

Weekend Getaway

by Christy Noel

Sunshine filtered through the lace curtains. Though momentarily unfamiliar, the surroundings felt comfortable and safe. Alec's mind slowly began to wake up, and he recognized the room. He was staying at the Hotel Cypress, the one hundred and twenty year old resort where he had first met Anna.

She snored softly next to him, and he frowned at the familiar sound.

Turning, he drew in a sharp breath. "June?"

She rolled over.

Alec gaped at the sleeping form beside him, expecting the tight, tanned skin and dark tresses of his paramour, Anna, but instead finding the soft, peach-toned flesh and dyed curls of his wife.

Where was Anna?

His tongue suddenly felt too dry, like he had a mouthful of cotton wool.

June stretched, yawned, and opened her eyes. "Good morning, dear." A good night's sleep had relaxed her brow lines and crows-feet.

"Good morning," he mumbled. He climbed out of bed and staggered to the window. How could this have happened? His pulse pounded in his throat, and he felt lightheaded. Could Anna have somehow slipped away? Had she been taken away against her will? He winced as a sharp pain stabbed his temples. Leaning against the sill, Alec

resisted the impulse to shake his wife and to demand Anna's whereabouts. The swap defied explanation.

"This is such a nice hotel. Who would have thought this old place would have so much charm and still be so comfortable." June shifted the pillows around in the rickety bed and settled herself against the headboard.

He turned around. She couldn't know, could she?

June yawned, oblivious to his turmoil.

He had met Anna a month ago when he came up for a conference. When the overbooked motel in town had messed up his reservation, he had ended up staying at the resort where she worked. She was everything his wife wasn't: adventurous, playful, sensuous. He loved his wife, but Anna made him feel eighteen again.

Coffee. He needed coffee. He scanned the room and remembered that it lacked a personal coffee maker.

By coincidence, they were staying in the same room he had had last time. The hotel brochure boasted about the lack modern distractions, but the intentionally old-fashioned setup did not seem so charming this morning. Considering that the room did not even have a television or clock radio, they were probably lucky to have a phone.

"Do you want some breakfast?" he asked, picking up the receiver. He was painfully aware of how breathless he sounded.

June yawned again. "Scrambled eggs and bacon. And some orange juice, please."

He rang room service and placed an order, his stomach fluttering as he wondered about Anna. How could he have gone to sleep with one woman and woken up next to another? It made no sense.

"I would never have thought to stay here if you hadn't suggested it. And the drive didn't take that long, either," added his wife.

The drive? His brow furrowed, and his mind replayed the journey: loading the suitcase, stopping at the gas station—and listening to June's prattle along the way. His wife had been with him through dinner, and they had returned to the room together.

His memory was disjointed after that—until Anna...

He reviewed the last month. At first, he had seen the romantic encounter as a careless fling, even as something he deserved. Only after he came home from the conference did he become paranoid that June would find out. Alec had never had an affair before, and the knowledge of what he had done was both intoxicating and terrifying.

He tried to hang on to the experience, but his memory was imperfect. Anna was like discovering ginger and musk after only knowing the scent of violets. Or was she like honeyed pears? Was he remembering her correctly?

Such thoughts finally compelled him to see to her again, and he convinced himself that a few minutes together would be enough. He had called and left a message for her once, but she had never called back. It had been impossible to think of a good excuse to drive up to the resort by himself, so, in desperation, he had suggested the weekend getaway to his wife.

“I always thought it would be a spooky place.” June smoothed the quilt around her. “They featured it on the Discovery channel a couple times. Did you know this place is supposed to be haunted?”

He rubbed his unshaven chin, only half-listening to her words as he wandered into the bathroom to splash water on his face.

The affair had started innocently. One morning, when the conference topic had not interested him, he had settled in the quiet resort lounge to do some reading. The room offered a view of the lake and was usually deserted during the day. Anna had startled him when she came in to check the flowers. Flitting from table to table, she had enticed him with teasing glances through her long eyelashes. They had exchanged some light banter, and then the dark-eyed beauty had left him alone.

Alec absently filled a glass with water and began swallowing his daily regimen of vitamins and pills.

In the evening, he had run into her by the mossy fountain in the garden. She had flirted with him. Her accent—a hint of Spanish and something unidentifiable—sounded incredibly sexy. He knew he should not have teased back, but he loved feeling the chase

again after so many years. Then Anna had unexpectedly kissed him. Soon afterwards, he had surprised himself by inviting her up to his room under some boyish pretext.

“I’m married,” he had finally admitted at the door.

“I know,” she had whispered, her breath hot against his cheek.

What was wrong with him? The tingle of Anna’s electric caresses lingered on his skin. He studied his reflection, his chin covered in stubble and his graying hair ruffled. He looked healthy enough.

June continued to talk about the hotel. “This place has had several unnatural deaths. I hear there was a war hero who shot himself. He’s supposed to wander the halls, dressed in his military uniform. It was terribly tragic. His widow was heartbroken.” She sighed. “Oh, and there’s supposed to be a woman. Sometimes she throws things around and disturbs guests.” She giggled to herself. “That would be something to see, wouldn’t it?”

He grunted, absently slipping into their usual conversational rhythm. “That stuff is for the weak minded.”

“What did they call her?” she asked herself, her gaze unfocused as she tried to recall. She shook her head. “I’ll have to ask the hotel staff.”

Someone knocked on the door.

“Room service,” called a male voice.

Alec crossed the room.

“Oh, I remember. Her name was Anna.”

His hand froze on the doorknob. “What did you say?”

After consuming an omelet, three slices of bacon, and two cups of coffee, Alec had managed to convince himself that the name in his wife’s tale was nothing more than an absurd coincidence. Setting his dirty plate and silverware on the tray, he forced himself not to think of last night’s passion.

“You’re looking much better now,” June commented, crossing her silverware over the empty plate. “You seemed a little green this morning. Are you sure you want to go to the museum today?”

“I’m fine,” he replied. “Just needed some food.”

The gap in his memory irritated him like a scab, and his mind kept picking at it.

He downed the last of his coffee, refusing to believe there was anything wrong with him. As soon as he could get away from June for five minutes, he planned to find Anna—talking to her would no doubt clear up his confusion.

Last night’s tryst had to be a dream.

A new thought discomforted him. Maybe he was only remembering the first time he had slept with Anna. But why did the memory seem so fresh?

Maybe the guilt was getting to him.

By the end of the day, Alec was doing his best to dismiss his jumbled memories, but he had not yet found Anna. He had nearly given up. Maybe she had quit her job at the resort.

Piano music drifted from the lounge as Alec and his wife left the dining room.

“Oh, let’s go in,” suggested June.

“If you like,” he said.

Reproduction Victorian furniture was arranged in clusters, and hand-painted lamps cast a warm glow over the large room. At one end, dried flowers filled the dormant fireplace; it was too warm for a fire. The bar and piano sat opposite. Guests relaxed around marble-topped coffee tables, sipping drinks and occasionally chatting over the music.

As June settled into one of the upholstered arm chairs, Alec stopped. “I just remembered—I wanted to ask for a morning paper.”

A slim waitress caught his eye and signaled that she would be over shortly.

“Order me a brandy,” he added. “I’ll be right back.”

The man behind the front desk noted his request. “Anything else I can do for you, sir?” he asked.

Alec cleared his throat and tried to sound casual. “Do you know if Anna is working this weekend?”

The phone rang. Reaching for the handset, the distracted concierge replied, “I think she’s in today.”

Alec returned to the lounge and sat down. His drink was sitting on the table.

June’s lips parted in happy concentration as the pianist played “Moon River.” Her eyes grew a little misty as he finished the song.

“We should do this more often,” she said. “Nice to get away for a long weekend.”

Alec nodded in agreement. He swirled the glass of Hennessy, and the fragrant, fermented caramel-like scent drifted up his nose, simultaneously soothing and poignant. The pianist glided through a series of old love songs: “We Kiss in a Shadow,” “Unforgettable,” and “When I Fall in Love.” An elderly couple, white-haired and frail, danced alone near the piano. Alec imagined that they were celebrating an anniversary. He wondered how many years they had been married.

He thought back to when he had first met his wife. Slender, shy, studying to be a nurse, June had had a sweet, girlish demeanor. Her girlishness had evaporated with time, replaced with unadventurous simplicity. They had started a family right after marrying, and raising three children had distracted them from each other. He would never have traded those years, but after their youngest left home, the house felt empty.

He suddenly wondered what June did all day while he was at work. She liked to garden, but what else? What kind of books did she read? She always had paperbacks around, but he only knew the topics never looked interesting to him. In the evenings, they watched television in separate rooms.

Still, he had to admit it was a comfortable marriage. They had survived hard times during the recession and had weathered the years well enough. That had to count for something. He loved her, but he missed the energy of his youth.

The heady liquid rolled down Alec's tongue, warming him. He pictured the old couple when they were young. Had the man ever cheated on his wife? Had they suffered through any crises? Had they always been as happy as they seemed tonight? He wistfully hoped he and his wife might end up like them, happy in old age. He was a fool to risk his marriage the way he had. He should never have succumbed to the temptations of seeing a younger woman.

He reached over and rested a hand on his wife's arm, feeling a mixture of guilt and tenderness. She didn't pull away as she so often did. He closed his eyes. Her skin felt soft.

"I thought you loved *me*," hissed a lilting voice.

An electric shiver ran down his spine. "What?" he exclaimed, nearly dropping his glass.

"What's the matter, dear?" asked June. "You look so pale."

Alec cast his gaze around. His heart pounded. He had heard Anna's voice, but she was no where to be seen. June leaned forward, her brow creased with worry.

He swallowed the rest of his drink in one gulp, letting the burning liquid numb his sudden fright. "I'm fine. Just feeling a little under the weather," he said, covering his anxiety.

"Hmm." She settled back into her seat.

Alec set his glass aside. "I'm probably just coming down with a cold. Suppose it's my body's revenge for me never taking time off." It was true: even though he had officially retired two years ago he still worked a full week.

"I'd better make you a doctor's appointment when we get back on Tuesday."

"I don't need to see the doctor," he snapped. He hated it when June pestered him, even when she was right.

She sighed and looked back at the pianist.

Spotting their empty glasses, the waitress came over. "Can I get you anything else to drink?" she asked.

"No, thank you," murmured June.

“We’re all right,” he added. He glanced up at the waitress’ face and nearly choked.

The waitress was Anna! Her eyebrows knitted together and her eyes narrowed. Her unspoken accusations stung like arrows.

A wave of panic flooded him; he feared she would reveal their affair. What an idiot he was! Not once in the last four weeks had it occurred to him that this might happen. He cast a nervous glance at June and then back at Anna.

An unexpected transformation made him do a double-take. Anna had vanished, replaced by another waitress, a tall, college-aged girl with too many freckles. “Coffee?”

“Where...” he gasped. “Where did the other waitress go?”

“Who?” asked the young woman. “You mean Anne?” She nodded towards the bar where a waitress with cropped blond hair collected a fresh tray of drinks from the bartender.

“But I thought—oh, never mind,” Alec said through clenched teeth. Anna must have somehow slipped out of the room.

The waitress wandered over to the next table.

“What was that all about?” asked June.

“Nothing,” he said, looking away. “I’m tired. Let’s go up.”

“Goodnight, dear,” said June.

Pulling the covers up, he said goodnight, and they exchanged a dry kiss. Sleep soon washed over him.

Alec dreamt that he was standing in his own garden, trimming the rose bushes.

“Send her away.” Anna did not startle him.

In the context of the dream, her presence did not seem strange.

Intent on washing dishes, June smiled cheerfully at him through the kitchen window. She seemed unaware of Anna.

“I don’t want to,” he replied, realizing how empty the window would have looked without her. “I love her.”

“You don’t sound convincing,” said Anna.

She brushed her lips against his cheek, and he inhaled the fragrance from her lustrous black hair.

Alec reluctantly moved away from her, his mind at war with his body. “It’s not her fault. I’m just... not as happy as I used to be.”

“I’ll make her go away for you,” suggested Anna. She snapped her fingers, and June vanished. The house suddenly changed into the Hotel Cypress, and they were now in the formal garden.

Filled with irrational dream-panic, he spun around and searched for his missing wife. His heart raced and sweat beaded on his forehead. “Where is she?” he demanded.

“Don’t you want her to go away?” asked Anna. “There she is.” She pointed at the lake, now shrouded in mist. A black-clad figure sat huddled in a tiny rowboat.

“June!” he cried.

“Let her go!” Anna ordered.

“Wake up, dear. You’re having a nightmare,” June said, nudging him.

“Ju... What?” He opened his eyes and gazed at the dim form of his wife.

Relief swept through him. He apologized for waking her. “I’m okay. Go back to sleep.”

She nestled back into the pillows, but he lay awake long after her breathing changed to the steady rhythm of sleep.

It was just a stupid nightmare, he told himself. Just a figment of his imagination.

Sleep threatened to carry him back into the same dream, so he shook himself awake again. Alec got out of bed and went to use the toilet, leaving the light off.

As he came out, he glanced at the oval mirror which he could just see from the bathroom doorway.

Anna stood in the shadows, gazing towards the bed.

Alarmed, he rushed into the bedroom. His wife was alone. He rechecked the mirror, but the room looked perfectly normal.

Climbing back into bed, he grumbled at himself and swore he needed to get his eyes checked.

They ate breakfast in the hotel restaurant. In spite of his restless night, Alec felt much better. He resolved to tell Anna that he had decided to be faithful to his wife.

“What shall we do today?” asked June, paying partial attention to her menu.

Alec turned his coffee cup over and paused while the waiter poured the steaming brew. “We could drive into town and walk around.” The Hotel Cypress held a coveted position on one side of the lake, isolated from the lakefront properties and the businesses at the other end.

“That’s a good idea,” she agreed. “I’d like to stop in a local bookstore and pick up some histories on the area.”

“Still on about that Discovery channel program?” he murmured, trying to decide between pancakes and French toast.

She must have been perturbed by his remark because she replied in a mildly sulky manner. “They were interesting stories.”

The waiter hovered into view. “The Discovery channel?” he said, having overheard part of the conversation. “You should have seen the place when they filmed here last fall.”

“I saw the program,” said June, who instantly cheered up. “It was very good.”

“It’s been great for business,” said the young man. “I think half our guests come here just to get a glimpse of one of the ghosts.” He cracked a toothy grin. “There are supposed to be lots of sightings on the upper floors.”

Alec frowned at his menu.

June’s eyes grew wide. They were staying on the top floor. “Oh, we haven’t seen anything,” she said, her voice slightly hushed. “Have you ever seen any... strange occurrences?”

The waiter bit his lip and pondered the question. “Well, I’ve seen the lights flicker a couple times in the stairwells.”

She shivered in sympathetic excitement.

After the waiter had taken their orders, June said, “Did you hear that? He’s actually seen something!”

“Just an overactive imagination,” Alec muttered. “The wiring in this place is probably ancient—the lights certainly flickered because of that.”

“Oh,” murmured his wife, her gaze dropping. “You always have an explanation for everything.”

“That’s because there *is* an explanation for everything.” He ignored the voice in his head that reminded him of Friday night.

June sighed. “Maybe you’ll see something some day, and then you’ll know it’s true.”

He huffed.

The pile of books sat innocently on the lace-covered table. Alec eyed them.

The shower hummed; June would be at least another ten minutes.

Just a quick peek, his curiosity whispered. He wanted to quiet the superstitious notions that had been lurking in the darker corners of his mind ever since his wife had mentioned the ghostly Anna. His Anna was flesh and blood—he was certain.

The hotel ghosts were fake, probably invented by the staff to drum up business.

Almost with a will of its own, his hand flipped open the topmost book, and he searched the passages for the ghost named Anna.

Anna DeMille came from the Caribbean to marry a rich industrialist during the end of the nineteenth century. Her dark looks had captivated her husband, but he had a wandering eye. Shortly after they married, he had an affair. More scandal followed when Anna died on their first wedding anniversary—at the Hotel Cypress, then a new resort. Her husband discovered her, hanging from an improvised noose made of bed sheets, her neck broken. Some experts claimed that he actually murdered her, but others suggested she had taken her own life when she discovered his infidelity.

The book also described sightings of her in the resort that were associated with a few untimely deaths. The war hero who committed suicide turned out to be one of them. Guests who had spotted his ghost said half of his head was missing.

Alec stopped himself.

Just what was he doing, reading this junk? “Fool!” he muttered under his breath. It was no wonder he was seeing things. As if he believed such nonsense!

Alec clapped the book shut and banged it down on the pile. He had no use for such fantasies. It was time to start acting like a grown man again.

When June emerged from the bathroom, he announced, “Let’s go home.”

“Whatever for?” exclaimed his wife, more than a little surprised. “We still have another day before we have to be back.”

“It... I’ve just had enough of this place.” Every defect stood out to him: the lacy cracks in the ceiling plaster, the yellowing edges in the wallpaper, the fading pattern on the carpet, and the overall mustiness.

She pouted. “Oh, but I was enjoying our stay here.” She absently poked through the contents of their suitcase as if wondering whether she should put on her dress or her travel clothes. “I don’t understand.”

“It’s all this old stuff,” he said, gesturing at the antiques. “I like the town, but next time we’re staying somewhere newer.”

Sighing, she selected her dress. “Just one more night. Please?” She pressed the rayon to her body, her brow raised hopefully.

Alec relented. He decided he could stand one more night. If anything, he deserved it as punishment for cheating. He was done with that now.

“Look at the lake,” said June, pausing at the window.

They had just finished dinner and were heading up to their room. Alec followed her gaze. Moonlight shimmered in a long column across the water, and the stars twinkled above. Colored spotlights and decorative lamp posts illuminated the garden. A few people strolled along the path.

“So pretty,” she murmured. “Let’s go for a walk.”

Tired but unwilling to disappoint his wife, Alec went along with her suggestion.

A cool breeze flowed across the water and stirred the tree branches. Feeling a touch of sentimentality, Alec reached out and took June’s hand in his own.

She briefly smiled up at him: a gentle, warm expression that brought him memories of her younger days.

They paused at the fountain, chatting about inconsequential details of their weekend. The sound of the splashing water was soothing.

“One of my magazines had an interesting article,” said June. “About couples. What do you think of renewing our wedding vows?”

Alec paused. Now that she mentioned it, it seemed like a good way to put his recent indiscretions behind him, like forgetting misbehavior during a bachelor party. “I’d like that.”

Arm in arm, they continued their walk down to the shore.

“Oh dear.” June frowned. “I left my handbag at the fountain.”

“I’ll get it. Be right back.”

He jogged back the way they had come, located the misplaced bag, and returned.

As he approached the water’s edge, he frowned. Where was his wife?

“June?” he called.

He heard no response and called her name a few more times.

“She’s gone.”

His face blanched. “Where is she?” He turned to face Anna, glorious in a silky gown that glided around her shapely breasts and hips. He grasped her firmly by her tanned arms, repeating his question. She was solid and substantial beneath his touch.

Her eyes sparkled. She pointed out to the lake.

Thrusting her aside, he scanned the dark water, almost expecting to see the little boat from his dream. Not a single wave broke the surface. He cupped his hands to his mouth. “June!”

No answer.

Anna smothered a laugh, and the sound enraged him. He waded in and shouted again. Had Anna tricked her? Why would she have gone into the water? His mouth dried out. He called for his wife over and over.

“Alec!” June’s voice carried to him from the shore.

He looked up, relieved to hear her. “June!”

“What are you doing out there?” she shouted.

Alec sloshed back, and the water dragged at his trousers. To his relief, Anna had gone. He was surprised at how far out he had walked.

“You’re all wet! What were you doing?”

“Looking for you!” he snapped.

“Me!?” she exclaimed. “Why would I be out there?”

“Where were you?” Alec’s feet slipped in his submerged shoes.

“Just talking to another couple that came by,” she replied.

“You shouldn’t have wandered off. I thought...” He stopped, mid-sentence, not believing his eyes. Anna had appeared just behind his wife. “Leave us alone!” he shouted.

“What?” His wife stared at him, dumfounded.

“Not you. *Her!*” He pointed at Anna. His head started to ache.

June glanced behind her. “Who?”

Anna was still there.

Alec hurried onto dry land. Trying to catch his breath, he waved Anna off, glaring at her.

She laughed at him.

“Alec, you’re scaring me!” June ran to meet him. “Who are you shouting at?”

“I was...” he began, short of breath, “trying to say...”

Anna—as solid as his wife—suddenly blinked out of existence.

Alec stopped. He had spots in his eyes. Suddenly, something felt very wrong inside. Weakness engulfed his left arm.

“Alec? Alec!” June shrieked as he collapsed to the ground.

Anna appeared, smiling.

Darkness overwhelmed him, along with the scent of ginger and musk.