived, and waited until Rosaria looked up.

"Can I tell you something?" the girl said. "You can tell me to mind my own business."

"Mind your own business," Rosaria said.

The girl nodded, as if she'd expected that, and didn't leave.

"The man at the two-top by the bar," she said. "In the vest. He's been timing our table."

Rosaria didn't move.

"He started a stopwatch on his phone when he sat down. He's looked at it nine times. Every time he looks at it he looks at us, and then he types something." The girl said it flatly, as if she were reading out the specials. "The woman with him has taken pictures of the room. She hasn't taken any pictures of the people. Only the tables. Where they are. How far apart."

"How do you know he's timing your table?"

"Because when Kayla threw the bread he stopped the watch," the girl said. "And then he started it again when you went back in the kitchen. Like it was a thing he'd need to subtract."

Hector had turned around at the sink. He was holding a plate and not washing it.

"Why are you telling me this?" Rosaria said.

The girl thought about it. Rosaria watched her decide how much of the true answer to give. She had the look of somebody who had been making that same decision about every answer all her life.

"Because he's looking at your room like it's his," the girl said finally. "And I don't think he knows that's what he's doing."

"And you know what he's doing."

"I watch rooms," the girl said. "It's a habit."

Rosaria looked at her. The good blazer, the hair pulled back, twenty years old and already standing in doorways counting exits.

Somebody had taught her that. Rosaria did not ask who. She had stood at enough tables to know which questions got you the truth and which got you a smile, and this girl had more smiles than anybody Rosaria had met in a long time.

"Your friend," Rosaria said. "The tall one. Diana."

"Yes?"

"Does she always miss?"

The girl's face changed. The pleasant face went, and a real smile came up in its place, sudden, and it took ten years off her, which on a girl of twenty didn't leave much.

"I don't know," she said. "This is the first time any of us has thrown anything."

"First time here."

"First time here," the girl agreed. "Melissa found you. She said you were the only place in Dallas nobody would rush us."

“Melissa is right.”

“She usually is.” The girl took her hand off the doorframe. “I'm sorry. I should get back.”

“Go.”

She went. Rosaria stood at the counter. After a moment Hector put the plate down in the sink without washing it.

“She's right,” he said. “I saw him from the window. I thought it was a game on his phone.”

“It's a game,” Rosaria said. “It's not on his phone.”

* * *

She went out to the two-top by the bar at ten.

Gil was finishing his wine. Shelby had her phone in her lap and was scrolling through photographs of the room, tables, chairs, the banquette Sal built, the round table in the corner with the five women at it, shot from an angle that cut off the women.

“Rosaria,” Gil said. “This is wonderful. The energy in here. We could bottle this.”

“Could you.”

“Absolutely. We're already thinking about the build. Same footprint, give or take.” He turned the phone toward her so she could see the stopwatch, still running, though not at the number it would have been if he'd never stopped it. “Can I show you a number? Your corner there. Five people. They sat down at seven-ten, the last one came in at seven-forty, they've been here almost three hours. What's that, one check? One check for the best table in the room on a Thursday.”

“And?”

“And in Frisco that's two turns. Maybe two and a half. That table pays for a cook.” He said it kindly, as you'd explain arithmetic to a child. “I'm not saying change it here. Here is here. I'm saying there, we'd design for it. Smaller tables in the corners. Faster pacing on the courses. People don't even notice. They feel taken care of and they leave happier, and the next party gets the table.”

Rosaria looked at the corner.

Priya had her chin in her hand. Kayla was leaning against Melissa's shoulder, and Melissa had let her.

Diana was turning a piece of bread over in her fingers as if she were studying its weight. The blonde was sitting back in her chair for the first time all night, with her water glass held in both hands.

None of them was looking at the time. None of them had looked at it since Priya closed her menu.

“Excuse me,” Rosaria said.

She went back to the kitchen. She opened the freezer by the back door, the small one Sal had kept for the things that weren't for selling, and took out the bottle.

It was the limoncello Sal used to make every spring from the lemons off her sister's tree in Houston, until the year he got sick. After that she made it herself, because nobody else was going to. She had eleven bottles left in the world from the last good batch, and she poured from them maybe four times a year.

Hector watched her take down five small glasses.

“Five,” he said.

“Five.”

“For the bread girls.”

“For the corner table,” Rosaria said.

He didn't say anything. He didn't need to. He went back to the sink and started washing the plate he'd put down, and he was smiling at it.

* * *

She set the glasses down without a word, one in front of each of them, and poured. The limoncello came out of the bottle thick with cold and the color of a yellow nobody had invented a name for.

"We didn't order this," Priya said.

"Nobody orders this," Rosaria said.

Kayla picked hers up and smelled it and made a sound. Melissa looked at Rosaria with a question in her face, and Rosaria answered it by not answering, and Melissa understood, because Melissa was a woman who had been to enough tables to know what it meant when the owner sat a bottle down without a check.

Diana lifted her glass toward Rosaria, an inch, and drank.

The blonde held hers and didn't drink yet. She looked past Rosaria's shoulder at the two-top by the bar. Then she looked back at Rosaria, and her face was very still.

"You're deciding something," the girl said, low enough that the others didn't hear.

"I decided," Rosaria said.

She put the cap back on the bottle. Then she turned and went to Gil's table, and she did not limp on the way there, though it cost her more than anything she had done that day.

* * *

"No," she said.

Gil looked up. "I'm sorry?"

"No. To Frisco. To the license. To the consulting." She set the bottle on the bar beside his empty glass, where he could see it and not have any. "Thank you for the offer. It was a generous offer. No."

"Rosaria." He smiled, and put the phone face down, and stopped smiling. "Can we talk about this on Monday? When it's not ten o'clock on a Thursday and you're not on your feet?"

"I'm always on my feet. That's the job."

"That's what I'm trying to fix."

"I know," she said. "That's the problem."

Shelby had stopped scrolling. Gil leaned forward with his elbows on the little table and his voice dropped into the tone men used when they thought you hadn't understood yet.

"Look," he said. "I respect this. I do. But you're sixty-two. You've got no partner, no kids in the business, your knees are shot. You know they're shot, I watched you walk. What happens to this place in five years? In ten? You can't write down the short rib. Fine. Then the short rib dies with you. At least this way your name keeps going."

The room had gone a little quieter around them. Not silent. The Abernathys were still talking at the window, and the Methodists had moved on to football, but the tables near the bar had heard enough to want to hear more.

Rosaria looked at him.

"My husband built that banquette," she said. "He carried that round table in on his back. That table's been in that corner twenty-seven years, and you want to cut it in half so the next party gets it faster."

"I want to make it work at scale."

"It doesn't scale," Rosaria said. "It's a room. It's one room, and I'm in it."

Gil opened his mouth and shut it again.

She picked up his check from the bar, where she'd left it face down an hour ago, and tore it in two, and put the halves in her apron pocket next to the heel of bread.

"The wine's on me," she said. "Drive safe."

* * *

They left at ten-fifteen. Gil held the door for Shelby and did not look back, and the cold came in around them in a damp gray breath and the door closed on it.

Rosaria went to the bar and leaned on it with both hands.

Her knee was a hot coal. Her back hurt. She had turned down more money than she had seen in one place in her life.

She was sixty-two and had no partner and no children in the business, and every word the man said had been true.

None of them had been the point.

She stood there and breathed until the knee went from a coal to an ember. Then she straightened up and went to the corner.

* * *

The five of them were finishing the limoncello. Kayla had drunk hers in two swallows and was eyeing the bottle on the bar.

Priya was holding her glass up to the candle and looking at the color through it. Melissa had her coat half on, and there was a babysitter somewhere doing arithmetic.

"Thursdays," Rosaria said.

They looked up.

"Thursdays at seven. This table." She tapped the round wood with two fingers, the wood Sal had sanded by hand. "I'll hold it. You don't call. You come."

The table was quiet.

"Every Thursday?" Kayla said.

"Every Thursday you want it. If you don't come, I give it away at eight." Rosaria looked at Kayla. "Seven. Not seven forty-one."

"I can do seven," Kayla said. "I can absolutely do seven. Probably. Most of the time."

"She can't do seven," Diana said.

"I can try to do seven!"

"Try is a start," Rosaria said. She looked at Priya. "You don't have an email at nine."

"I don't have an email at nine," Priya agreed. She turned her phone over, looked at it, and turned it back without reading anything. "I'll have one at ten."

"Have it at ten."

Melissa had both hands around her empty glass, and her eyes had gone wet. "Why?" she said. "You don't know us."

"I know what you ordered," Rosaria said. "That's enough to start."

She turned to go. The blonde was watching her. Rosaria stopped.

"You," she said. "The one who watches rooms."

"Annabelle."

"Annabelle." Rosaria said it carefully. It was a name worth getting right. "Next Thursday you sit with your back to the door."

The girl looked at her. The pleasant face came up, quick as a reflex, and then went down again, slower, as if she'd decided against it.

“I don't know if I can do that,” she said.

“Then you sit where you want,” Rosaria said. “But I'll be watching the door. So you don't have to.”

Nobody at the table said anything. Kayla looked from Rosaria to Annabelle and back again with her mouth open, and Diana reached over without looking and closed it for her with one finger under the chin.

Annabelle held Rosaria's eyes. Then she dipped her chin, once, and picked up her empty glass and looked into it as if there might be more in the bottom.

There wasn't. Rosaria went and got the bottle.

* * *

After close, after the chairs were up and Luz had gone and Hector had mopped the floor and gone, Rosaria sat at the bar with the legal pad.

The heel of bread sat on the counter beside her. Gil's card sat beside that. She looked at the card for a while, and then she turned it over and on the blank back of it, in pencil, she wrote:

Short rib. Brown it until it's right. Put in the wine when the onions go sweet. Cook it until the fork says. Then twenty more minutes, if you're in a good mood.

She read it twice. It was the whole recipe, and it was no use to anybody in Frisco, and she didn't care.

She got up, which took a minute, and went to the reservation book at the host stand. She turned forward a week, to the next Thursday, and in the line for seven o'clock she wrote, in pencil, pressing hard enough that it would come through on the page behind:

Corner. Five. Hold.

Then she turned forward one more week and wrote it again. And the week after that. She wrote it on every Thursday until she got to the end of the book, which was June, and then she put the pencil down and rubbed her knee and looked at the round table in the dark.

The candle was out. The chairs were up. There was a ring on the wood where somebody's glass had sat too long, and a few crumbs on the floor underneath, from the bread.

She left the crumbs for the morning. She turned out the last light and went home.

The World of The Blonde with a Violin Tattoo

Who is who, when things happen, and where. Everything here comes from the novel, and nothing here gives away how Annabelle's year turns out.

The Main Characters

NAME	WHO THEY ARE
Annabelle	The narrator. Twenty-two when the novel opens, the receptionist at Crestline Energy in downtown Dallas. Grew up in Fort Worth. Reads every room she walks into and gives away almost nothing. Carries her father's violin on her back in black ink.
Thomas	Annabelle's father. A former Marine, quiet and still, who played violin in the evenings. He died when she was twelve.
Linda	Annabelle's mother, in Fort Worth. Annabelle stopped speaking to her at eighteen.
Kayla	One of the four friends at Rosaria's. Constitutionally late. Has a long history with a man named Brandon.
Melissa	The friend who reads Annabelle best and pushes least. Married, with kids.
Diana	Says almost nothing, and the table stops when she does. Arrives from places she doesn't mention.
Priya	The analyst of the group. Her boyfriend Vikram lives in Seattle.
Rosaria	Owner and cook of Rosaria's. Twelve tables, one rule: you don't rush.
Dale	Annabelle's manager at Crestline. Lover of procedure and a style guide that does not exist.
Tiffany	Crestline coworker who brings Annabelle coffee exactly as she takes it, and watches her.
Brenda	Accounts payable at Crestline. Warm, direct, calls Annabelle hon, and brings her lunch.
Rick	Land acquisition at Crestline, thirty-eight. Stops by the front desk two or three times a week.
Chad Burrell	Someone Annabelle has known since they were seventeen. Charming, and she knows exactly what he is.
James	An engineer from Houston she meets at Idle Hands. Asks before he does anything.
David	An architect from San Antonio she meets on a bench at the Dallas Arboretum. Notices light the way she notices people.
Maurine	Sixty-something, silver hair, Blanton's neat. Sits down beside Annabelle at a bar and tells her the truth.
Jerome Whitfield	Tall, quiet, from Atlanta. Says he works in operations management, and says that answer is accurate but not complete.

In this story only

NAME	WHO THEY ARE
Sal	Rosaria's late husband. Built the banquette, carried in the round table, ran the front for twenty-one years.
Hector	Rosaria's line cook for nineteen years. Brought his own knife.
Luz	Washes dishes at Rosaria's.
Gilbert “Gil” Prescott	A restaurant group man with eleven restaurants, a building in Frisco and a stopwatch.
Shelby	Gil's partner. Photographs the tables, never the people.

Timeline

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENS
Annabelle at nine	She stands in a kitchen doorway and sees something she was not supposed to see. She has been managing things ever since.
Annabelle at twelve	Her father dies. Within a month her mother sells his violin.
Annabelle at eighteen	She stops speaking to her mother.
September, at nineteen	She walks past a tattoo parlor on a Thursday afternoon, goes in and says violin. Four hours face down on the table.
A February, at twenty	The five friends first sit at the round corner table at Rosaria's. This story.
Around twenty	She starts going to the Dallas Arboretum when she needs somewhere that doesn't want anything from her.
A Tuesday in July, at twenty-two	10:47 in the morning. A couple kisses in the Crestline lobby, twelve feet from her desk, and the novel begins.
That fall and winter	A company party at the Adolphus. Thursday nights at Rosaria's. A walk of twenty feet across a bar called Idle Hands.
February	Dale holds three closed-door meetings in a week. The Hendricks Basin project is in trouble.
March	The ranunculus at the arboretum, and a man on a bench.
April	Annabelle turns twenty-three. A woman she has never met sits down beside her and says, “He ain't worth it.”
May	A card that says only Jerome Whitfield and a number.

Places

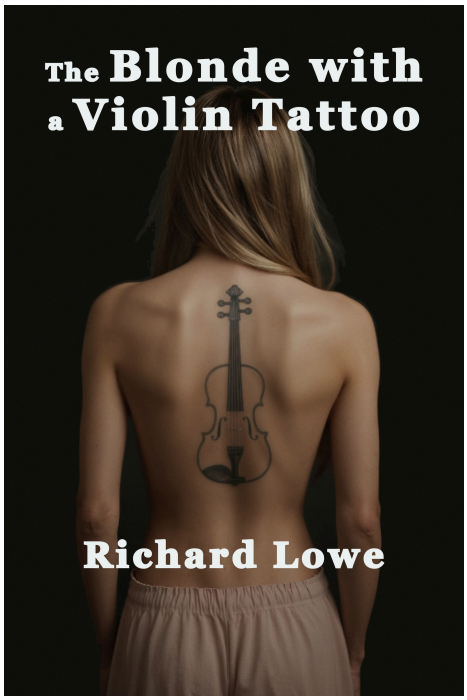
PLACE	WHAT IT IS
Crestline Energy	A fracking company in downtown Dallas. Marble lobby that carries sound, a scale model of a rig under its lights, a revolving door, executives on the eighth floor.
Rosaria's	Twelve tables, smelling of garlic, brown butter and old wood. Tagliatelle with short rib, burrata, bread that keeps arriving warm, and limoncello nobody orders.
Idle Hands	A bar on Commerce Street that stopped trying to be anything and became exactly what a bar should be.
Dallas Arboretum	The rose and perennial gardens, a bed of ranunculus, a wrought iron bench by the reflecting pool, cypress, and a duck with an air of ownership.
The Adolphus	The Dallas hotel where amber light makes everyone look like they're in a 1947 film.
Deep Ellum, Uptown, the Design District	Dallas neighborhoods where the men in Annabelle's year keep their apartments.
Fort Worth	Where Annabelle grew up, and where her mother still lives.
The Permian Basin	West Texas oil country. Its office calls Crestline every afternoon, and Annabelle says Good morning anyway.

Glossary

TERM	MEANING
“Good morning, Crestline Energy.”	The full greeting, per Dale. The Good morning is a courtesy, not a time indicator.
The violin	Annabelle's tattoo, black ink, the full instrument from scroll to tailpiece, drawn from memory of her father's.
Ranunculus	A spring flower with layer on layer of petals. The ones at the arboretum are completely insufferable, and they know it.
Blanton's, neat	Maurine's drink.
Hey stranger	A text from Brandon. Not a door.
The ceiling fan	In Annabelle's apartment. It turns slow, indifferent, reliable, unbothered.

Read the Novel

The round table at Rosaria's is where Annabelle keeps her friends, and where she keeps her secrets. In The Blonde with a Violin Tattoo, a kiss in a Dallas lobby starts a year in which she stops managing everything and starts finding out what she actually wants, and what it costs.



The Blonde with a Violin Tattoo

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