

**P.S. Thanks for the
Inspiration**

A Collection of Stories

by

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Part I

The Collector

He'd been offered a broad range of services in his years collecting debts owed to the southside loan shark: women ranging from jail bait to middle-aged to elderly, even men. Known for integrity in the execution of his duties, he never succumbed.

The principal and interest filled his pockets, or bones were broken.

That Tuesday afternoon, he paid a call on the flat up two flights in a converted brownstone. His knock gentle, so as not to attract the neighbors' attention, he recoiled when the door was yanked inward with a force equal to an individual much larger than the petite, smiling ash blonde in a flowered summer frock.

"Why didn't you use your key, dude?" she spat, apologizing for the mistake when she actually glanced at the lean, chestnut haired visitor. "What can I do for you?"

"You can pay what you owe."

She cowered, realizing the import of the situation. "I..."

He crossed the threshold and secured the deadbolt against outside interference. "Come on, gal. Don't try that act on me. I've seen it all."

"I don't have the cash," she whimpered, backing toward the kitchenette. "Would you like a cup of coffee while we discuss it?"

"There's nothing to discuss. You agreed to pay the Shark on the fifteenth of March. It's now June."

She scrambled to pull two ceramic mugs from a cupboard and fill them with steaming brew. "It's not that I don't want to pay. I lost my job when the factory closed in February, and haven't been able to find anything else..."

"Then, I'll have to liquidate your assets." Brushing aside the cup, he clutched her shoulders. "Sad to have to take such drastic measures..."

"No, please! Isn't there another way?"

He had to admit, most of the females he dealt with weren't half so lovely. He wouldn't mind having a tumble with this one... "Maybe we can make some arrangement..."

Thus, he spent his Tuesday and Friday afternoons in bed with the Welsher over those sultry months,. He suspected she understood her outstanding debt had become a moot point; they enjoyed each other's bodies to their mutual satisfaction.

Until the Shark discovered his highest paid enforcer had been compromised.

“I saw him goin’ into ‘er place twice a week this last month,” reported one of the Shark’s messengers during the bi-weekly staff meeting.

“You had me shadowed?” the Collector protested.

The Shark, his elegant grey Gucci suit bearing a rose in the lapel, sneered. “Of course. How else can I be sure you’re not cheating me out of my take?”

“She keeps putting me off...”

“Then, she should be in the hospital, or dead.”

“I... can’t...”

“You haven’t let yourself get emotionally attached?” pressed the Shark.

“Not in a million years! It’s just good... fantastic sex.”

“Fine. Then, we’ll all have a go at her.”

The Collector froze. He couldn’t confess his feelings for the woman, nor could he let these thugs violate her against her will, whether she owed \$50 or \$50,000.

He pulled his Beretta from its shoulder holster beneath the Pittsburgh Pirates windbreaker. “That’s not happening,” he warned.

The Shark didn’t need to so much as tilt his head; bullets riddled the Collector’s body and he collapsed in his own blood.

Dumped in the river beneath the warehouse through a trap door, local news outlets reported the murder on the next evening’s news, after the bloated corpse washed ashore five miles downstream.

The woman had wondered why he didn’t show up the previous day and, when six men appeared on her doorstep after midnight, she knew she’d be the next to die.

Breaking the Big Story

From the anchor desk, he'd witnessed countless changes in the news broadcast game.

Experiments in popularity ratings had brought in voluptuous, air-headed blonde co-anchors, who rarely lasted beyond a year.

Weather forecasts had evolved from frontal boundaries drawn with black markers on glass-covered national maps to computer generated radar images.

The content itself - especially from the networks - had deteriorated from straight, unbiased fact to commentary.

When Monroe Jacobs first addressed WORP viewers, the final three minutes of each program included an editorial segment - oft-pithy comments authored by the news director, station manager or himself, dealing with current topics.

Five decades later, cable news boasted brief recitation of facts and endless dissection from a corral of self-proclaimed experts.

He'd considered retiring more than once; public outcry in support of his ethics, integrity and approach to the news prompted the owners to offer the still handsome - albeit heavier and grayer - fixture substantial pay raises on each occasion so he would tear up his resignation letter.

Fortunately, he worked in a market neither too large nor too small, which allowed for such loyalty.

The area also proved suitable for a state prison, where medium security inmates spent their days in idle pursuits, except for the handful who studied for their high school diploma or GED, worked in the laundry, kitchen, library or ran their own craft shop.

When Jacobs, through a reliable source, got wind of an embezzlement scam at the facility, he jumped at the chance to expose wrongdoing.

"They won't grant you access," declared Ralph Owens, the cameraman whose brother served as the lockup's recruiting officer.

"Being taxpayer funded, they have no choice."

"They can stall you with piles of paperwork, while the story fades into oblivion."

That thought generated a host of ideas on how to infiltrate a system reputedly secure yet flawed.

He needed someone on the inside.

Not an actual inmate - trusting such being problematic - but an employee, a volunteer or a contracted laborer...

On the premise of checking which ministers might be providing religious services for the upcoming holidays, Jacobs asked the station receptionist to phone the city's prominent churches. Three names garnered from that effort provided links to eight others: the prison's volunteer coordinator, four correction officers who regularly escorted inmates to the gymnasium where Sunday services provided a means to kill an hour or two, and lay chaplains who provided a sympathetic ear for offenders discovering their new faith.

A phone conversation with one of the latter merited a decent lead.

"My granddaughter is graduating Friday from the prison's training academy," related a Baptist elder. "She's already told us quite a bit about conditions there."

Jacobs directed the gentleman to pass along his cell number and email address to the young woman, so they could arrange a time to meet.

Patrons few early on Saturdays at the downtown coffee shop, a New England Patriots sweatshirt, jeans and brown leather motorcycle boots elicited no undue attention as the anchor sipped his Columbian brew. The silhouette which breezed through the entrance just after 7:00, backlit by the dawn, proved tough to assess - in many ways.

Tina Uhrh approached the table, smiling. "Good morning, Mr. Jacobs."

He returned the greeting and signaled her to a chair opposite. "May I buy you something to drink?"

"I've already had my quota for today, thanks." Slender digits ran through an unruly blonde mop, impatient. Blue eyes peered from beneath long lashes. "What can I do for you?"

"You're in a hurry?"

"In my position, being seen with a news reporter won't help my job security."

Jacobs grasped her discomfort. "To be brief, I'm wondering if you're willing to dig up a bit of information about the prison administrators and how they handle their funds."

"That's a tall order."

"You don't need to place yourself at risk. If you're willing to listen - casually - to conversations when you're in the office, say, and pass along any insights..."

"It could take months to gather enough information..."

"That's part of any in-depth investigation. There's no rush. Before we put anything on air, we want to be sure of the facts, and verify any statements to prevent... errors."

“Good to know.” Tina rose. “I’ve got your number, so I’ll keep in touch.”
“Even if you don’t have anything, please check in weekly. A text would do...”

“Nothing traceable. When I contact you, it’ll be from a payphone - those that still exist.”

As she strode toward the door, Jacobs drained his cup. So logical her thinking, if she did gather any credible details, the report might garner national attention.

Segments on a surge in car burglaries around an affluent subdivision, the hotly contested mayoral election and a drive-by shooting on the city’s south side occupied Jacobs’ time early the next week. Preparations for the governor’s press conference on an initiative to legalize marijuana had him scrambling to compile questions and organize the camera and sound crew.

His desk phone rang as he was tugging on his sport coat mid-morning Thursday. He considered ignoring it, but journalistic instincts prevailed.

“Hello?”

“When can we meet?”

Jacobs vaguely recognized Tina’s contralto. “You’ve got something?” he queried.

“Absolutely huge. Tomorrow, dawn, at River Island?”

“Sure.”

The prospect of learning about prison operations distracted the news anchor from the task at hand. He missed two opportunities to grill the state’s elected leader about his rationale for placing the “Weed Bill” on the November ballot, essentially getting scooped by the competition.

He didn’t sleep that night, despite his exhaustion when the 10:00 edition signed off. After showering, he dressed in black sweats and drove a vintage blue Corvette to where the river split into two forks, a spit of land in the midst of rapids.

The foot bridge swayed ominously in the morning breeze. Jacobs recalled the day that structure had been dedicated, even then doubting its stability.

Seeing Tina, bathed in soft pastels of the rising sun, he accelerated his pace to join her atop the concrete retaining wall that prevented soil from eroding.

She never glanced at him, gazing instead at a pair of swans idling in the tidepool below. “You’re not going to believe this,” she began.

“Try me.”

“So, I’m in the office most of the week, filling out paperwork and watching orientation videos, right? I’m hearing all sorts of talk, from the warden on down to

the guys who read the offenders' mail. The Security Threat Group officer mentions over coffee in the break room twenty thousand in grant monies earmarked for rehabilitating former gang members has been funneled into a private account, financing cruises and European vacations."

"You're sure?"

"It's the thin slice of a very large pie. The only way you're going to see the whole picture is by going inside."

"What! You mean, as an inmate?"

"No. As a correction officer."

"I... don't have time to go through such a process..."

Tina smirked, marring her otherwise delicate profile. "No need for that. During our training, I had a chat with the woman who processes identification cards. The computers are so antiquated, hacking into the system is simple."

Jacobs' elegant, tapered fingers accepted the plastic rectangle thrust toward him. The photo used for his biography on the WOPR website had been printed above the name, "Amos Robinson."

"I've got a uniform for you in my car," Tina added.

"How'd you acquire *that*?"

"Stole it from the laundry when I was picking up mine."

"This will never work," Jacobs objected.

"You don't realize how easy it is to go anywhere, as long as you wear the right clothes and have that little card. Your transfer paperwork is in the trouser pocket of your uniform slacks, so the administrative types will think you've been shipped over temporarily to replace a couple guys who quit without notice on Tuesday."

Impressed, the anchor accompanied Tina to her red Fiat 500 on the river's west bank. She laid the grey outfit across his extended arms, remarking, "There's a brief, fictitious bio matching the name on the ID, as well as an address and cell number to a cheap flip phone. Be at the main building at 6:45 Monday morning. I'll be there, too, but don't acknowledge me in any way. Just keep your eyes and ears open."

Jacobs retreated three steps as she started the engine and shifted into reverse. Tires spit loose gravel in his direction as she sped from the parking lot.

Allowing a substitute to sit at the anchor desk had always irked the long-time WOPR employee, and this instance was no different. Meeting the station manager Friday afternoon, Jacobs explained his plan, which met with hearty approval.

“You know as well as I do, the hype about transparency among the state agencies is bunk,” Karla Andrews stated. “Get the dirt and let’s blow this mess wide open.”

Upon leaving her office, Jacobs sighed in relief the woman hadn’t been part of the organization years earlier. Commentaries she would’ve written would’ve placed them on the receiving end of numerous lawsuits - the difference between a degree in business administration and journalism.

He slept until 10:00 on Saturday and enjoyed a breakfast of eggs, bacon, toast and coffee. After showering, he slipped on the uniform and scrutinized himself in the full-length bathroom mirror.

“Just might succeed,” he muttered, the nondescript attire intended to make him blend in with every other guard monitoring the prisoners.

Attached to the bogus transfer papers, a list of basic employee rules explained behavior inside the razor wire-topped fences. Tina had scrawled, “There’s a lot more, but this should get you by.”

As a result, Jacobs swung by the barber shop for a trim. He preferred thick sideburns extending below his earlobe; when he rose from the chair, they’d been almost entirely eliminated. His reflection in the glass door reminded him too much of photos taken while his father had served as a World War II Navy pilot.

College and pro football games ran on his television much of the weekend while he puttered around the bungalow. He mentally critiqued the sportscasters’ narratives, a constant habit when anyone spoke, nurtured over the course of decades. He abhorred poor grammar or unnecessary slang from those striving to appeal to the modern generation.

He encountered that generation - on both sides - when he reported to the prison early Monday.

Lack of life experience made the younger correction officers prime targets for offender scams. Jacobs himself had dealt with thousands of individuals, through interviews and crime reports, to grasp the workings of the human mind. What he sensed as the deputy warden escorted him on a tour was a disaster in the making.

Tina passed him en route to her post in one of the concrete slab structures, narrow horizontal windows the residents’ sole access to daylight when confined to their cells. She fell into the category “young and inexperienced,” though her willingness not to limit herself to blurbs posted on social media sites or texting on a cell phone gave her points in his estimation.

She observed her surroundings - the people, places and things - a practice that would benefit her in the end.

Or, so he believed.

Jacobs, having never visited a prison, approved of the cleanliness and well-organized layout of this complex. Four two-storey buildings housed inmates, with a centrally-located gymnasium surrounded by outdoor recreation yards. General administration worked in a building on the western perimeter, while those who assisted with processing and aiding inmates performed their duties in a maze-like barn to the south.

Offenders wore white scrub tops and baggy trousers, with green quilted coats in colder weather. They were not supposed to interact with their guards more than necessary, in the cell blocks, the day room or outdoors, but that didn't mean they suspended their efforts to foul up the daily routine with underhanded antics such as provoking personnel into using unnecessary force, blackmailing those who let their emotions override good judgment, or misinforming "fresh fish" about procedures.

Walt Owens, the prison's recruiter, met Jacobs when the latter concluded his circuit. "Since you're my only correction officer requiring orientation today - and you're familiar with all but our unique procedures - we'll make this short and sweet."

The office door closed, Owens made a show of setting up his laptop computer to play a DVD, so anyone watching through the glass would not suspect the true nature of the meeting.

"We're being videotaped, Mr. Jacobs," the WORP cameraman's brother whispered. "There's no audio recording, fortunately. I'm glad you're here, though I'm not sure how you managed it. I recognized you as soon as you arrived, because of Ralph. There's no telling how many others will do likewise, though most on the day shift don't have a chance to catch the evening news, and would be in bed by the time the late broadcast hits the air. At most, you'll have two days before you're discovered."

The infiltrator pretended to concentrate on the computer screen. "Then, give me what information you have, and I'll get out before the shit hits the fan."

The elder Owens launched into a recital of facts which simultaneously horrified and exhilarated his listener.

Documents were produced from a locked filing cabinet: falsified grant reports, receipts from internet travel booking websites, bank statements. Though Jacobs could not photograph or be provided copies, he examined each thoroughly and jotted notes on scratch paper, tucking the folded scraps in his black uniform boots.

The corruption, despite underlings being drilled on ethical and professional conduct, ran from the major who served as third in command down to the sergeants performing administrative functions.

“The secretaries and others are on the take, as well,” Owens affirmed. “That’s the joy of being part of a criminal justice system in a sparsely populated state where oversight is limited by the tight budget.”

“What now?”

“You’ll meet the warden, as is customary for transfers and new hires.”

“But?”

“He’s been here six months, and has his own... version of how a prison should operate. No one has dared broach this subject with him, afraid of not being believed, or facing retaliation from the major because it’s impossible to keep such reports anonymous.”

“So, you want *me* to tell the warden?”

“Just like you were here to do an official interview. Ask him questions; mention the facts. Put him on the spot and tell him you’ll be contacting the Prison Board before making this public in a matter of days.”

Jacobs realized he’d been set up to serve as messenger for a group of fearful employees, hoping their boss would take appropriate action.

What did transpire, no one could have predicted.

Guy Hildebrand greeted Monroe Jacobs with an affectionate hug. “You don’t remember me, do you?” the warden queried.

“I’m sorry...”

Hildebrand recounted his participation in a summer course taught by Jacobs on journalistic ethics two decades previous. “I finished my degree and took a job in San Diego. When television news programming changed so drastically, I began searching for an alternative career. I’d done an exposé on a county jail, and one of the administrators offered me a position as public information officer.”

From there, Hildebrand worked his way to his home state and through the ranks of the prison system.

The tale Jacobs told made the younger man visibly shudder. Hildebrand didn’t bother using the intercom, he strode from his office, personally ordering every occupant of the administrative wing to assemble in the courtyard near the building’s front entrance. Then, he seized a hand-held radio from the central control room, summoning one guard from every section to gather in the main lobby.

Tina Uhrh left her post in the pod to join her co-workers.

Nearly 30 individuals were summarily placed on suspension without pay, pending investigation of fraud and other criminal activity. They were not allowed to remove any possessions from their offices, the guards permitting them only to retrieve their coats - first searched - and personal keys.

Jacobs witnessed the scene, having time to fetch a digital recorder from his car.

Hildebrand's tirade, albeit delivered in a calm tone, carried the weight of disgust and anger at the violation of the people's trust. The breaking news preempted afternoon talk shows, with WORP touting exclusive sources.

Employees who tried to bilk offenders of their possible rehabilitation faced the wrath of both press and local citizens in the wake of this revelation. The Department of Criminal Justice's executive director authorized the termination of every participant in the scam, promoting Walter Owens to major and Tina Uhrh to shift captain for their courage and integrity.

Screening replacements for both uniformed and non-uniformed administrative positions eliminated any applicants with questionable qualifications or backgrounds. Within three months, the entire atmosphere at the prison changed from oppressive and threatening to respectful and disciplined, thanks to Guy Hildebrand.

Monroe Jacobs received local, state and national accolades for his reporting. That April, he came home from the national press convention with plaques, trophies and certificates, and a check for \$5,000.

During a lunch for WORP staff celebrating Administrative Professionals' Day, he recognized Tina at a long table on the restaurant's opposite end. He admitted, silently, if the brilliant, resourceful woman had been ten years older, he might've pursued a relationship.

He had no intention of dating anyone young enough to be his granddaughter, however.

Raising his water glass, he saluted her with a grin.

She noticed the gesture and returned it, winking.

Overdue Redemption

Steffi lingered near the white picket fence, gazing up at the five bedroom, yellow clapboard farmhouse. The white trim had faded; paint peeled off the wood columns and slat board porch that wrapped around the dwelling's front and south facade.

The gate squeaked as she pushed it aside, strolling the gravel walk to warped steps. She'd grown up here: romping through the fields, some years planted with corn, others with wheat or soybeans. Acreage left untouched allowed for games of hide-and-seek among sturdy oaks and pines.

Those precious memories had been obliterated one fateful night years earlier.

Approaching a lopsided screen door, the flannel shirt and jean-clad woman half expected to find traces of blood on the weathered faux-grass welcome mat.

The scene washed over her like a tsunami.

She'd ridden to a rock festival over in Bridgeport on Benjy Thynne's Harley Davidson that summer Saturday. The pair had dated through much of high school, and they planned to marry after graduating from college.

A light rain coated the roads during the night, raising a fog that made traveling difficult. The delivery truck hadn't seen the motorcycle on the curve...

She'd arrived home in a police cruiser, the swollen black eye and miscellaneous contusions raising her father's ire. As her mother helped her to bed, he'd sworn revenge on the man who'd abused his flesh and blood.

When Benjy appeared at the door Sunday, picnic basket in hand, Richard Parietti didn't wait for explanations or apologies. He'd unloaded both barrels of his shotgun into the teen's chest.

Steffi heard the blast in her bedroom, racing down the stairs. Joan rushed from the kitchen; her coffee mug shattered on the parquet floor at the sight of the dead youth.

No charges were filed against the patriarch, who claimed he thought the boy an intruder and was only defending his property. There being no eyewitnesses to the deed, the prosecutor dismissed Benjy's family's accusations of murder.

Steffi knew better and, despising how her father hadn't trusted her, packed and left for California.

In the decade since she'd last set foot on the farm, she'd dropped out of the university, entering a congregation of progressive Franciscan sisters. While she learned to calm her volatile temper in formation, her father died of prostate cancer.

Her mother, alone in the huge house, succumbed to depression, passing in her sleep.

She bequeathed the property to her only daughter's community, with the proviso a school be built to prepare girls for meaningful careers.

Sister Katherine, the superior, sent Steffi - fresh from the ceremony renewing temporary vows of poverty, chastity and obedience - to assess the condition of the house, anticipating its use as a convent for those who would oversee the construction process.

Utilities off, Steffi navigated the dim foyer by memory, moving left into the living room, through to the dining room and kitchen. A thick layer of dust coated every surface. She chuckled at the thought of a cadre of sisters, buckets and rags in tow, scrubbing every inch of floor, wall and counter.

Cleanliness is next to godliness, she grasped.

The afternoon sun through smudged windows illuminated legal documents and unopened mail cluttering the desk in her father's den. Steffi shuddered at the sight of the shotgun, mounted above a dormant quarry stone fireplace. She reached up, intent on smashing the weapon into tiny pieces.

A hand on her shoulder nearly propelled her out of her skin.

She spun 180 degrees, the room empty.

"Shit!" she muttered.

Mounting the creaking staircase in the hall, carpet runner frayed at the edges, Steffi disregarded the railing, badly in need of repair.

Chests and desks in the bedrooms, some dating to the 19th century, could be used by the sisters when they took up residence; the mattresses and box springs would need replacing - especially in the master bedroom. Her mother had expired on that bedding beneath the frilled canopy, and no one had ever bothered to discard it. The nearly unbearable stench drove Steffi to throw open the French doors, standing briefly on the small balcony as trees swayed in the breeze.

She recalled the night, her parents in town at a dance, when she and Benjy had enjoyed this vantage point. He'd been loathe to leave her alone when he dropped her off after a basketball game. They studied the stars, tried to guess which planets were visible, and he'd kissed her.

Suddenly warm, despite the spring chill, Steffi retreated indoors and secured the knobs. As she traversed pine boards needing a coat of wax, she noticed a brightly colored greeting card - seemingly tossed in her path - that hadn't been there minutes earlier.

Her mother's habit of stashing holiday and birthday wishes, along with notes, in drawers, this might've been jarred free of that collection by air suddenly circulating through the chamber. She bent to retrieve it.

"I miss you," read the stylized cover font, art depicting a broken heart amidst a floral bouquet. Trembling fingers unfolded the textured paper. "I love you" was scrawled on the otherwise blank interior.

She recognized the handwriting, and the "B" underneath.

The card fluttered down when she dropped it.

Descending to ground level, Steffi concentrated on her breathing to slow her pounding heart. Somehow, it made sense that Benjy's spirit might inhabit the old house, dying at a young age from such unwarranted violence.

Wall sconces in the living room flickered to life, raising a shriek in her throat. She rushed outside, collapsing in relief against the nearest column when she noticed the County Power and Gas van parked behind her Toyota Corolla.

"You're all set!" called the technician with a cheery wave, tool belt jangling at his waist.

"Thanks!" Steffi inhaled deeply. "What about the water?"

"Word was, they resumed service yesterday."

Good to know. She hadn't tried the sinks or used the toilet.

That meant she wouldn't have to find lodgings in town; she could remain in the house and figure out what the hell was happening.

Doing a bit of cleaning, herself.

The young religious marveled how careless the family's attorney had been to allow old food to spoil in the refrigerator and boxes of cereal, instant potatoes and rice to deteriorate in the cabinets.

The pantry should hold broom, bucket and plenty of Pine Sol, Steffi surmised. She'd never trusted lawyers, especially after...

"Don't worry your beautiful head over it."

The familiar, albeit disembodied baritone echoed around the kitchen; she shuddered.

"Ben, are you here?" she whispered.

Ethereal arms encompassed her waist from behind. "Yes."

"How?"

"I came to get you that day, and I won't leave without you."

Steffi never had reason to fear Benjy in life; she dared not anger his ghost, just in case. "Can I... see you?"

Glancing down, his arm gradually materialized. Her legs would have buckled, had he not caught her.

“You okay?” he asked, twirling her toward him.

“I... well... what do you think?”

He guided her to a chair at the tiny breakfast table. Then, he selected a tumbler, rinsed it and filled it with water from the tap. “Here. Drink this.”

She hesitated. Running the water for 30 minutes or more might flush the... impurities from the pipes after prolonged disuse...

Setting aside the glass, she studied the image before her, awestruck. His longish, sun-bleached russet hair retained that windblown look, as if he’d just stepped off the saddle of his Harley. The wide forehead tapered down his jawline to a narrow chin, skin tanned. Intense brown eyes beneath thick brows glistened in the light. That nose, stolen from a statue of a Roman god, protruded above the lips she’d tasted so often, that slanted up at the right corner when he spoke or smiled.

His shoulders set within the black leather jacket, the silver Om pendant dangled from a filigree chain. Leather chaps emphasized muscular legs, tucked into square-toed boots.

“Damn, you look fine!” she gasped.

Very real digits ruffled her short brunette curls. “What’s all this?” he quipped. “Where’s the ponytail?”

“I cut it off when...”

How could she tell him she’d forsaken the ways of the world for a convent? But, then, didn’t souls released from earthly existence have an omniscient perspective on those still living?

“You can’t ride like this,” Benjy persisted. “You won’t be able to get a brush through it when we’re done.”

Steffi admitted she could be wrong. She’d never before dealt with... denizens of the afterlife. Perhaps Benjy’s reason for haunting the farmhouse narrowed his focus...

“I... can’t ride with you today, Ben. I’ve got to whip the house into shape.”

“Yeah, it’s a mess, isn’t it?” He lifted her off the wooden chair. “C’mon. I’ll help you, and we’ll get it done in half the time.”

True to his word, the ectoplasmic manifestation commandeered bottles and rags, concentrating on removing layers of dust from every stick of furniture within the structure, while Steffi swept and mopped floors, vacuumed carpets, wiped down counters and sinks, and allowed the water to run freely.

The sisters would be pleased, she mused, the washing machine churning three hours later.

“What about the beds?” Benjy puzzled as they reclined on the living room sofa.

“We can deal with that another day.”

He leaned over and kissed her lightly.

“Ben, I...”

“You’re exhausted, I know. And hungry, probably. But, it’s time to go.”

She shifted on the cushions, goosebumps rising on her flesh. “Time to go?”

“We’re meant to be together, you and I,” he reasoned. “I can never rest unless you’re with me.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

His solemn mien disproved any joke. He drew her close and smothered her mouth with his, igniting a flame Steffi never thought she’d experience again.

The next morning, a sheriff’s deputy - investigating the car parked in the driveway of the abandoned residence - discovered Sister Stefanie Parietti dead on the oak four-poster bed, French doors open, a strangely contented smile giving her an angelic appearance.

When the tragedy was reported to her superiors, their reaction confounded the official.

“She’d been diagnosed with stage four ovarian cancer,” came Sister Katherine’s explanation. “We hadn’t yet had a chance to tell her...”

Chaos Theory

The fly swatter flattened moth-eaten maroon draperies against a sliding door and, with them, the spider that had been crawling toward the ceiling.

Ellie discerned two silhouettes through the cloth, illuminated by the sunrise: one, tall and broad, the other, shorter and slim.

She whipped pleated fabric aside and groaned at sheepish grins slightly distorted by grimy glass.

The McQuaid brothers.

She'd met the pair at Lincoln High School soon after the second semester commenced. They sat behind her in Chaos Theory, not very intent on acquiring an education.

They weren't twins - Doug, with his sandy mullet, wrestler's physique barely covered by an oil stained and shredded wife-beater and distressed denim shirt; Tom a runner, if he participated in any sports at all, the lunatic sleeveless jean jacket, ragged flannel shirt, two wide leather belts over severely ripped jeans, and patterned bandana tied around his cranium confirming a rough reputation - but both claimed to be juniors. Ellie could imagine Doug flunking a couple grades years earlier.

Their synchronized hand-slap greeting for each other and signature entrance: kicking open a door then filling the space with a simultaneous and very loud, "Hello!" - usually before seizing the nearest youthful miscreants and teaching them a very painful lesson - amused many, but disgusted her.

"What the hell do you want?" she barked.

Doug's accent bordered on Brooklyn. "Thought you might want a ride."

"It's only four blocks."

Still, Tom drove a sweet frost turquoise 1967 Ford Mustang fastback she'd heard girls drooling over in the cafeteria.

Her shoulders sagged. "Give me a minute."

Closing the curtains, she never changed from pajamas to an Edgar Allan Poe t-shirt and bell-bottom jeans so quickly in her life. She ran a comb through purple-streaked ashen tresses, slid into Birkenstock sandals and snatched her backpack.

The McQuaids lingered beside the Mustang as she secured the deadbolt. Mimicking a gentleman, Doug opened the passenger door, shoved the seat forward and slid into the back, so she could have the front.

Turning the key, chewing remnants of an orange plastic straw, Tom revved the engine. The vibration thrilled Ellie in ways mere words couldn't describe. He shifted into reverse and left a patch of rubber on the concrete.

"So, I thought you two were slackers," she remarked as they slowed at the stop sign where landscaped stone identified the Heritage Hills apartment complex. "You always seem to miss first hour."

"Doug has a hard time waking up," explained Tom lightly, a slight southern twang to his baritone.

She snickered. "I've known a lot of guys like that."

"I've known a lot of gals who aren't half as drop-dead gorgeous as you. Why aren't you on the cheerleading squad, or dating the varsity quarterback?"

"You want me to puke on your dashboard?"

"How come you're in high school, but you live alone?" Doug's mouth hovered inches from her left ear as they merged with traffic on Tenth Street.

"Where're your folks?"

"Does it matter?"

As if responding to some invisible signal, he slumped on the blue upholstery.

"Cancer took our mom," Tom volunteered.

"I never said..."

"It's hard for me to talk about."

Ellie bristled. "Leave off, already! It's none of your business!"

"Sorry."

She relaxed at his contrite tone. "So am I. I just don't understand why you're so interested."

"There are rumors goin' 'round that you're..." Doug hinted, silenced by a harsh glance from his brother.

"Rumors are as common in those halls as red lipstick and switchblades."

Tom chuckled, a pleasant sound. "You're right."

"For instance, I've heard you two beat up more dweebs in the bathroom than Chucky's whole gang."

"We ignore the dweebs," grunted Doug. "It's those wanna-be gang bangers we don't like."

Cruising the student parking lot, Tom eased the Mustang into a vacant spot. Once they alighted, he gestured to Doug, who trudged off, disappointed.

"What's going on, man?" Ellie queried. "Why the sudden attention?"

Tom circled the car and propped himself on the front quarter panel. "You haven't noticed?"

“Noticed what?” she countered, focused on a throng congregating near the tennis courts, music blaring from a boom box.

“The guys carrying pistols in class.”

“Sure. It’s not like they conceal them.”

“Word is: there’s a price on your head.”

The guffaw burst forth, unbidden. “That’s the most ridiculous thing anyone has ever said to me.”

“They think you’ve got a fortune stashed at your place, an inheritance from your folks.”

“If that were the case, I wouldn’t be living in a one-bedroom pit.” Angry hazel orbs met his dark brown eyes. “When my parents died, they bequeathed me their debt.”

The warning bell reverberated across the campus.

“You haven’t answered my question,” she persisted.

“Outside the principal’s office yesterday, I overheard the secretaries discussing gaps in your records...”

“Gaps?”

“No Social Security number, no birth certificate, no previous address...”

“So, you can’t abide a mystery?”

Tom smiled, reaching to squeeze her hand. “Actually, I love a good mystery.” He plucked her backpack off the gravel and moved toward the massive red brick edifice. “Would you like to take a drive after school?”

“Where to?”

“I know this burger joint...”

Oh, the impulses of youth! Ellie mused. But, she had nothing on her agenda. “Sure.”

Doug sprinted in their direction, a trio of toughs on his heels.

“Excuse me a minute,” Tom demurred.

She countered, “Excuse you, hell!”

As teens formed a ring around the combatants, Tom bloodied his knuckles on a suede-jacketed albino, while Doug spun and tackled a behemoth who outweighed him by 50 pounds. For her part, Ellie sent the largest sailing into a tree trunk with a vicious round-house kick.

The McQuaid brothers tucked matching silver St. Michael medallions under their shirts, brushed themselves off, and stared at her in awe. “We salute you!” they chorused, thumping their fists over their hearts, raising them to their mouths as if blowing on imaginary dice, shaking and releasing them.

School security officers converged on the disturbance.

“Where’d you learn to do that?” hissed Tom.

Ellie smirked, retrieved her bag and pranced up the sidewalk.

She despised when bullies of any ilk attempted to oppress a minority.

The morning passed without further incident; she wasn’t even summoned to the administrative office for disciplinary action. After lunch, she felt a note slipped into her three-ring binder from behind while she copied equations off the chalkboard. She didn’t read it until a smoke bomb exploded in the teacher’s desk, filling the room with a noxious odor that warranted evacuation.

“Will you teach me?” was written in a childish script, unsigned.

She crumpled the scrap and pitched it in the nearest trash basket, not caring if its author witnessed the deed and took offense.

Doug, his wife-beater soaked from dousing the non-lethal grenade with water, fell into step with her as she approached the history wing.

“You okay?” she muttered.

He snorted, “Talk about a mess!”

“What do you want?”

“Just wanted to warn you: when I was fetching a bucket from the janitor’s closet, I heard guys talking about ransacking your place tonight.”

“What on earth for? I own four pieces of furniture and little of value.”

“They’ve got it in for you, whatever their reason.”

Ellie collared Doug, craning her neck almost nine inches to meet his gaze. “What do *you* think is their reason?”

“Like I said: you live alone, no parents. You don’t have an after school job, so they think you’ve got wads of cash...”

“Do I look like I’m wealthy?” she scoffed.

“You look like every other kid in school, but sometimes their sort gets a fixation...”

She leaned against the wall. “Let’s say I *am* wealthy, and I don’t trust banks, so I have a shoebox jammed with C-notes in the cupboard above the stove. What would these bozos do with the money? Buy drugs, smokes, what?”

“Any and all.” Doug planted massive paws on the tiles, pinning her between them. “If you did have that kind of scratch, where would you have gotten it?”

Ellie ducked under the barrier and resumed her trek to fifth hour, his jaw agape at her boldness.

Backpack tucked in her locker - required homework spurned, as it was - she met Tom at the Mustang with a sense of trepidation. Heading beyond the city limits, few other vehicles occupied winding lanes.

“Open her up,” instructed Ellie.

“You sure?”

“I wanna see what she’s got.”

Tom cautioned, “You buckled up?”

“Are you kidding?”

“She’ll jump over a hundred, easy.”

“I had one fresh from the factory up to 150, back in the day.”

The 320-horsepower V-8 roared and the car bolted forward, then screeched to an abrupt halt. Tom switched off the ignition and glared at Ellie.

“What’s the problem?” she prodded.

“There’s no way you could’ve driven one of these new. You weren’t even born yet.”

“Says who?”

“You’re sixteen, seventeen, tops.”

She tittered, “You’re a real hoot, you are.”

“I’m serious!”

She swiveled on the bucket seat, tucking her legs beneath her. “Okay. Your... friend - because he’s not your brother, of that I’m positive - told me some jokers want to burglarize my dump because they think I’m loaded. You’re suspicious about my sketchy records. You tell me your secret, and I’ll tell you mine.”

A hushed minute passed, then Tom’s bravado crumbled. He pulled a billfold from the hip pocket of his tattered jeans, flipping it open to reveal a silver police badge and credentials.

“I’m an undercover cop.”

Ellie’s body convulsed with hilarity. “And, Doug?”

“He’s my partner.”

Hazel eyes rolled. “Heaven help us!”

“Now, wait a minute...”

“Why’re you here?”

“The department received reports about an international agent, with such deep cover no one could source it, among the student body. We were assigned...”

“How bogus! What could a spy possibly find...”

“Some of these kids’ parents hold sensitive government positions...”

“And students would freely convey intelligence they overheard at dinner? For what?”

“Drugs, money...”

Ellie's palm covered her face. "So, using superior deductive methods, you honed in on me?"

Tom shrugged.

"You gonna arrest me?"

"Right now, we have no proof," he admitted.

"Damn straight!" She stroked the shifter knob. "You got anything incriminating on those pistol packing imbeciles?"

"We think they're feds on a covert operation."

"Shit! A person can't live in peace anymore..."

"You make it sound like you're fifty," Tom chortled, before sobering.

"You promised to tell me your secret, remember?"

"I'm seven hundred, eighty-two years old."

Not that Ellie divulged her longevity to many people, but she relished the reaction. Brown eyes widened; trembling hands yanked the bandana off an unruly sun-bleached bronze mop to wipe perspiration beaded on his cheeks.

A motorcycle roared up the road, braking beside the Mustang. Tom managed to crank down the window, his muscles little better than mush.

Doug stuck his wind-blown head through the gap. "Everything okay?"

"Oh, hell, no," Ellie supplied. "I think he's in shock."

"Why?"

"He told me you're cops, and I told him my age."

The officers exchanged tense glances.

"Not that there's any way to verify if I'm telling the truth," added Ellie.

"It's not like you can carbon date me. But, why should I concoct such an outrageous lie?"

Doug whispered to his partner, "How old is she?"

Tom's tongue non-functional, he used his fingers, flashing seven, eight, and two.

"No way!"

"Look, I'm hungry, and you promised me food," Ellie stated. "We can talk more at this dive you mentioned."

Reluctantly agreeing to the bargain, Doug mounted his Harley and Tom started the Mustang, hands still twitching.

"You want me to drive?" she taunted.

"You don't... have a license."

He slammed the accelerator to the floor. Tires squealed and a blue blur whisked along the asphalt, pegging the speedometer in less than ten seconds.

Doug didn't catch up until they were parked at Burger Heaven.

Ellie grinned ear-to-ear after that rush. “Haven’t felt like this in a very long time!”

In the rustic dining room, they settled in a booth - Ellie opposite Doug, forcing Tom to decide whether to sit beside her or wedge himself next to his compadre.

He chose comfort over decorum.

Ellie patted his arm. “I don’t bite.”

“Meaning, you’re not a vampire?” quipped Doug.

“It’s full daylight, idiot. Anyway, there’s no such thing.”

Tom stammered, “Then, how...”

“You won’t believe me...”

She’d aroused Doug’s curiosity. “I will.”

Ellie commenced the tale with an account of her birth in 1207 north of Rome, Italy.

“You don’t have an Italian accent,” Doug interrupted.

“I lost that when I came to the States over a century ago. Now, shut up.”

He hunched down on the seat like an errant child.

A buxom, greying waitress prolonged the pause, taking their orders for burgers, fries and shakes.

“When I was a kid,” continued Ellie, “if you dared to speak against the established order - the feudal system or the Catholic Church, for instance - you were likely to be burned at the stake for heresy. I saw the... shallowness of religious practice, and the hypocrisy of those who claimed authority, so I rejected both.”

“Okay...” Tom muttered.

“The ultimate fallacy for me? The concept of God predetermining a person’s entire existence. I decided at 14 that I simply wouldn’t die, and I’ve maintained that resolve ever since.”

The men contemplated this declaration, stunned.

“It may have helped,” Ellie acknowledged, “that I was blessed as a toddler by St. Francis of Assisi, too, while he was on a pilgrimage to see the Pope.”

They couldn’t judge if she was toying with them or not. Their meals arrived, and they concentrated on the platters.

Until a pair of black-clad thugs wearing ski masks burst through the entrance and aimed pistols at them.

Tom and Doug vacated the booth, arms raised. One of the assailants frisked them, relieving them of their weapons, and waved them toward the wall near the restroom. His comrade approached Ellie.

“Get out here,” he commanded.

“No.”

“I’ll shoot you!”

“Go ahead. See if I care.”

In nearly eight centuries, the woman had amassed an expertise in reading fear, misery, anger and every other emotion not just in an individual’s face, but their very demeanor. She grasped the tall fountain glass and sucked from the plastic straw. As the trim ruffian whirled at the clatter of breaking dishes from the kitchen, she pitched the melted ice cream at him.

He staggered backward; she leapt from the table and hurled him onto unwaxed pine boards, her knee crushing his esophagus.

His associate heard the commotion and turned, giving Tom and Doug an opening to disarm him. They hustled him to where Ellie had commandeered Doug’s shake, draining the last drop.

“Hey!” the latter objected.

She chided, “I’ll buy you another.”

“Who trained you in martial arts?” inquired Tom.

“I traveled extensively through Asia in the 1700s.”

He swallowed hard.

Two police cruisers arrived, lights flashing, and the patrol officers took custody of the thwarted hitmen. Their entrees in to-go containers, the faux high schoolers filed into the chill night air.

“So, what now?” Ellie speculated.

Doug replied, “Well, officially, the case is closed.”

“Even though you’re unsure how to complete your paperwork?”

Tom nodded meekly.

“I have every confidence you’ll be discreet.”

Doug straddled the motorcycle, subdued. Tom didn’t budge.

“Tomorrow?” the former prompted.

“Yeah.”

Tom and Ellie drove to the city without exchanging a syllable. The Mustang navigated through Heritage Hills, forced to remain at the curb near the four-plex, visitors’ spots occupied.

“You’re still not satisfied,” observed Ellie.

“What you said... just... isn’t possible.”

“It’s mind over matter. Proof we can determine our own fate.”

Dismayed brown orbs scoured her features. “You’ve lived through so much... aren’t you tired?”

“Sure. There’s nothing new under the sun, and humanity remains as foolish and greedy as ever.” She heard his labored exhalation. “What else?”

“Were you ever... married?”

“That’s the first tenet of society I shunned. Love, if you wish to love; fuck, if you want to fuck. There’s no higher purpose to having some robed humbug mumble prayers over two people and signing documents that create a legal nightmare.”

“Wow. That’s harsh.”

“Maybe. If more people concurred, though, the world would be a better place.”

He didn’t respond.

“What else, Tom?” She fidgeted. “What’s your real name, by the way?”

“Hanson. Tom Hanson.”

“And, Doug?”

“Doug Penhall.”

“I like McQuaid better.” She clutched the chrome handle. “What else?”

He scrambled from behind the steering wheel and opened the door for her.

“I...”

Instinctively, Ellie grabbed strands of his longish mane and tugged him close. The kiss she planted on his lips he’d remember the rest of his life.

“You didn’t know what it would be like with... someone so old?” she laughed. “Age is just a number, kid.”

No answer necessary; she perceived his toes were curling inside his sneakers.

She mounted the steps, contentedly twirling her keyring.

“Can I... stop by sometime?” he eventually mustered.

“I won’t be here.”

“Say what? The school year’s not finished.”

“You think I’m here for the diploma? I’m just killing time.”

“You... don’t have to run, you know.”

“If the feds are on my trail, yeah, I do. I prefer to stay off the radar.”

“Ellie, I...”

She motioned him across the threshold. “Poor thing. You desperately need a beer.”

Come the dawn, he departed, sated and wiser.

Duffel slung across her back - the sole possessions that really mattered stuffed inside - Ellie never wondered if he included *that* in his report.

Good for a Laugh

Sound technicians in the audio booth monitored the mixing board and microphone output from the stage in the studio below, headsets blocking out external noise.

In the shadows, a long cord connected a third headset to a jack among the electronics. A rattling periodically vibrated the floor boards, as if echoing the laughter of the live audience.

So it was for each week's radio broadcast of "Hijinx!" starring Clay MacGregor, originating from WGN Chicago.

Disjointed comic plots brought roars from some, joyful tears to others.

Much needed with the Cold War in full swing, people suspicious of their neighbors most days, digging radiation-proof bunkers in their backyards.

That's why Jan Harris had launched the program three years earlier, covering the expenses from her own pocket without the need for sponsors and advertising. No political or commercial agenda impacted 30 minutes of pure lunacy; she believed it worth the cost to join in the merriment.

She also believed in Clay MacGregor, who could adopt any type of accent at the drop of a hat, performing a myriad of roles himself, with the support of three other actors and a sound effects crew.

The stage manager and episode director, however, disagreed with her. MacGregor's celebrity increasing with each season, he'd let fame swell his head. More and more outrageous demands, scrawled on embossed letterhead, were delivered to the production office, and he balked at attending more than one rehearsal.

"His contract is up for renewal," Steve Dennis had told Jan before that evening's show. "You need to consider hiring someone else."

She swiveled her wheelchair toward the booth. "I'll take care of it."

"How can you?" he called to the receding form. "You've consistently refused to meet him."

"That's why I have assistants."

"He's adamant about a face-to-face with you."

"We'll discuss it tomorrow," Jan stated flatly.

Her mood spoiled, unscripted antics still managed to raise laughter in her throat, at points writhing so violently, she struggled to breathe.

No more had the seats cleared and stage lights dimmed, than a raging MacGregor stormed up the steps and crashed into the audio booth. "Is she here?" he bellowed, nearly tripping over the wheelchair.

Somebody - possibly the stage manager - had tipped him off that she listened to the show on the sly.

Jan nodded the crew from the cramped chamber. Beneath a lone bulb, the pair stared at each other.

God, he's handsome, she mused. Wavy chestnut hair framed scorching brown orbs, a Romanesque nose, thin lips angled upward at the right corner, the wide forehead tapering down to a narrow chin.

He studied her slender form topped by sandy blonde ringlets, blue eyes brimming. "You!" he rasped.

"Hi, Clay."

"Why all the... subterfuge?"

"How so?"

"Never wanting to meet in person, ignoring my requests for format changes..."

"Calm down, boy. You'll pop your cork." She maneuvered toward the technicians' chairs. "Sit down a minute."

Confounded by her appearance, he complied. "What gives?"

"What gives is that you're a star, with offers to move the show to New York for next season."

"What?" he shrieked.

She nodded sedately. "It's been a grand accident, but I'm not a bit sorry."

"What do you mean, 'accident'?"

"You remember high school?" she prompted.

"Sure, I..."

She silenced him with a finger to her mouth. "You never knew the story behind my... hospitalization, did you?"

"Nope."

A blunt narrative recounted events Jan would have much rather forgotten. During her junior year, she'd been dating MacGregor's pal, Dave O'Riley. She'd discovered her pregnancy during spring break, the doctor phoning her father - since they belonged to the same fraternal lodge.

Fred Harris beat his daughter so badly with the wide leather belt, the scars remained vivid welts on her back and legs. She'd tried to flee, falling down the stairs and breaking her spine. She'd lost the baby, as well.

Her recovery took weeks, including broken ribs and a severe concussion. Fading in and out of consciousness, she remembered MacGregor visiting her bedside, with vague recollections of his tale of Dave's death in a horrendous car wreck, after he'd drunkenly confronted Fred at a church social.

MacGregor had spent hours at her bedside on a regular basis, making her laugh with his impersonations of movie actors, radio personalities, and their teachers.

She might never be able to walk again, but she swore to repay his kindness.

“Instead of relishing the opportunity, you’re acting like a... a...”

“Bubble-headed blowfish?” he quipped.

“Exactly.”

He moved to kneel beside the wheelchair. “I didn’t know it was you...”

“Does it change anything?”

“Of course!”

“Why?” she prodded.

“Because... because...”

“So, if I was a total stranger, you’d still be a jerk?”

“I thought... I thought...”

“You thought no one here knew the kindness of your innermost soul like I do. You thought you could get away with throwing tantrums like a five-year-old.”

“I’m... sorry, Jan.”

“You should be.” She shifted on the leather seat.

“Can I help?”

“Me? There’s nothing to be done.”

“What about surgery?”

“It’s been too long, Clay. Twelve years. This is my lot in life.”

“Are we going to accept the New York offer?” he puzzled.

“We?”

“You’d make the move with the show, wouldn’t you?”

“No need. They have their own financing.”

MacGregor paused, straightening. “I always wondered about that.”

“What?”

“Why our show had no commercials, no sponsors. You covered it all yourself?”

“When my dad crashed his plane, thinking he could navigate through the fog, he left me comfortably well off. Why shouldn’t I use that wealth to negate his abuse and make the world a better place, sharing laughter with the masses?”

He smirked. “So, you won’t come with me?”

“Why would you want this wreck of a human being...”

“I’ve made some connections, too, thanks to this... platform you provided me.” He gazed out the glass at the empty studio. “In New York, we’d be close enough to Johns Hopkins for you to get cutting-edge treatment...”

Blue eyes squinted at him. “What are you saying?”

“Those days at the hospital, you inspired me to expand my... repertoire, if you will. I wouldn’t be here if not for you, and you wouldn’t be here, if not for me. We can’t go our separate ways now. I won’t leave you here to... to...”

“Waste away with remorse?” she chuckled facetiously.

“Right.”

“Okay. We’ve a meeting with the New York reps Monday morning. Wear a new suit, be on your best behavior, and we’ll clinch the deal.”

He bent and kissed her eagerly before breezing across the threshold.

Only once before had he dared such boldness: the morning she’d been discharged from the hospital. The taste of him had lingered with her for months.

Her right fist pounded the metal armrest.

Maybe she could get out of this contraption and learn to live again.

Tax Season Woes

Chris Stewart paused outside the elevator, considering his reflection in the decorative mirror. Nervous fingers adjusted the Windsor knot of his blue tie and smoothed a few wrinkles on his black suit. Too late to debate whether he should have instructed the barber to cut his light brown mane shorter; a lock flopped over his nose and he cringed.

The soles of his new Hush Puppies squeaked as he proceeded along the tile corridor. He inhaled self-consciously as he opened the door marked, “Welles, Barrymore and Flynn, Certified Public Accountants, LLC.”

Within, three brown overstuffed armchairs offered clients a place to relax, under the watchful eye of a pleasant - both in personality and appearance - receptionist.

“Good morning, Mr. Stewart,” the brunette Kinzie Lindhurst greeted.

His normally cultured tenor came out a squeak. “Morning.”

“Mr. Flynn is waiting for you.”

“Thanks.”

Gerald Flynn - in his forties, a touch of grey at the temples and a spreading waistline - the junior partner of the firm also handled human resources aspects of running the business. That included hiring neophyte accountants eager for some tax season experience while prepping for their CPA exam.

Chris fell into that category, and jumped at the opportunity to spend ten weeks in such prestigious company.

Flynn grasped Chris’ outstretched hand across the inlaid oak desk, the windows behind him overlooking the city park. “Glad you’re here, Stewart. Have a seat.”

Chris settled uneasily in the green wing-backed chair.

“You’re familiar with the software we use for inputting and filing tax forms?” Flynn began.

“Yes, sir.”

“You’ll share an office with three other temps, but confidentiality is the most important part of this job.”

“Of course, sir.”

“We don’t care if you talk, just not about whose returns you’re working on.”

“Right.”

Flynn picked up an antique desk phone and activated the intercom. “Kinzie will introduce you to the other staff.”

Rising, Chris almost lost his balance, his muscles so tense. “Thank you, sir.”

“Calm down, son,” the man chuckled. “We don’t bite.”

Head bowed as he exited the office, Chris almost collided with Kinzie, . A delightful scent reached his nostrils as she preceded him to a door on the opposite end of the reception area.

“The payroll forms you need to fill out are on your desk,” she stated.

“Where are you staying?”

“I... don’t know yet.”

“Yeah. Apartments are difficult to find this time of year, with the university in session.”

“I should’ve started looking as soon as I received the job offer, but...”

Kinzie giggled, “You’re a procrastinator, like many of our clients!”

“Right.”

“I have a spare bedroom at my place, if you’re interested.”

Chris felt his left eyebrow arch.

“Not that I make this offer to every temp, but my roommate moved out last week, and I need someone to split the rent, on a purely platonic basis.”

“How much?”

“Five hundred a month.”

“I could afford that.”

“Great. I’ll jot down the address, and you can swing by after work.”

What a call home this will make! Chris mused as he settled at a black wooden table supporting a knock-off laptop, a locked two-drawer filing cabinet beside it. “Hi, Mom,” he imagined himself saying. “I’ve got a job, and I’m living with a girl from the office.”

He cleared his throat, trying to swallow his amazement.

Stacks of manila folders already required attention, early filers eager for their tax refunds. He opened the first, reviewed the numbers and switched on the computer.

Kinzie returned to the pristine chamber with his login information and directions to the bathroom and employee kitchen. “I usually bring my lunch. It’s cheaper than going out,” she advised.

“Thanks.”

“The apartment’s within walking distance, too, so it saves on gas.”

“Great. We can walk in together.”

Her rosy lips twisted in a scowl. “No...” she drawled. “I usually come in early. Lots to do.”

Chris sensed her reluctance. “No problem.”

Obviously, Kinzie didn’t want anyone in the office knowing she would be sharing her apartment with a co-worker.

Sam Welles, the senior partner, made an appearance late morning, as did Tim Barrymore. Chris learned Welles had retired two years earlier, helping out during tax season when complex issues required his attention. Barrymore kept the firm’s wealthy clients happy, ensuring the government didn’t take too much of their money.

Chris input 16 returns that first day and, his brain ready to explode, he drove to the address Kinzie provided well after 5:00. The three story domicile reeked of age, narrow stairs in need of repair and paint. The top floor apartment, however, had been completely renovated and offered sufficient comfort: internet access, cable television, a sizable kitchen and cozy furniture.

“Fantastic!” the new tenant gasped. “I never would’ve guessed...”

“My... dad paid to upgrade the place for my last birthday,” admitted Kinzie.

“He must be well off.”

“He’s Sam Welles.”

Chris blanched. “Huh?”

“I use my mother’s maiden name, to... keep clients from thinking I’m only there because of nepotism.”

“You run things... very well, that’s for sure.”

“As I was trained to do. I’m a CPA, myself, though I seldom get involved in crunching numbers.”

“Why not?” Chris prodded.

“I really don’t like accounting. My talents run to organization.”

“I see.”

“Your room’s through that door,” Kinzie pointed across the living room. “Get unpacked, and I’ll start dinner. We’ll alternate days cooking.” She pulled a package of hamburger from the refrigerator. “You do cook?”

“Simple stuff, mostly.”

“That’s fine. We’ll go halves on the grocery bill, too.”

“Okay.”

Chris developed a basic routine for his life: up at 7:00, walking to the office by 8:00 with a sack lunch, putting in a hard eight or nine hours, strolling home to eat dinner, watch a sit-com or movie, then falling into bed, exhausted.

Kinzie’s presence kept him balanced, unflustered. She not only managed to organize the offices of Welles, Barrymore and Flynn, but Chris himself. Where he

formerly had been known as the campus dorm slob, she inspired him to place his clothes in the laundry basket, make his bed and hang up his towels after showering.

Sometimes they chatted over the television dialogue, and he gleaned details of her life as the daughter of a prominent accountant. Wisely, the elder Welles had required her to earn the money for those luxuries she desired, as had Chris' own parents.

The March evening when rain drenched the city, Chris opened his umbrella upon leaving the office building, to find Kinzie huddled beside him.

"I haven't owned an umbrella in years," she explained. "Can I share yours?"

He chuckled, "We share everything else."

The trek to the apartment still managed to wet them thoroughly, puddles splashed by passing cars and wind whipping droplets horizontally. Unlocking the street door deadbolt, they scurried into the vestibule, where Chris closed the umbrella, allowing it to drip on the linoleum.

When he reached for the inside knob, he felt Kinzie's arms around his neck. Two damp bodies pressed together, kissing passionately.

Chris had never intended, had never expected this development. Kinzie was quite a bit older than he - not that it mattered much in an age where cougars were readily accepted. She had wealth and he would struggle for years, until he established himself as a CPA after passing the exam in July.

They climbed the stairs slowly, neither speaking. Kinzie showered first to warm her chilled bones, emerging in a thick pink terry robe. Chris contemplated the mud-stained suit as he removed it, no other choice than to send it to the dry cleaner. Shampoo ran in his eyes and he swore aloud.

"Everything okay in there?" Kinzie called through the frosted glass panel.

"Yeah, just great."

"Would you like me to scrub your back?"

Chris gulped. How had the situation accelerated from platonic to intimate in a matter of minutes?

"No, thanks."

He heard the bathroom door close.

Attired in black sweats, Chris parked himself on the leather sofa as the national evening news ended. Kinzie sipped a glass of white wine in the matching recliner.

"You look... confused," she observed.

"I am, a bit. What just happened?"

"I wanted to show you how I feel about you."

Chris laughed unwittingly. "You could've just said something."
"If I misinterpreted how you look at me sometimes with those big brown eyes..."

"I didn't realize..."

"That's why I took the initiative. I don't like... ambiguity."

"You prefer organization."

Kinzie nodded, uncombed brunette tresses falling across her face.

In that moment, Chris grasped the implications of his situation. The boss' daughter wanted him as more than a friend.

If Welles discovered how the relationship had progressed, would that endanger his job, his future?

"Dad doesn't even know you're living here. He never drops by. He's too busy... doing other things."

"What other things?"

"Serving on the university board of trustees, a couple international committees, the kind of prestigious claptrap he can write off on his taxes."

"He's been at the office every day this week," Chris remarked.

"And, when I deliver his morning coffee, he kisses my cheek, asks me how I'm doing, and leaves it at that. I'm a grown woman, after all."

"Then, how do you suggest we..."

Kinzie placed the wine glass on the end table and joined Chris on the sofa, her face inches from his. "Do I have to be so obvious?" she grinned.

They'd removed most of each other's clothes, sprawled on the carpet, when the sound of a key in the lock made Chris hesitate. As the hinges groaned, his head popped up to find the massive-shouldered, white haired Sam Welles poised on the threshold, holding a gaily wrapped parcel.

Kinzie scrambled to her feet, nimbly tying her robe. "Hi, Dad."

"What's this?" rumbled Welles.

"A private party for my birthday."

The older gentleman presented the gift, kissing his daughter's cheek. "I forgot to give you this at the office."

"Thanks, Dad."

Welles' hazel orbs bored into Chris' head like lasers. "This young man works for us, doesn't he?"

Chris pulled on his sweatshirt, the cloth absorbing beads of perspiration coating his skin, and rose. "Yes, sir."

"He lives here, too," blurted Kinzie, at which Chris shuddered.

Welles bristled. "You're married and you didn't tell me?"

“Oh, no, Dad. But we will be.”

Chris struggled not to collapse, his knees abruptly gelatinous. He’d been set up by this woman using the most callous means...

“Let me know when you set the date, and your mother and I will handle the arrangements,” announced Welles before kissing Kinzie again and departing.

The sardonic smile Kinzie wore when she spun toward Chris aggravated him. Where, moments earlier, he’d been ready to consummate their togetherness, he now despised her.

“Good night, Kinzie,” he grumbled, striding to his room and wedging a chair under the knob to prevent her from following him.

When he cracked the door around midnight, the living room was bathed in moonlight and still. His bags in tow, Chris left the apartment after tossing his key on the kitchen table.

He took a job with a chain of tax preparation stores for the remainder of the season, then holed up in his parents’ basement, studying for the CPA exam. On the same day he accepted a position with a prominent firm in Cleveland, he read that Kinzie Lindhurst, aka Kinzie Welles, had been indicted on charges of embezzlement.

The charges had been filed by her own father.

“She lied to me,” reporters quoted Welles. “She lied about many things, and I don’t abide a liar, even my own flesh and blood.”

The knots which had long remained in Chris’ stomach - as he anticipated being contacted by the elder Welles about his daughter - finally dissipated.

He had neither time nor wish to pursue a romantic relationship for almost a decade, finally marrying a woman he met at a local church’s Christmas bazaar while buying a present for his mother.

Danvers Redux

The distinguished executive had just toggled the intercom to summon his secretary when the office door burst open. Angry footsteps preceded the glossy magazine slamming on his antique oak desk.

“Are you on drugs, Andrew?” the woman stormed. “How could you do this to me?”

Grey orbs scrutinized windblown brunette curls, pinched, pale features, black scoop-necked blouse and broom skirt. He stifled a chuckle at the incongruous tan square-toed boots.

“Honestly, Jeannine, I didn’t know.”

She guffawed, “You didn’t... What kind of editor are you?”

“The article was a last minute addition to the issue,” Andrew Hunter explained. “I was on holiday in France, and the layout team had an empty page...”

“So, you let Robert Danvers ruin me life?”

The maroon buttoned-leather chair pushed back from the desk. “Ruined? How?”

Jeannine Ratigan’s fist clenched. “Remember why I left me position on the copy desk?”

“Your father died...”

“Right. You were kind enough to loan me a considerable sum, so when I went home to Pode Hole to care for me mum, I could open a tea room on the ground floor of the house.”

“You paid back every penny.”

“As promised, besides dischargin’ me dad’s old debts. We were goin’ along fine, serving high tea on Sundays and more modest fare during the week, then expandin’ our hours to draw in a lunch crowd. Last autumn, we started serving dinner Thursday and Friday evenin’s. Then Mom was diagnosed with cancer.”

“I’m... sorry,” Hunter muttered.

“Yeah, the sawbones hadn’t caught it soon enough. I trusted me small staff to carry on with the business, while I nursed her upstairs. They recognized Robert when he stopped in that day with some bit of blonde fluff, titterin’ about it afterward, but I never thought...”

“It’s a bit of unpaid publicity, Jeannine. What’s so bad about that?”

Rage exploded anew. “I never went into this to work 80 hours a week, or rake in a fortune! Mom died the day this” - she thumped the magazine with her index finger - “hit newsstands. Here, I’m tryin’ to arrange a funeral and I’ve got snobbish gits ringin’ to make dinner reservations a month in advance!”

Her attitude unusual for the proprietor of any business, Hunter could only apologize again for the situation. He trusted Robert Danvers, popular writer and television commentator on cuisine and wine-related topics, to submit suitable articles. The replacement for a lost full-page advert, the editor hadn't made the connection between his former employee and The Tea Cake prior to sending the layout to the printer.

"What are you gonna do about it?" Jeannine demanded.

The middle-aged administrator contemplated options. "Nothing Danvers wrote is untrue, correct?"

"It's... too true, if anythin'. He gushes about the menu like a school boy with his first crush..."

"Food isn't merely his crush, it's a lifelong passion," Hunter chuckled. "You should be honored..."

"Bollocks!" She twirled on her heels and marched toward the exit. "Next time he plans to write about an establishment, he should get the owner's permission!"

Her hand on the brass knob, Jeannine recoiled when the panel swung inward and Robert Danvers swept over the threshold. His salt-and-pepper mane perfectly combed from a left part, he wore a mod red velveteen, high collared jacket, white silk shirt and silver pattered ascot with blue trousers and alligator skin loafers.

"Did I hear my name being taken in vain?" the celebrity inquired with an urbane baritone.

Receiving an unexpected slap across his tanned cheek for his troubles.

Startled, Danvers nonetheless caught a struggling Jeannine by the waist before she could escape. "What the devil?"

Hunter traversed cream shag carpet to make the introductions.

"So, you're the inspiration behind that exceptional bistro in Pode Hole," Danvers oozed, releasing her. "We patronized the place quite by accident, you know. My Rolls had a puncture, and while we waited for the mechanic to fix it... I've always wanted to make a return visit."

"Because of your article, and that mention on the telly last week, you'll have to wait until Christmas to get a table!" she scoffed.

"That's a bad thing why?"

"I intended it to be a cozy, neighborhood gatherin' place, not some national tourist attraction!"

Danvers' brown orbs studied her slender physique. "You simply need to engage more staff."

“You make it sound like a lark. If I increase the payroll, I’ll need to hire an accountant to keep the books. Most of my time will be wasted orderin’ supplies, rather than cookin’, and expenses will skyrocket...”

“Such is the fate of every successful restaurateur,” Danvers stated flatly. His expression brightened, however, when the import of her complaint registered. “You do the cooking?”

“Of course!”

Noticing her hands twitching and fearing another violent reaction, Hunter interspersed, “Jeannine used to work here as my copy editor.”

“Is that so?” Danvers commented.

“Yeah, I know all about you, Mr. Bleedin’ Robert Danvers,” she retorted. “The entire staff spent most days gossipin’ about your... antics.”

His cringe, slanting the right corner of his mouth upward, faded quickly. “Glad I was able to entertain you lot.”

She snickered under her breath. “I know some who got photos.”

Hunter consulted his Rolex. “What say we go to the club and resolve this over lunch.”

“Sorry, Andrew, I’ve got an appointment with me solicitor,” Jeannine announced.

“To what end?”

“Filin’ suit against you and the magazine for ten million pounds.”

The editor’s jaw gaped; Danvers laughed elegantly.

“It’s not funny, Robert,” Jeannine added. “You’ll be included among the defendants, as well.”

He instantly sobered.

Each man grabbed one of her hands and drew her to a maroon armchair near the dormant marble fireplace. When she sat, they practically knelt before her, eyes at the same level.

Hunter spoke after a pregnant pause. “What if I provide extra personnel to handle the ledgers and the ordering - at my own expense - until you adjust to your new... popularity?”

She sniffed, “I’d never be able to trust someone I don’t know personally, and I don’t have time to interview dozens of prospects...”

“There’s another option.” Danvers’ tease drew the stares of his companions, and he milked their anticipation to the full. “What if I buy you out?”

Hunter straightened to his full height. “You can’t, Robert! Your credibility hinges on your... your... objectivity when reviewing the restaurants and the wine. If your public finds out...”

“Then, we’ll create a dummy corporation to handle the transaction, and no one will be the wiser,” he proposed, raising Jeannine from the cushion. “Come, we’ll discuss it at my flat.”

Andrew Hunter knew Robert Danvers well enough to detect the ploy. The television personality couldn’t look at a shapely woman without lathering up. Jeannine, especially in black, qualified as stunning.

He voiced no protest as Danvers insisted on her company.

She extracted a gold pocket watch on a chain - more suited to a man, and perhaps her deceased father’s, Hunter guessed. “You’ve got two hours until me appointment...”

“Oh, it’ll take only half that,” Danvers professed. “You can teach me how to make those delightful pastries we had with our tea...” Winking to Hunter as he escorted her toward the door, he whispered toward her unadorned ear, “My God, but you’re lovely.”

John, the robust, uniformed porter, couldn’t count the number of gorgeous women Robert Danvers had guided through the lobby over the years, taking the lift to the eighth floor penthouse. Rarely, after their first go-round with what his wife termed “the old lecher,” did they ever return - except for one or two, but ages had passed since then.

The silver Rolls-Royce convertible pulled beneath the portico and John watched Danvers alight, then hold the passenger door for his current lady.

Something familiar about her disheveled curls and sparkling hazel eyes, the former noted.

“Welcome back,” John greeted as they crossed the tile.

Danvers halted mid-stride. “What?”

“Sure,” Jeannine smirked. “I’ve been here before.”

“No, you haven’t...”

“Do you recall, John?” she pressed the attendant.

He complied with her request, her friendly contralto clinching the memory. “You... used to bring magazine proofs from Mr. Hunter’s office for Mr. Danvers to review.”

“And you were kind enough to give me the key to his flat.”

The middle-aged lothario bristled. “You never told me you’d let in a stranger, John...”

“I presumed you knew, sir.”

“I assumed Andrew had delivered the packets.”

“Not always,” Jeannine responded. “He did like to get home to his family for dinner, and I lived not far from here.”

Danvers attitude softened as he proceeded to the lift. "Why didn't you come to my attention before?"

"Because I strenuously avoided it."

"Ah, my reputation..."

"For one, I was married and, two, your behavior disgusted me."

Textured panels slid open, then closed when they boarded the car.

"You use the past tense when referring to your... husband?" Danvers queried.

"He died in Vietnam."

"The British military weren't..."

"He was American, a Rhodes scholar. We married while he was at Oxford, then he was drafted and had to return to the States."

"I'm... sorry."

"No need. We had two glorious years, but I prefer being alone."

Emerging before the penthouse door, Danvers used a key to unlock the deadbolt and waved her inside.

"God, you haven't changed a thing in five years!" she snickered.

The greenish vertical striped wallpaper - even on the doors and cupboards - had turned her stomach during those deliveries, though she'd envied his modern kitchen appliances. The space lacked interior doors, the living room with its expensive stereo equipment, tan leather sofa and chairs, open to the bedroom with a round mattress and plenty of mirrors. Only floor-length curtains, hung on curved metal poles, afforded a bit of privacy when drawn.

"Make yourself comfortable," Danvers instructed.

"Why? I thought this was going to be a cookin' lesson."

"In due course. Can't we relax a bit?" He sauntered to a cart that resembled an infant's crib, bottles of various sizes and shapes positioned within the gold railings. "Would you like a drink?"

"At ten in the mornin'?" she huffed.

"Orange juice, if you like."

"Do you even stock such mundane beverages?"

"Indeed."

"Then, sure." She tested the sofa cushions. "I didn't have breakfast."

From the kitchen, where he filled two crystal goblets, Danvers called, "Why is that?"

"One of me neighbors brought me her copy of Andrew's bleedin' magazine while I was feedin' me birds, and I caught the next train to London."

Presenting her a glass of frothy liquid, Danvers settled beside her. "I don't understand your vehement reaction..."

"You wouldn't." Jeannine stiffened at his close proximity. His smoldering brown eyes, Romanesque nose, lips curled up at the right corner bemused her.

"Most restaurateurs thank me for my endorsements."

"Let's just say, you should have left well enough alone, Robert. A small business in a small village... who's to benefit when cars jam the streets and noise disrupts the idyll?"

"Ah, I see. Then, allow me to apologize..."

"Too late. You should've asked me permission *before* writin' the column."

"Henceforth, I shall. And, if you agree to my purchase of your establishment..."

She jolted upright. "Are you kiddin'? Me regulars would think it the ultimate betrayal of their patronage!"

Slyly, he muttered, "You knew that's what we came here to discuss. Why else..."

"Because..." Jeannine lowered herself, choking on the admission. "Because I respect your knowledge of cuisine, and felt... honored you were interested in how I create me pastries."

"Ah, yes. So light, so tasty..."

The woman realized, in that moment, that Danvers' reference to pastries had nothing to do with dough rolled with butter and baked in an oven.

He leaned forward and planted his lips on her neck. "You have a delicious flavor."

She recollected those infrequent sojourns to this flat, standing over the unmade bed, imagining the horizontal gymnastics in which he and his paramours engaged. She never dreamed he'd take an interest in her, that way.

No man had, since her husband's passing. There'd been no opportunity to pursue romantic liaisons, with her father's subsequent death, the quest to right his financial missteps, and her mother's illness.

She edged away from him, striding up three steps to the kitchen. She tugged the lid off an insulated urn, positioned next to the island. A bottle of champagne rested within. "I've always wondered about this... Hell of a wine cellar!"

From behind, she felt his heat through her skirt. "It serves a useful purpose," he hissed.

"Where's the flour?" she persisted, absently searching the cupboards.

"Later." He drew her into an embrace, kissing her passionately.

A choice of responses - cooperation or resistance - faded rapidly. Danvers might be 20 years her senior, but he exuded a virility many younger men lacked. Well before landing on the bed with him, her heart raced as it hadn't since her wedding night six years previous.

Mutually sated, they slept entwined until mid-afternoon, when the faux French phone rang. Drawing a tie-dyed brown robe around his nakedness, Danvers spoke into the handset, and Jeannine overheard him arranging a meeting with his television producers for the following morning.

"I'd best be on me way," she remarked when he found her tugging on her blouse.

"Why?"

"We've... had our fun. Reality awaits."

He slid his arms around her shoulders, their reflection multiplied by the mirrors. "I was serious about you teaching me how to make those pastries."

"Some other time, maybe."

"I... want you to stay. You're unlike any woman I've ever met. You know what you want, and it's not money or fame. I... want to understand..."

Her pert nose twitched in disdain. "No good, Robert. I've heard the gossip, remember: how you despoiled a bride on her weddin' day, after you'd broken off your six month affair with her. Then, that twig of an American who the scandal sheets reported you'd married..."

"That... was a joke. She left me for some idiot drummer."

"And, the next night, you were between the sheets with Andrew's au pair."

Danvers elongated face blanched. "How'd..."

"I arrived early with a delivery - the traffic had been horrendous and I didn't make it the day before. John told me you were... occupied. When I got to the office, the debacle was the hot topic at the water cooler."

"So, you know my secrets."

"I know you're a shallow, vain bounder who preys on naive young women for your own gratification."

"Yet, you succumbed to my charms."

Jeannine pulled on tan leather boots. "Call me a lonely widow who wanted to feel like a woman for a bit, instead of a non-stop workhorse."

"You *are* a woman. An intelligent, independent, tantalizing woman."

"What's on your mind?"

He led her to the living room, pacing with eagerness. "Do you trust your staff in Podge Hole?"

"Sure."

“Then, let them manage that location, and open a new Tea Cake here.”

“Are you daft? I’d be slavin’ even longer hours...”

“No, just for tea. No lunch, no dinner. You could work from noon to six weekdays, maybe serve high tea one Sunday a month. I can adjust my hours to coincide with yours, and the rest of the time, we can revel in each other. Travel to the Continent...”

She glared at him. “You’re serious?”

“Absolutely.”

“I want it on paper.”

He squinted at her. “What?”

“A contract detailin’ the operations of both Tea Cakes, and our livin’ arrangements.”

“There’s no guarantee of success, on either front,” he hedged.

“Then, if the plan fails, you provide the fundin’ for me to resume me former life.”

“That’s... ludicrous!”

She chuckled. “Hurts your vanity that I might take advantage, doesn’t it?”

“I...” En route to the door, he snagged her by the sleeve. “A two week trial period, while we investigate the feasibility of leasing a shop here, before any documents are signed.”

She spun toward him. “Fine.”

A whirlwind 14 days sent the couple on a tour of available properties in the city, and up to Pode Hole, where the staff didn’t seem enthusiastic about the prospects, but accepted their employer’s decision.

Sharing her double bed on the top floor of the structure, Danvers woke to birdsong and a pleasant breeze. “How marvelous,” he breathed.

“Do you grasp why I left London?” Jeannine prodded, snuggling against his hirsute chest.

“Indeed.”

“We could stay here, you know. I could run this place, and you could commute...”

“I can write anywhere,” he acknowledged. “As for the television show...”

“We could tape it here and ship it to the broadcasters.”

“The background would be... far more picturesque than that dull studio.”

“Definitely.”

He caressed her bare leg. “Are you amending our agreement?”

“Only if you’re willin’.” She kissed him. “It might do you good to be away from those bloody... sycophants, a chance to find yourself.”

“I’ve found myself, right here.”

When Andrew Hunter picked up the phone that afternoon, he couldn’t believe his ears. Jeannine Ratigan and Robert Danvers had legally formed a production company, through which the latter’s articles and television appearances would be negotiated, with strict provisos, and the Tea Cake would be franchised throughout the British Isles.

When next Hunter encountered Danvers, on the boat train to Paris, he exuded a different type of confidence, more natural, more genuine.

“What’s happened to you, Robert?” the editor asked.

“Jeannine happened to me. She’s taught me what life really means.”

“And, what have you taught her?”

The object of their exchange appeared along the aisle, plopping beside Danvers on the bench. “He’s a whiz in the kitchen. Our menu has expanded considerably, much to our customers’ delight.”

“I’m happy for you both,” Hunter declared.

No mistaking the contentment he detected in their eyes, and he foresaw a bright future for them both, though he doubted Jeannine would ever be able to drag Danvers to the altar.

“We’re together ‘til we’re not,” she replied when Hunter joked about the subject. “A ring does not a relationship secure.”

“Very wise.”

Danvers leaned toward her and kissed her ear. “My God, but you’re lovely.”

Bending the Rules

Who would've guessed they would make headlines?

Most community theatre reviews - and previews - were consigned to the entertainment page buried in the local newspaper's second section.

This situation smacked of the unique, however, and the publicity reflected that.

It started at the auditions. Every summer, Canfield Civic produced the winning script from their annual competition as a fundraiser for local charities. Ambitious actors, hoping to get noticed by out-of-town critics who attended opening night, lined up in early May for their chance at a part in what usually qualified as "escapist fare" - a musical or comedy.

Rick Jenkins, the theatre's artistic consultant, was set to direct this particular effort titled, *In the Old Caribbean*. The greying, trim impresario sat at a make-shift desk in the recently renovated balcony, calling out individuals as their cards were carried up the stairs by stage manager Terri Bismarck.

The men - perhaps 15 total - ranged in age from 16 to 68, and in size from twig to portly. Only a few had voices which could be heard above the piano accompaniment of their respective songs.

This theatre used no microphones to reach its 300 seats.

Of the six males asked to stay for a second round, Manny Lindenwood impressed the women who observed the proceedings with both his innocent features and slender frame. No one seemed to mind he wore his dark hair in a pony tail. In fact, the play's 17th century time period would make it possible for him to keep it as part of his costume, if he made the final cut.

Females filled the first four rows of seats, summoned one by one to the stage with their sheet music. Jenkins tried to conceal his cringe as some croaked and shrieked; he relaxed and enjoyed a handful of other, exceptional performances.

One card definitely intrigued him, and he studied Andrea Simmons closely. She strode confidently onto the boards, reading selected lines from Act Two with a definite capacity for emotion and volume. She sang her number as a soprano, but had written "contralto" and "tenor" in the description of her experience.

Under "Additional Notes" she'd scrawled, "Have played many male roles, including as a dancer in *The Nutcracker* and *H.M.S. Pinafore*."

With her thin physique, Rick could see why.

Her long brunette waves, though, would make her perfect for the ingenue...

A long weekend involved shuffling and reshuffling cards as the director tried to pull together a superior cast.

Manny was set for the male lead: a Spanish pirate. Four minor male speaking/singing roles could be handled by those who seemed eager to improve their skills, adding another three to bulk up the chorus.

The second lead remained a blank spot on his kitchen table well into Sunday evening.

So did the female lead. Seven minor female roles were filled by those Rick designated “utility players,” but the cards for Andrea and the next best, Tracy Newell, sat off to his left.

No one else even came close to being able to shine in such substantial parts.

He punched the keypad on his cell phone reluctantly. “Andrea? This is Rick Jenkins.”

A gasp, then, “How are you?”

“Upset a bit. I have to ask you a question.”

“Sure.”

“Are you willing to cut your hair to play Captain Dillard?”

Silence.

“I need your tenor. None of the guys...”

“I’d... love to do it.”

Rick hadn’t realized he was holding his breath. “Rehearsals start tomorrow at seven.”

“I’ll be there.”

He envisioned no complications, since the captain’s role involved no romantic entanglements with the women who would share the stage.

What he didn’t envision was the romance which developed between the pair in the male leads.

The process began innocently enough. Read-throughs and blocking sessions were balanced with nights where the music director, Glenn Owens, ran everyone through the songs.

Manny flavored his renditions with a hip-hop style which, Rick admitted, seemed to work for the pirate. Andrea - called “Andy” at her own request, to diminish her femininity - applied a proper British accent and demeanor to the captain’s lyrics, creating a definite distinction between the two protagonists.

The rest of the cast swept up by the enthusiasm of the leads, the hours spent at Canfield Civic proved exhausting yet fun. Rick didn’t need to emulate any previous interpretations of the script, it being brand new. They experimented with scenery and costumes, harmonies and dance moves, creating an impressive spectacle.

Fridays usually found younger cast members enjoying a few beers at the Main Street Pub after Rick dismissed them. Initially, they sat together at one long table, sharing stories and jokes, but around the fourth week, Manny and Andrea started adjourning to a secluded booth with their second glass.

Rick surmised the pair were discussing his notes about their characters. When he glimpsed them holding hands across the board, his muscles tensed.

The next Sunday afternoon, he happened to be driving past Andrea's apartment complex in the small New England town, recognizing Manny's black Dodge Challenger being unloaded near an open door.

"Shit!" Rick grumbled.

Having worked in theatre for two decades, he realized how tenuous fraternization among cast members could be. An untimely argument could ruin a performance, and dress rehearsal was scheduled for that Wednesday.

Furthermore, any adverse publicity could spoil the three-week run. Canfield Civic relied on the summer show to maintain a positive working relationship with area nonprofits. This offset the executive director and board's selection of more edgy, socially-conscious fare for the main season, which some audiences didn't appreciate, preferring lighter endeavors or the "old standards."

Andrea and Manny arrived together for Monday's rehearsal. From his office above the lobby, Rick watched them walk, arm-in-arm, from a parking spot up the block, resembling a truly "odd couple": her brown hair cropped in a sailor's cut, Manny with his black ponytail, mustache and goatee, both wearing jeans and baggy t-shirts...

Well, the conservative citizens just wouldn't understand.

Andrea found herself summoned to Rick's *sancto sanctorum* while Act One started below.

"What's up?" she inquired, settling on the lumpy red sofa.

"I could ask you that, about you and Manny."

"So, you know?"

"I know he's moved in with you."

"Oh, that."

"What do you mean, 'oh, that'?"

"I thought you meant you knew he..." Andrea pressed her lips together and lowered her hazel eyes.

Rick rounded the rusty metal desk and plopped down beside her. "If there's something you need to tell me..."

"It's not for me to divulge." The young woman rose. "You'd better ask him."

The director caught her arm. “Just... don’t spoil this by having some blow-out before Thursday.”

She grinned, the one expression that transformed her countenance from gender-neutral to undeniably female. “That won’t happen.”

Manny, in his pirate’s flowing shirt, tight leggings and leather boots, ascended narrow, dim stairs during Scene 3, when he wasn’t required on stage. “You sent for me, Rick?”

“I know you’ve moved in with Andrea, but there’s something else she wouldn’t tell me. She said I had to ask you.”

“I have no idea...”

“Is she pregnant?” Rick blurted.

The male lead swallowed hard. “Not that she’s told me.”

“Then, what secret...”

Manny laughed, a melodic noise. He crossed to the desk and tapped the ring binder containing Rick’s master script. The title page had been printed and tucked inside the plastic cover sleeve, reading, *In the Old Carribean*, A Musical in Two Acts by Emmanuel Perea.

“What?” Rick pressed.

“Emmanuel. Manny.” The younger man stared at Canfield Civic’s artistic consultant. “Perea is my mother’s maiden name. I use it when I write.”

So relieved by this declaration, Rick nearly collapsed on the floor. Manny seized his shoulders to hold him upright.

“I thought... I thought...” Slowly recovering his composure, Rick leaned against the desk. “That’s why you grasped so well how the role should be played...”

“Yeah. I wrote the part Andy’s playing for a friend of mine who contracted HIV and died last December, but it’ll be a fine tribute to his inspiration.”

“Then, you and Andrea are...”

“Married. Saturday in New Jersey.”

Near hysteria caused Rick to laugh uncontrollably. Manny maneuvered him onto the sofa, filling a glass with water from a pitcher on the bookshelf and forcing him to drink.

“You okay?” Manny puzzled.

Rick stammered, “I... you... less than six weeks...”

“Oh, hell no, dude. Andy and I met years ago in college. We hadn’t seen each other in awhile, and she didn’t recognize me at first because of the hair and the goat...”

Terri interrupted the exchange, popping her head through a crack in the door. "You'd better come down, Rick."

Respiration almost normal, he glanced up. "What is it?"

"Ol' lady Wycroft from the paper. Asking questions."

The entire cast stood on stage, resembling a platoon ready to wage war. A photographer's camera flashed repeatedly; the wiry reporter with a digital recorder was shouting from the second row, receiving vehement expletives in response.

"Andy Simmons, are you saying this theatre isn't a haven for lesbians and gays?" Rachel Wycroft hissed.

Rick intervened before Andrea, in her British naval uniform, could descend temporary stairs across the orchestra pit and rip the very obvious auburn bouffant wig off the woman's head.

"Wait just a minute!" he warned. "Who gave you the right to come in here and..."

"We've received complaints about these two" - Wycroft pointed to Manny and Andrea - "flaunting their homosexual relationship all over town."

As Manny burst out laughing, Andrea retraced her steps and vanished behind heavy red curtains. Three cast members pursued her, while the journalist preened in triumph.

Not for long.

Andrea emerged with her wallet, confronting Wycroft with a Maine driver's license. "Here, you silly bitch. Read it and weep."

Unconvinced, the reporter snarled, "That could be old. You might've been a woman once, but sex change operations happen frequently these days."

"You wanna see my tits?" Andrea raged.

Manny restrained his wife. "If you really want to settle this, come to our apartment tomorrow to see the marriage license."

"Those kind of things are legal now, too."

"If you won't believe them, will you believe the city's mayor?" Rick challenged. "He's on our board and has attended a number of rehearsals for the show..."

That statement gave Wycroft pause. "I'll... phone him in the morning."

She signaled the photographer toward the door, but that individual hesitated. Manny led Andrea onto the stage, where the cast surrounded them as they kissed.

That was the photo on the next day's front page.

The accusations, though, were not included in the brief article touting the premiere. That relieved many cast members, who held their sexual orientation as their own private business.

In the Old Carribbean proved a sensation, tickets in such demand that an extra week's performances were added to accommodate audiences. Andrea and Manny were approached by agents and producers, eager to move the musical off-Broadway.

Rick's direction was hailed, and he received offers to head his choice of three Tony Award-winning musical touring companies.

The trio shared a moving van in late August, loading their possessions for the jaunt to New York City. Most carefully wrapped was the framed, full-page spread with the six-column photo of Manny and Andrea locked in an enthusiastic embrace, being cheered by their cast mates.

From Car to Car

His passion made her very, very rich.

And that passion had nothing to do with sex.

As the 20th century wound to a close, Suzanne Carbonell reflected on her contented life, financed primarily by Jacques Bautista, a fickle car enthusiast who traded fast, sporty models as if his six-stall garage had revolving doors.

Each purchase, which she handled exclusively, netted her a generous commission. She'd taken up residence in the Carlton Hotel, Cannes - world renowned thanks to films like *To Catch a Thief*, *There's a Girl in My Soup* and the more recent *French Kiss* - the windows of her fourth floor suite overlooking the Mediterranean.

This arrangement offered an extra perk: procuring vehicles on the French Riviera, she delivered them - often at high speed - to Bautista's Paris residence, or his summer home in Spain.

They met in 1962: he, 27, the pampered son of an industrial magnate; she, 19, the daughter of a respected race mechanic, who'd grown up wrenching on engines alongside her three brothers.

His red Corvette convertible, shipped from the States, had stalled on the road near Charles de Gaulle Airport. Suzanne, test driving a silver Jaguar Series 1 E-type after its annual tune-up, stopped to offer assistance not just because she admired his car; his slender figure leaned against the boot as if without a care in the world.

"What happened?" she asked.

"It died."

"Mind if I have a look?"

Chestnut hair rustled by the breeze, a wide forehead tapered down to a narrow chin, elongating his face. The right corner of his mouth slanted upward when he spoke in a delightful baritone. "Help yourself."

She raised the hood, gasping in awe at the pristine V8. Leaning in, she instantly discovered the issue: clogged spark plugs and loose wires.

When she straightened, she felt him immediately behind her. She spun to meet intense brown eyes, standing nose-to-Romanesque nose.

"Well?"

"A simple fix and you'll be on your way," she grinned.

He retorted, "I thought you were kidding."

"I never kid about cars."

She fetched her tool chest from the Jag, tightened his bolts and listened to the roar as he turned the key.

“Fantastic!” he praised.

From her jean pocket, she drew an embossed business card. “Bring it ‘round the shop, and I’ll give it a once over, for free.”

He sneered, suspicious. “Why?”

“Because it’s an exceptional piece of machinery.”

“So are you.”

Brunette curls disheveled, grease smeared on her cheeks and t-shirt, she could only imagine her appearance, chuckling. “Take it easy getting back to Paris.”

Instead of merging with traffic, Bautista shut down the engine, following her to the Jag. They made love across the shifter - a rather uncomfortable position, yet mutually satisfying. Then, he was gone.

Monday fortnight, the Corvette cruised into the repair shop’s parking lot. Bautista alighted, an air-headed blonde in tow. That dashed any hope Suzanne might’ve entertained about an ongoing romance, despite them both qualifying for inclusion among the young, beautiful set of that era, though Suzanne’s hands always boasted a residue of motor oil.

A lengthy discussion while staring at the undercarriage on the hydraulic lift established the parameters of their relationship that day.

She’d procured 172 cars for Bautista over 36 years - Ferrari, Maserati, Rolls-Royce, Lamborghini, BMW, among others - selling those he discarded to other wealthy patrons. He’d recommended her services to his friends, as well, substantially augmenting her income.

Suzanne glimpsed him in passing a few times while waiting for his business manager to sign the receipts. Only once did he even acknowledge her presence, pausing to focus those penetrating brown orbs upon her for a split second. He’d inclined a greying head slightly, lips twitching into a smile.

She nodded a wordless response.

Her surprise was, consequently, genuine when the phone rang in her suite that sultry July afternoon. The Carlton concierge’s announcement that Jacques Bautista had entered the lift on his way to see her raised her heart to her throat.

Though she hadn’t actively worked on car engines for more than a decade, her initial reaction was to examine her hands. Her mind’s eye still detected traces of oil on her palms, though the stains had long since been scrubbed clean.

She had no time to change clothes, wrapping a blue satin robe over her orange tie-dye tank top and cut-off jean shorts. His knock firm, she drew the door

inward, shocked at the casual, untucked blue-striped shirt, khaki trousers and tan loafers.

“I hope I’m not intruding,” he greeted tentatively.

“Not at all! Come in!” She led him to the sitting room sofa. “It’s marvelous to see you!”

“I can’t... stay long. My wife...”

She let it slip. “Which one?”

“My fifth,” he replied, no offense tinging the pleasant baritone. “Yes, she’s young and a gold digger. But I need arm candy when I travel, so other - less appealing - women don’t hound me for attention.”

Suzanne didn’t remark on the declaration.

“She’s in the shop downstairs, and I don’t want her to spend too much.”

“Since when are you worried about money?”

“Since I found out you’ve been keeping a secret all these years, and I plan to pay you ten million dollars for it.”

To Suzanne, the statement reminded her of plots on television soap operas classmates babbled about as teens. He hadn’t fathered her secret love child, nor sparked any scandalous rumors that would disrupt his business enterprises.

“What the hell are you talking about?” she queried.

From his shirt pocket, he drew a folded glossy sheet. Straightening it on the French Provincial desk, he thumped the color image with an elegant index finger. “You never mentioned this.”

She rolled violet eyes ceilingward. “I...”

Painted sky blue, sleek and singular, the photo caption described an 860 horsepower, 16-cylinder engine beneath the hood, custom built to undisclosed specifications.

Suzanne’s present to herself for her 30th birthday. She’d constructed it, piece by piece, in a vacant stall of her father’s garage - a two year project.

“I want it,” Bautista demanded.

No hesitation to her refusal. “Not on your life.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s special.”

He snorted. “Every car I’ve bought is special...”

“For a month or two, maybe,” she retorted. “Once you possess it, peg the speedometer, you don’t want it anymore.”

“So?”

“This is my one and only dream. I’ve had it for decades, and I won’t give it up.”

“Twenty million.”

She marched to the window, specks on the beach below enjoying the sunshine. “God, Jacques! Didn’t you ever grow up? Money can’t buy everything!”

He joined her there, his breath hot on her neck. “You’re wrong.”

“In this case, you’re the one who’s wrong.” She slipped away when he attempted to grasp her shoulders.

“That first time, you couldn’t wait to tear off my shirt.”

“I was a kid. You were...” She sighed. “I get a better high off speed, these days, than sex.”

The admission might have been ripped from his soul. “Me, too.”

“Besides, even if we did try to relive that... adventure, it wouldn’t change my mind about Big Blue.”

He chortled. “Is that what you call it?”

Brunette curls bobbed in affirmation.

“There’s never been...”

“Let it go, Jacques. This is one toy you’ll never possess.” She strode toward the door, twisting the brass knob. “You’d better get back to your wife before she drains your bank account.”

He paused on the threshold. “Susie, I...”

That slant to his mouth melted her resolve briefly. “How long will you be in Cannes?”

“We leave for India on Sunday.”

“I tell you what. Meet me out front at two o’clock Saturday afternoon, and I’ll take you for a ride.”

“I can drive it?” He beamed like a five-year-old anticipating a chocolate bar.

“We’ll see.”

Suzanne realized the four day wait would drive Bautista to distraction. Each morning, she devoured the headlines, half-expecting him to create a row at the casino or on his yacht moored off shore, where the cream of Riviera society was feted.

The fine he accrued along the winding roads merited its own headline. Suzanne had buckled under pressure - a check for two million dollars tucked in her jeans - allowing him to drive Big Blue part of the distance during their five hour excursion along the coast. On one stretch, the speedometer exceeded 200 mph.

The police chase lasted eight miles once their radar detector signaled the alarm.

Suzanne laughed as Bautista surrendered his - expired - license. She deposited him safely on the Carlton's steps well after sunset, an oddly content expression lighting his tanned countenance.

He'd just wanted to feel the power of that engine when he jammed the accelerator to the floor - the same as any other car he'd bought. Once that thrill had been achieved, he lost interest.

Just a little boy playing with his cars.

And making her rich.

Opposing Views

From her place at the warped pine counter, Jenna usually enjoyed a view of the sun-drenched city park through streaked storefront panes. Children played hide-and-seek around the aged oaks, or tag along the gravel paths, under parents' watchful eyes. Senior citizens sat on wrought iron benches, gossiping while feeding the pigeons.

Small town living at its finest, the middle-aged businesswoman mused.

A bizarre transformation occurred after dusk. A cadre of homeless wanderers - invisible through the day - migrated to the open space, pitching tents or unrolling sleeping bags beside metal grocery carts stuffed with their assorted and sundry possessions.

When Jenna would be locking the deadbolts at 7 p.m., she felt their eyes upon her, as if sizing up the possibility of breaking the glass and stealing the limited cash from the antique register.

Thankfully, that never transpired.

Local police would, most nights, clear the park around midnight. Arrests of those who resisted would land some of the indigents in jail. Jenna could view that scene, too, from the bay window of her apartment above the bookstore, if she hadn't already fallen asleep.

Her sole relief from this regular disruption: cold temperatures. Come autumn, the homeless shifted their activities south, leaving sheets of discarded newsprint or candy wrappers to blow idly through the park, creating weird shadows as they swirled beneath faux 19th century-style black steel lamp posts.

Other, larger shadows caught her attention the night of October's full moon. She'd been sipping hot cocoa and reading *USA Today* in her recliner when the fluctuating light interrupted her concentration. She switched off the floor lamp and peered between heavy maroon velveteen curtains at a procession of white-robed teens bearing lit candles.

She didn't need to raise the glass to hear their ludicrous chants as they formed a circle in the middle of one grassy expanse. She recognized the motions of summoning the elements of air, fire, water and earth at the four points of the compass from books lining one section of shelves in her own shop.

Stupid kids, she muttered to herself.

The premise of the circle, Jenna knew, was to create a "sacred space" wherein the participants could perform magick, spells, or however they defined these activities.

Hell, they even carried wands!

Whether inspired by the Harry Potter novels and films, old television sitcoms like *Bewitched*, or campy internet videos, Jenna pitied their wasted time. No amount of dramatic gestures or poetic babble would rate success. She knew, from experience.

Just as the prayers of penitents kneeling in a church were ignored by the deity they petitioned, so these kids would fail in their quest.

And, she couldn't explain it to them; they wouldn't listen.

The unexpected rainstorm scattered them into the darkness.

Except for one.

He must have been the coven's priest, if he even grasped the title's meaning. He paused at the driver's door of a rusted green Ford Taurus parked at the curb, his longish brown hair dripping, silver-rimmed spectacles askew, mustache and goatee framing a frown.

Their eyes met.

Jenna withdrew from her vantage point, chuckling.

She heard the muffler-less vehicle rumble from the square.

When he came into the bookstore the following morning, Jenna had to squint against easterly glare to focus on his face.

No kid, this. He had to be in his early 30s, at least. A roundish face retained some youthful attributes, but his stocky frame, visible without the robe, in grey silk dress shirt and black Dockers, hinted at a working stiff.

"May I help you?" she greeted, setting aside her ceramic "I Hate Mornings" coffee mug.

He smirked. "I don't know."

As he approached the counter, she glimpsed his intense brown orbs, and uncertainty.

"Any particular type of book you're looking for?" she prodded.

"Not a book, but an explanation," he blurted in a pleasant baritone.

Jenna felt herself grinning, repressing a caustic remark.

"You had something to do with that storm last night, didn't you?"

"Just why would you assume that?"

"Because the forecast called for clear skies, and those clouds rolled in awfully fast. Besides which, the rain stopped before I reached Fourth Street on my way home. A very isolated event, confirmed by my... associates."

"Maybe your little ceremony... offended some... ethereal entity," she snickered.

"Not likely. We were simply celebrating the full moon..."

"Why?"

He didn't hesitate. "It's what we believe."

"Because you read it online, or saw it in a movie?"

"Are you saying, we're..."

"Idiots," she supplied.

"How would you know?"

Jenna could have launched into a lengthy tirade about the futility of their endeavors, but the bell over the door tinkled the arrival of a genuine customer.

"Bring your crew to the park tonight," she instructed, passing the man en route to greet the newcomer. "All will become clear."

"It's... a school night for most of them."

"Then, bring the ones you can."

Once he departed, Jenna forgot his ignorance, his arrogance. She couldn't forget his eyes, though.

A total of five individuals - carrying their robes and other "magickal" supplies - converged on the park at 8 p.m. Early 20s, the two girls, the two boys possibly freshmen at the community college. Their leader confronted her, perched on the base of a Civil War memorial statue.

"What's this about, then?"

She leapt gracefully to the ground, as if supported by unseen hands. "First, put that shit down."

They resisted the command.

She moved along the path. "Fine, if you don't want to learn..."

He caught her sleeve. "We're not here to learn. We're here to figure out..."

"What's your name?"

"Grant. Grant Winslow."

"Well, Mr. Winslow, if you want my cooperation, then follow my directions."

He signaled the group to lay aside their belongings.

"Don't treat them with such delicacy," Jenna snapped. "In fact, toss them in the trash, because they're worthless."

"What?" squealed a blonde. "I paid over fifty bucks for..."

"That's right. You've thrown away a lot of cash on useless trappings."

Overhead, lamps began flickering in a random pattern. "You want to perform magick, but it's not a show. You have to merge with the universal energies, absorb them, use them for good."

An auburn maned teen objected. "That's not what it says in the book..."

She grabbed him by the collar of his Ohio State t-shirt. "I run a bookstore, kid. The supposed experts who write those nonsensical tomes do it purely for the

money. They know ignoramuses like you will buy them, and line their pockets with profits.”

Winslow dislodged her fingers from the material. “So, you’re saying...”

“It’s all here.” She tapped her temple. “And here.” She tapped her heart.

“It’s got nothing to do with crazy words or tracing circles on the ground. Scripted gestures interfere with the flow. The energy isn’t confined to that space. It’s everywhere!”

“What about the gods?” demanded the ebony-haired young woman.

“Myths, dammit. Constructs created by man to cow the masses into conformity. The sigils, the potions... all drivell!”

“You’re wrong,” Winslow stated. “And I’ll prove it.”

She shook her brunette curls in disdain. “Go ahead.”

Snatching the sanded birch branch he used for a wand, Winslow commenced an impromptu ritual. He stood in the center, with his four companions positioned at the compass points.

Jenna watched from atop a large boulder.

Thirty minutes later, the circle was dissolved, the five drenched in sweat, disappointment evident in their expressions.

“What was the point of that?” she queried.

Winslow panted, “I wanted to summon fire...”

“What? Like this?”

The quintet recoiled when a shaft of fire shot into the air from the grass not three feet in front of them.

“You didn’t even...”

A column of water poured down then, dousing the flames.

The four youngsters sprinted from the park, leaving Winslow eye-to-eye with Jenna.

“How...” he stammered.

“The first step is to empty yourself of preconceived notions. Let the energy engulf you - in a tangible sense. Feel it. Once you have integrated it into the depths of your being, use it.”

“Like chi in martial arts?”

Jenna bit her tongue. “You don’t need to punch to expend the energy, or flick so much as a finger. You will be one with it, and a simple thought will manifest the deed.”

“I don’t believe it,” Winslow admitted.

“As Yoda said to Luke Skywalker, ‘That is why you fail.’” She strode toward the bookstore. “Stop by and see me when your mind has wrapped itself around the concept.”

As months and years passed, Jenna contented herself that no more rituals were held in the city park. The homeless returned in warmer months, drifting to more southerly climes as the seasons cycled.

Periodically, teens would slip into the bookstore and purchase used copies of insipid magick tomes. Their attempts to charge “crystals” or cast love spells were harmless enough, she didn’t interfere.

An otherwise quiet March night - the spring solstice Jenna later remembered - she was watching the classic Irene Dunne movie *My Favorite Wife* when an ear-splitting roar nearly deafened her. Scrambling to the bay window, she saw a pillar of fire rising fifty feet from the park’s snow covered band shell.

At the base of this phenomenon stood Grant Winslow.

“A hell of a calling card!” she scolded, wrapped in her plaid bathrobe as she crossed the damp expanse.

“You told me to stop by,” he grunted.

“I didn’t mean you should rouse the whole town! What if someone phoned the fire department?”

“They’ll think it’s a bad dream.”

“You hope.”

“I just wanted to say thanks for... enlightening me.”

“It took you long enough to come to grips with it.”

“I had to undo decades of falsehoods and fear.”

Her nose twitched. “And?”

“I’ve never known such peace.”

“Good for you.” She turned to retrace her steps, toes frozen in her fuzzy pink slippers.

As he had once before, he seized her arm. “Jenna, wait.”

She didn’t dare look into those eyes. “What?”

“Are we the only two people who... understand what we can do?”

“In this hemisphere, maybe.”

“Then, shouldn’t we be together?”

Too long, Jenna had endured the loneliness of being unable to share her secret with a kindred spirit. Here he stood, thinner than before, wisdom lighting his features, heat radiating from every pore.

She led him to her apartment, where their energies mingled in an ecstasy of passion, their physical beings dissolved in the ether as dawn broke.

Off Balance

Jackie Ernst, barely 20, maintained a personal balance rare in one so young: university classes and leisure, food and drink, spiritual and mundane, friends and lovers.

The latter aspect had begun to upset that equilibrium in recent weeks, however.

She'd met Mike Paden at the community college, when she took her 1974 Volkswagen Beetle to have the brakes replaced. Cheaper than a garage, having only to buy the necessary parts so the auto mechanics-in-training could perform the work as projects toward their grade, she'd watched the ash blond twig enthusiastically wrench on the vehicle, like a child with a new toy.

He'd asked her for a date when he returned her keys.

They'd gone to dinner on a regular basis, played touch football in the park with mutual friends, or huddled in dark movie theaters watching comedies and science fiction blockbusters. On Saturday nights, Jackie accompanied Mike to whatever gig he'd booked for his garage band, the Greasers - named so since all were in the auto shop program.

She'd expected him to propose marriage for six months, but he seemed to chicken out at the last minute each time.

Then, Peter Selby entered the picture. A member of her father's fraternal organization - a fit 45 with a shaggy, salt-and-pepper mane, intense brown orbs, a wide forehead tapering down a long jaw to a narrow chin, thick brows and a Romanesque nose - he'd discovered her in the lodge pantry, sobbing tearfully after a rack of home-canned tomato sauce collapsed, spraying red liquid on the floor, walls, ceiling and herself.

Selby had used his handkerchief to wipe her cheeks and dry her eyes and, suddenly, they were wrapped in a mutual embrace, kissing.

Her father preoccupied with cooking 75 pounds of pasta, Selby suggested they abandon the monthly spaghetti dinner in favor of his apartment, no illusions about the status of their relationship. Jackie found in his bed a contentment impossible with Mike.

So, she gradually achieved a balance between the two men: Monday, Wednesday and Friday nights she spent with Selby, dining at fine restaurants, dancing, attending theater performances; Saturday evenings, she joined others applauding Mike's band at quaint bistros or clubs.

During autumn and spring breaks from school, she traveled with Selby on his private plane to the Bahamas, the Virgin Islands, or other resorts.

Jackie saw no harm in this schedule. Mike knew nothing about Selby, and vice versa.

That is, until she glimpsed Mike in a waiter's apron at the Café Rouge one Friday when Selby ushered her across the foyer.

She shuddered, and her escort studied her pinched features. "What's wrong, darling?"

"Nothing. I just... caught a chill."

"Would you prefer to eat somewhere else?"

"Please."

Reclaiming the mink coat he'd bought her from the cloak room, they escaped before Mike saw them.

Jackie made the mistake of asking the mechanic about his new job after the band's first set that weekend.

"How'd you know?" he pressed.

She bluffed, "Word gets around."

"I wanted it to be a surprise."

"Why?"

"By next term, I'll have earned enough money not only to pay my tuition, but to lease an apartment..."

She feared the next.

"And buy an engagement ring."

"Save your money, Mike," she advised. "I don't need some gaudy diamond catching on my clothes or blankets."

His disappointment evident, she pitied him.

"I'm sorry."

"It's just..." he stammered. "I want everyone to know you're my girl, and we're going to be married as soon as I can afford it."

"That's a long way off, Mike."

"I know, but..."

She laid delicate fingers on his forearm. "Be patient."

"Okay."

Jackie let him kiss her before he returned to the platform where his bass guitar - and bandmates - waited.

His lips didn't set her ablaze like Selby's did. The sheer virility of the latter, the heat he generated when he touched her, even in passing, could neither be denied nor ignored. Beyond the physical, his life experience, intelligence and well-rounded knowledge base stimulated her mind. As they cuddled on the mattress, he would tell her stories of the world, expanding her horizons.

Though Selby provided her with every necessity, and many luxuries, they'd agreed early on that marriage would not be in the offing.

"If either of us gets bored," he reasoned, "we're free to end it, without any legal entanglements."

More than a year after they'd initially met, she could not identify one second of boredom with him.

Mike, for his part, grew more and more unpredictable, his auto shop courses interfering with his job, and his job interfering with the band.

One spring Friday, Jackie accompanied Selby to a fundraising dinner for a local charity and, to her horror, the Greasers took the stage after a delectable meal, a set of classic rock encouraging the aging crowd to relive their youthful dance trends.

The young woman hoped bright spotlights would blind the bassist to her presence. As much as she adored when Selby whisked her around the floor in a waltz or polka, she refused his request to enjoy the modern beat.

"I insist," he growled as the clock struck 11, his mouth slanting upward at the right corner.

She lamented, "Can't we just go home?"

"What's wrong?"

Selby's answer came in the form of the tall youth approaching their table as his last break began.

"I thought it was you!" Mike rumbled, plopping on the vacant gold-upholstered chair to her left.

"What... are you doing here?" Jackie gulped.

"One of the guests at a wedding we played last month got us this gig." He squinted at her, then Selby. "What's this get-up and who's this guy?"

The yellow satin gown complemented her natural coloring, a corsage of white orchids pinned to the blue sash. Mike was used to seeing her in t-shirts, jeans and sneakers.

Selby bristled in his tuxedo. "Darling, are you acquainted with this... this..."

"Darling?" Mike echoed, flabbergasted. "What the hell, Jackie?"

Sensing the imminent anxiety attack, Jackie introduced the men. She made no effort to explain her association with either.

Mike seized her hand, attempting to pull her upright. "C'mon. We need to talk..."

Jackie didn't need to struggle. Selby rose and decked the intruder with a deft left hook to his jaw, before calmly resuming his seat.

Only those at the closest table realized there'd been a disturbance, leaving Selby to interrogate his date in an undertone.

"What bond is there between you and this boy?"

She averted her blue eyes.

"Have you slept with him?" Selby's cultured baritone conveyed a threat.

"No! We're... just friends."

"If that's the case, why were you so afraid he'd notice you from the stage?"

"He... wouldn't understand... about us."

Groggy, Mike regained consciousness, staring at the underside of the round, linen-covered table. When he moaned, Jackie shifted her attention and squatted beside him.

"Please, Mike. Get up and go back to the band. We'll talk about this..."

"There's nothing to talk about." He rolled on his elbow and, once a dizzy spell eased, he straightened and strode away.

Selby soothed, "That's that. Now, will you dance with me?"

"Can't we go?"

"Darling, I've always treated you with respect, haven't I?" he queried.

"Yes."

"Yet, you disrespected me by not telling me of your... divided affections."

"I... didn't think it mattered. There's nothing serious..."

"You may not believe that, but he does."

Jackie grimaced.

"If we leave now, I'll be dropping you at your apartment, and we'll never see each other again."

"But, Peter..."

"We agreed to be honest with each other, remember," Selby muttered, extending his hand toward her. "Dance with me."

Her inner balance shattered, Jackie realized maturity demanded a choice between the fresh-faced, naive bass guitarist/mechanic and the sophisticated, passionate Selby.

Wife or mistress? Shackled or liberated?

With Mike, life would be a constant struggle to make ends meet. He'd once mentioned wanting at least three children - and even the sound of an infant crying in the grocery store rattled her nerves. Granted, he had a sarcastic sense of humor and could make her laugh at the drop of a hat. Their conversations, though, never ventured beyond the latest car he'd repaired or piece of music the band had rehearsed.

Peter Selby offered her the world, albeit temporarily. Once they parted, could she ever find a man who would marry her, being “used goods”?

Millions of women had divorced their husbands and remarried, she rationalized; prostitutes left the business and wed loving consorts...

That he was twice her age increased his allure; lying beside him in the king-sized bed, she imagined the scenario drawn from old movies featuring older Hollywood stars romancing young, impressionable ingenues.

Given that anything could happen from day to day, she reconciled herself to living full speed and relishing every minute.

Content with the decision and balanced anew, she slid her hand in his.

As they twirled among the other dancers, Jackie heard discordant notes from the bass. She glanced up at Mike, scowling.

Sunday morning, perusing the newspaper in bed as Selby slept late, Jackie read of the horrific car wreck at Dead Man’s Curve - the road Mike drove on his way home. Pavement slick from a light rain, his 1967 GTO had lost control, smashed through the guard rail and into a tree.

She felt not so much as a twinge of regret.

Selby rolled over, brown eyes studying her expression.

She bent to kiss him. “Good morning.”

“Good morning, darling.” Wrapping his arms around her, they soared to the heights of ecstasy.

The Windfall

“Scraping the very bottom of my career barrel, you could phrase it,” Mickey Christian proclaimed to rows of students filling the auditorium. “If I hadn’t needed to earn a living, I wouldn’t have appeared in one of them.”

The session’s moderator glared at his guest speaker, aghast.

“I apologize for every bit of it,” Christian concluded, abandoning the podium and vanishing behind heavy maroon curtains.

Over 1,500 undergrads remained immobile, uncertain whether to applaud such honesty or simply return to their regularly scheduled courses.

“What the devil were you trying to prove?” demanded Emil Rodgers, Christian’s publicity agent, pursuing him from the building.

The actor paused on a snow-covered sidewalk skirting the quad. “That I’m sick and tired of playing games.”

“With six contracts awaiting your signature, you’re sick and tired?”

“Six contracts for what? Bit parts or leads in poorly written indie flicks that require Kickstarter drives just to be produced?”

Rodgers lips moved, but he uttered no words.

“Just as I suspected,” Christian scoffed, striding toward the parking lot.

The publicist chased him. “If you don’t want what is being offered, what *do* you want?”

“I’ll be in touch when I know myself.”

A firm grip allowed Rodgers to prevent his client from closing the Nissan Ultima’s door. “What should I tell the casting agents?”

“Tell them to go screw themselves.”

The engine revved and the car jerked into reverse, causing Rodgers to retreat, avoiding injury from flying gravel.

Christian arrived home well past 10:30, the dwelling silent. Bella and the children had long since retired on this school night. Passing through the living room into the kitchen, he pulled a gallon of milk from the refrigerator and dipped slender fingers into a ceramic Santa Claus cookie jar, left over from Christmas, on the counter.

When the ceiling lamp switched on, he momentarily felt like a child caught in a misdeed. Instead, he pulled out two chocolate chip cookies, offering one to his teenaged son.

“Bad night, Dad?” puzzled Darnell.

“That’s an understatement. Why are you awake?”

“I had to finish a paper that’s due second hour.”

Christian chuckled. “Which you’ve known about for three weeks?”

The ruddy 16-year-old nodded sheepishly.

Still young enough to recall his own academic procrastination, the father grinned and chucked this lanky athlete on the shoulder. “Get some sleep, son.”

“You, too, Dad. You look beat.”

As Darnell shuffled toward the stairs, Christian sank on a wooden stool near the marble-topped island. Yes, he was beat. Beaten by a system that made it almost impossible to be selected for meaningful roles in noteworthy plays or motion pictures, despite considerable talent and experience.

The cookie crunched between his teeth, a brief, delicious distraction as he imagined his wife and eight-year-old daughter mixing flour, sugar and other ingredients prior to baking.

Supporting them spurred him to perform uninspired parts in television series - where he was usually killed off after three or four episodes - or what had previously been termed “B” movies. He wanted that break which every actor craved and, maybe, an Academy Award nomination.

How to achieve that goal? he mused. He’d already changed agents three times in six years, none of them promoting him to his liking. He’d chatted with casting agents, who deemed him a “utility player” or “character actor”.

One had told him frankly, “You’re not leading man material, because of your physique.”

Yes, he was “large boned” and carried an extra 20 pounds or so around his waist. Constant attempts at dieting amounted to nothing. Yet, as with the revolution among women to denounce excessively thin models as unrealistic body images, so men should not need six-pack abs to portray heroes or get the girl in the end.

He’d seriously considered switching professions, having worked as a waiter, cook, postal carrier and convenience store manager in his youth. He’d spent months in New York, landing a secondary part in an Andrew Lloyd Weber musical, only to have funding for the show collapse as a result of the 2008 financial crisis.

Maybe the fates are telling me something, he decided, rinsing his glass in the sink. Tomorrow, I start looking for a different job.

The morning mail, however, changed his mind before he made it out the door, resumés printed. A certified letter contained a check for \$100,000 and an unusual contract.

Christian read the typed paragraphs on ivory linen stationery three times, flummoxed. An old acquaintance, Ursula Finch, explained winning the Powerball

Lottery the previous summer. With her newfound wealth, she'd purchased and restored a theatre near Chicago's Loyola Park along the Lake Michigan waterfront.

"I'm paying for six months of your time, Mickey," she stated. "We're going to knock the critics on their collective ear with a series of fresh scripts and, possibly, a little Shakespeare."

If the project proved successful, the contract would be extended through the creation of a formal theatrical company, featuring resident actors working separate presentations on three distinct stages.

"Be here on the first," came the final instruction.

Christian dialed his wife's office, not caring if a personal call would disrupt her routine. This windfall meant bills could be paid and the mortgage brought current.

"Will you go?" Bella queried, her contralto quiet, background noise confirming business as usual at the print shop.

"We could all go," came his reply.

"Pull the kids out of school? I was a Army brat, remember, and jumping from place to place wasn't any kind of fun."

"You're right, of course," Christian remarked, though he disagreed with her logic. "I could go ahead and, after school is out, you could join me."

"A separation that long..."

"There's Skype, Facebook, and other ways we can see each other and talk every day. This is too good of a chance..."

"Who's this Ursula, anyway?"

"She and I went to high school together. She wrote a couple of plays that won the yearly state drama competition, and scored herself a job as playwright-in-residence at some theatre in San Francisco."

"Did you ever date her?"

Christian detected a jealous edge to her tone. "We were friends, that's all. I portrayed the villain in one of her melodramas our junior year, and had the lead in her romantic comedy as a senior."

"We'll talk about it at dinner tonight," Bella announced.

"If I'm going to be there on the first, I need to make airline reservations today. Plus, I'll need to hunt up an apartment..."

Irritated, the statement amounted to little more than a hiss. "All right. Do as you please."

“You’ll have the money,” Christian assured her. “I’ll deposit the check when I swing by to pick up the kids at three. You can send me an allowance every week...”

The line went dead.

Cognizant of Bella’s tendency to overdramatize their partings - even when he left for two or three days to film commercials - Christian refused to let her suspicions dampen his excitement about this opportunity.

That he lied about his relationship with Ursula... well, why pour fuel on Bella’s fire?

Ursula had invited him to Frisco after their graduation, and they’d lived together in half of a converted loft above a butcher shop while he made the rounds of auditions and acted with a stock company performing on Fisherman’s Wharf.

Their son would have been 18, had he lived.

As Christian logged in to book his flights, a strange doubt nagged at his subconscious. Rather than select dates and input his destination, he snatched his cell phone and punched a series of numbers embossed on Ursula’s note.

Her voice echoed through the speaker, as if she was confined in a small space. “What’s up?”

“Hey, Sully, how’s your world?”

“Turn, turn, turn, Mickey. You received the check?”

“Yeah. A real surprise, but congrats on the lottery.”

“Four hundred mill will make a lot of dreams come true.”

“That’s for sure.” Christian affirmed. “I have a question, though: why me?”

“Because you’re the best damned actor I know, despite the tripe and trash those agents have thrown at you.” He heard a toilet flush in the background and a door open. “I’ve got a comedy, a drama and a historical piece in which you’ll play the leads. It’ll be fantastic.”

This news lifted a burden from his shoulders. “With you opposite me?”

“Oh, hell no. I’m directing. This isn’t a small high school, or community theatre. We’ll have enough experienced actors for even the walk-on roles, so I don’t have to do double duty and can actually see my dialogue come to life from the front row!”

“Sounds great.”

“So, I’ll see you on the first?”

“Not even a blizzard could stop me.”

Breaking the connection, Christian resumed his seat at the living room desk, booking a first class seat from Baltimore to Midway Airport, making use of his rewards points for the upgrade.

Bella would, indeed, have access to the money - 98% of it - with the actor receiving \$2,000 in cash from the bank teller to cover apartment rent and other incidentals.

Darnall objected to his father's departure, while simultaneously glad he would be able to continue playing on the basketball team. Emma was too preoccupied having a tea party with her dolls to do more than kiss Christian's cheek.

A vintage Cadillac limousine retrieved him on the Windy City's south side, icy precipitation making the drive through downtown hazardous and slow. When the vehicle braked beneath the stone portico of a vast mansion, the passenger objected.

"I've a reservation at the Drake," Christian reminded the chauffeur.

"Miss Finch arranged for you to occupy the north wing of her estate, sir."

With \$400 million at her disposal, Ursula could own homes in every major American city, and then some. This structure might have cost a cool \$500,000, easy.

The butler took charge of Christian's luggage after greeting the guest on the threshold. Mosaic tile created a picture of an idyllic country scene on the entrance hall floor, which they crossed to a curved double staircase.

"Dinner will be at 7:30, sir," the aging servant declared. "Miss Ursula doesn't dress."

Biting back a chuckle at the double entendre, Christian spent ten minutes unpacking and washing the dust of travel off his face and hands. His red polo shirt, jeans and sneakers nonetheless appeared out of place when he descended to the ornate dining room, its table capable of seating 30.

"Outrageous, isn't it?" Ursula quipped as she entered through the arched portal five minutes later.

The prematurely grey, lithe playwright wore a U2 t-shirt and cut-off jean shorts, despite the winter climate.

Crossing the chamber, she embraced Christian, planting a more-than-friendly kiss on his lips. "Welcome, Mickey."

"You do know I'm married, right?" he protested.

"Sure. But old habits die hard."

"You can hardly call it a habit, when we haven't seen each other since..."

"Little Mike's funeral?"

They stared at each other in silence for a minute.

"You don't still blame me, do you?" asked Ursula, signaling him to a chair at the head of the table, where two place settings were arranged.

“Anyone can break his neck in a skiing accident.” Christian unfolded the green linen napkin. “Is that why you never got hitched?”

“No. Simply put, I haven’t time for that type of relationship. After we... parted ways, I went from writing to producing to directing, without a second for myself.”

“Is that how it’ll be here?”

“Sure. I’ve hired well-organized assistants but, you know me, I’ll stay on top of every detail myself.”

“So, you moving me in with you is...”

“For old time’s sake. Saves you some scratch, too, which I know your growing family needs.”

“Thanks, then.”

Two maids bought bowls of French onion soup as the first course. The aroma delighted Christian’s nostrils.

“I’m up most mornings by six and out the door by seven. I supervised the theatre’s renovations personally and, now, will do the same with the productions. I don’t pull my Ferrari into the garage until almost midnight, so we’ll hardly see each other.”

“You finally got that Ferrari you always whined about?”

“Red Testarossa, yeah. God, it flies!”

“How many speeding tickets?”

Ursula blushed. “None, yet. I outran a pair of county browns near Lake Geneva one night before they could catch my plate number...”

“If you get yourself arrested, don’t count on me to bail you out!”

“No way. I’ve got a team of lawyers for that.”

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were accustomed to being rich your entire life!”

“It’s not a hard thing to get used to, Mickey.” Delicate fingers rang a small bell; maids replaced the bowls with Caesar salads.

“At least, you still eat healthy,” Christian observed.

“Not always. The other business I spent a bit on is a shop where they make fudge right in front of your eyes. It may never open to the public.”

The pair laughed together. Christian’s memories of Ursula consuming vast amounts of Easter and Christmas candy - and how she’d avoided gaining weight - still amazed him.

Forks speared lettuce, croutons and vegetables, followed by medium rare roast beef, baked potatoes and broccoli with Hollandaise sauce. A four layer chocolate cake for dessert left Christian stuffed and ready for sleep.

“Wally will drive you to the theatre around ten for the read-through,” Ursula informed him as they parted outside his suite. “It’ll be a gas.”

“Working with you was... never dull, Sully.”

“Ditto.”

Once changed into his pajamas, Christian sat on the carved mahogany, king size four-poster bed, phoning Bella to report his safe arrival.

He failed to relay his address, knowing his wife would research the information via the internet and assume his trip a mere ploy to be unfaithful.

A night’s slumber without being jabbed in the ribs for snoring refreshed the actor. Riding in the limousine unnerved him somewhat, but as the Cadillac swung through the intersection near the theatre, seeing large electric letters - M, J and C - being hoisted with a crane onto the marquee, blood rushed to his head.

“What’s all that?” Christian demanded of Ursula as he traversed the exquisitely appointed lobby.

“The exterior isn’t quite finished,” she replied. “The scaffolding will be gone well before we open.”

“Not that. The initials.”

Her giggle a lilting sound, she suggested he guess.

“You haven’t named it...”

Blue eyes squinted.

Then, Christian understood. “You’ve named it after Little Mike?”

“Good for you!” She squeezed his arm. “C’mon, everyone’s on stage.”

The cast had to sit tight a few extra minutes, as Christian stepped into the auditorium and stopped dead in his tracks. “Holy cow!”

If the edifice had been constructed new, it could have been no more ornate. Italian Renaissance decor shone with murals, gold filigree wall sconces and a crystal chandelier directly beneath the dome.

“This must’ve cost a fortune,” he gasped.

“Nice thing is: I have a fortune, so it’s no big deal.”

Ursula preceded him up temporary stairs allowing access to the proscenium arch. “Good morning, everyone!” she hailed the dozen men and women idling among flats and furnishings. “This is Mickey Christian, who will star opposite Gladys in our comedy.”

The newcomer expected others to be introduced; Ursula nudged him toward one of the wooden folding chairs arranged in a semi-circle. “You’ll meet everyone in good time,” she chided.

An assistant stage manager distributed spiral-bound scripts to each cast member. Christian rifled the pages and gauged the weight with his hand.

Too light; too short.

“I recognize that expression, Mickey,” Ursula grunted. “Don’t you think I know my business?”

He raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. “I didn’t say a word.”

“You didn’t have to.”

The title page read, *All in Fun*, with the plot summarized as an “adventurous romp through one family’s unusual life.”

That family - misfits and eccentrics from each character’s description - careened from crisis to crisis, always on the move, performing as a classic rock band in bars and nightclubs. Whether dodging bill collectors or cooking freshly killed rabbit in the wilderness, they always managed to see the bright side of life.

Christian liked what he read, and approved of the actors Ursula had chosen for the roles. The audience would leave with their hearts uplifted, having laughed themselves hoarse.

The read-through concluded by noon, he was free to depart, yet remained to watch Ursula at work. She did, as she’d told him, supervise every aspect of the production, down to the most minor detail.

No break for lunch, nor dinner, interrupted her hustling from stage to office to dressing rooms and wardrobe department. Christian finally blocked her egress from the sound booth, not permitting her to pass until she agreed to eat a slice of pizza he’d ordered for delivery.

“You’ll run yourself ragged,” he scolded.

“So much to do, so little time!”

“You’ve all the time in the world.”

Her expression transformed instantly into a somber mask. “I wish the doctors had said that.”

Her attempt to brush past was halted by Christian’s firm grasp. “What do you mean?”

“I’ll tell you later.”

“Promise?”

“Yes, I promise. You head home. We’ll have a midnight snack - remember the beanie-weenies and Fritos?”

“I’ll have it ready.”

The limousine deposited him at the mansion, where the servants had been holding his dinner since 7:00. He apologized to the staff and ascended to his room, watching an old movie on television until the house fell silent.

He hadn't cooked in years, but opening a can of pork and beans and slicing up a few hot dogs couldn't really be considered cooking, he snickered as he searched the kitchen for a suitable knife and sauce pan.

The concoction boiled and steamed well before Ursula arrived as the grandfather clock in the library chimed 3:00 a.m.

"What took you so long?"

"We discovered the circuit breakers were shorting out every time we switched the lights on full. The electrician didn't show up until ten."

"It could've waited until tomorrow."

"You mean, today?"

This type of verbal judo had been one reason Christian returned east those many years ago. Ursula's command of the language outstripped his own, and she flaunted that talent to excess - almost on an insulting level.

He remembered his reason for the rendezvous, serving her a bowl of beanie-weenies and a fork.

"Now, what did the doctor tell you?" he insisted, replacing the pan on the six-burner stove.

"Ironically, it was the week after I won the lottery," she quipped, smiling between bites. "God, this tastes good."

"Hard to foul it up."

"Anyway, I'd been neglecting my health a bit and, with that much money, I could afford a thorough physical. They did the blood tests, chest x-rays, the whole nine yards."

"And?"

"Pancreatic cancer, which has metastacized and spread."

"Shit!" Christian had been holding his fork in mid-air, dropping it. "Why are you doing this, then?"

"Because it's my dream. It will immortalize our son's name, and give you a bright future for your own family."

"Eh?"

"I've already made out my will. Once we're established, you'll be the executive director and can take your pick of any play you like: starring, directing, or merely producing."

"Dammit, Sully, you're out of your mind!"

She grinned across the table at him, chewing contentedly.

"I'm no businessman and, as for organization..."

"You'll be a millionaire, Mickey. You can hire someone to run the theatre for you."

“I wouldn’t begin to know how...”

“My lawyers can handle it, then. In fact, if any of my scripts are ever optioned by Hollywood, the contract will stipulate you’re to be the star.”

Christian felt his heart flip in his chest; his stomach reject the food he’d ingested. His goals of being recognized on stage or in film so close to reality - at the expense of a friend’s life?

The weeks which followed, he tried to put Ursula’s impending death out of his mind, as she seemed to do. Not once did she display any weakness of body or mind, scurrying hither and yon to handle even the most puerile questions.

The scaffolding came down from the theatre’s facade, the marquee bulbs tested, reflecting eerily upon Lake Michigan’s lapping waves. For the first time ever, Michael J. Christian saw his name in lights.

Critics joined a prominent opening night audience in the standing ovation, complimenting both the performances and the venue in their columns.

The date coinciding with spring break, Bella brought the children, sitting in the stage box, impressed by her husband’s success.

He didn’t mention Ursula’s condition or will before or after introducing the two women. When the time came, he would move the family to Chicago whether or not Bella objected.

The time came sooner than he hoped. During a dress rehearsal for Ursula’s drama, titled *Endings Come Too Fast*, she stumbled on the catwalk while adjusting gels on a spot. The ambulance transported her to the hospital, where what energy remained proved insufficient to aid her recovery.

Mickey reached the Intensive Care wing to find her hooked up to monitors and intravenous medications. Awake but agitated, Ursula signaled him to the bedside.

“Don’t let them keep me alive, Mickey. I’m ready to go.”

Christian felt tears on his cheeks. “I’m... not ready to let you go. Neither is anyone in the cast...”

“You’ll be fine. We’ve made a strong impression, and that will continue as long as you remember to produce only the best quality scripts.”

“Sully, please...”

“Kiss me once, like you used to,” she muttered.

He bent to her, but even before their lips met, he heard her chest gurgle with her dying breath.

Cremation followed a private funeral service hours prior to the opening. The press turned out in droves, nonetheless, congregating outside the church.

Christian practically assaulted when he emerged behind the casket, he made one statement to the assembly.

“Six months ago to the day, I was scraping the bottom of the barrel. The next morning, I found myself on top of the world, thanks to Ursula Finch. Sully taught me life hands us all sorts of challenges and we should tackle them with courage, integrity, and enjoy every second given to us.”

A theatrically-themed urn in a case, Christian took one last ride in the limousine to the mansion - now his. He enshrined the replica of the MJC Theatre’s stage on the library’s carved limestone mantle, an enlarged photo of Ursula with the cast of *All in Fun* beside it.

He couldn’t dwell on her demise, but he vowed to use her plays, along with his inherited wealth and success, to share her generous spirit with not just his family, but the world.

Yoga Positions

Hank Kite leaned on the whitewashed corral fence, the spectacle beyond raising his gorge. Bowing his salt-and-pepper head, he reminded himself to breathe evenly.

It didn't help.

Across the open field, Evelyn glimpsed his sour expression as she led the class through various yoga positions, baby goats frolicking between the mats. The baggy tie-dyed t-shirt, bell bottom dungarees and black Converse sneakers reminiscent of the 1970s couldn't be missed, along with his retro wire-rimmed, purple tinted glasses.

"Join us!" she called.

A slight shake of his wind-blown hair doubled as a reply.

Hank respected the practice of yoga more than to allow himself to be sucked into a passing fad.

A newsworthy fad, evidently, with a photographer he recognized from the local paper snapping candid pictures and a videographer from the CBS affiliate recording images for posterity.

Still...

The session ended with plastic water bottles being distributed to the students, resting or playing with the young animals. Evelyn mopped her short brunette curls and roundish face with a towel she'd pulled from her duffle bag and strolled toward the perimeter.

"Long time no see, Hank," she greeted.

He snorted derisively. "Long enough for you to forget everything I taught you."

She smiled, the memory so pleasant of how his mouth slanted upward at the right corner when he spoke. "I haven't forgotten. I've adapted."

"For the money."

"The class was free," she countered. "You're looking well."

Too well, she mused, those brown orbs flashing beneath thick brows, the wide forehead tapering along his jawline to the narrow chin. His Romanesque nose proved an apt center to the elongated face.

"It's been challenging the past couple years."

"I heard about your heart attacks. Why... didn't you call me?"

"What good would that have done?" Hank snapped. "I didn't need anyone to sit beside my bed, holding my hand out of pity."

"You know pity has never been an emotion we shared."

The clicking noise distracted them both momentarily. As they glanced around the slowly emptying expanse, they focused on the *Chronicle* employee, Nikon obscuring much of his bearded countenance.

“Give me a break, Jake,” Evelyn admonished.

“This will be the front page centerpiece,” said the photojournalist. “Yoga - Old and New.”

Hank took a step toward the ruddy youngster. “If I see that in print, I’ll sue!”

With a chuckle, Evelyn restrained the older gentleman. “Leave him. He’s just doing his job.”

“I’d expect such behavior from those tabloid flunkies, but not the legitimate press.”

Waving to the pair, Jake gingerly navigated a vacant cow pasture to his Ford Fiesta parked near the red brick farmhouse.

Hank unlatched the corral gate and followed Evelyn to where the portable sound system wobbled on a small wood pallet. He waited while she rolled her yoga mat and stuffed the towel in her bag.

When she straightened, they stood nose-to-nose.

“Why are you here, anyway?” she queried.

He hesitated, retreating two paces, self-conscious.

“I’ve never seen you unsure of yourself,” she mocked, car keys twirling on her index finger.

“What I saw here today forced me to reconsider my plans.”

“What plans?”

Another pause, then Hank exhaled loudly. “I’ve been invited to present at the annual yoga festival on Cape Cod. I was going to ask you to collaborate...”

“I’d love to.”

“I... said I’d reconsidered.”

Evelyn sniffed. “Fine, then. I’ll contact the organizing committee myself and offer my services for free.”

“What’s all this ‘free’ business?” Hank grumbled. “Don’t you believe in a person’s right to earn an honest living?”

“Sure.” She wrapped the power cord to the speaker around the prongs, gazing at him. “If someone has more than they need, though, and has the ability to share knowledge with those who can’t afford to pay, why shouldn’t they?”

He echoed, “‘More than they need?’ You’ve barely two pennies to rub together...”

“That was before.”

“Before what?”

“I won the lottery,” she quipped.

“Liar.”

“If you won’t believe that, maybe I inherited a bundle from an old, long-lost aunt.”

“What aunt. I...”

Frustrated, she pitched the duffel at him. “Oh, come on, Hank! My classes are popular and keep a roof over my head and food in my stomach. Maybe I learned something you didn’t teach me: generosity is a gift that reaps countless intangible rewards.”

Tossing the NYU logo bag back to her, he remonstrated, “All those hours I spent working with you one-on-one... what was that, chopped liver?”

She set off at a rapid gait toward her car.

Hank caught her arm. “You’ve grown hard, Evelyn. Not toward your students, perhaps - you’re maybe too soft with them - but toward me. What caused...”

Burning hazel eyes glared at him. “You really don’t know, do you?”

He met her gaze, silent.

“When I started doing yoga so many years ago, you were a kind and gentle teacher. You saved my life, in a way. All the shit I had to endure in school, because of the leg braces and the crutches after the surgeries... yoga allowed me a measure of peace and balance. Then, my body finally healed, and I thought... I thought...”

Tears streamed down her cheeks but, when Hank tried to pull her into an embrace, she jerked from his grasp.

“No. It’s too late for that now,” she huffed, striding across the damp grass. “If you’d supported me when I tried to expand my horizons...”

He pursued her, soon falling into step. “I couldn’t, don’t you see? You were... violating everything I believed...”

“Because I wanted to find ways to assist those whose physical disabilities prevent them from doing traditional yoga?”

“Your disabilities didn’t...”

“Surgery was an option for me. For some people, it’s not. They still deserve a chance to find the peace that yoga can offer...”

“I agree, but you took it too far...”

She threw up her hands and jogged the distance to her Honda Civic. Sliding behind the steering wheel, she drove along the gravel, kicking stones in Hank’s direction.

Leaving the equipment behind.

Exasperated, the yoga instructor trudged to his own vehicle, easing it across the rutted expanse and braking near the pallet. He loaded Evelyn's property in the Jeep's rear; she'd come to claim it when she missed it.

Within hours, actually. She knew where he lived: a simple apartment above his yoga studio. He might not be aware of her address; he'd not moved in 30 years.

Settled in a battered armchair by the bay window overlooking Main Street, he recalled the evenings they'd spent chatting about life over mugs of hot chocolate. She'd been unlike any other student he'd encountered since inheriting the teaching role from a college buddy who'd died of bone cancer.

He'd watched his hair fade from its original dark brown to the greying mane he saw each morning in the bathroom mirror. He felt his muscles stiffen; he could no longer touch his nose to his knees, the example of flexibility he'd so often used to impress students.

The heart attacks - the first sending him to hospital, followed by eight others on the operating table - drained him. Supreme effort kept him alive, restored him to a semblance of normalcy where he could resume teaching.

Evelyn had been long gone by then. A near-violent disagreement over how yoga should be taught destroyed their relationship. She'd moved to California and, only recently, he'd heard of her return.

She hadn't abandoned her radical thinking, though, and that hurt. He'd hoped she'd grow out of the youthful impulses...

"We'll just agree to disagree," she told him in the course of that afternoon's conversation, accustomed to debating him in the sirsasana pose, his bare feet in the air, as she folded her legs in the lotus position on the carpet beside him. "I can't change your mind, and you can't change mine."

Appropriate, perhaps, gazing at her upside down, he mused.

He smoothly righted his vantage point before transferring the sound system, wiring and bag into her car, cognizant he'd never see her again. He might not even last long enough to participate in the Cape Cod festival.

She extended her right hand in parting. He clasped it, securing his grip with his left and not releasing it.

"Stay with me, Evelyn," he pleaded quietly. "I promise I won't dispute anything you do."

She read the anguish in his brown eyes. "There's something you haven't told me."

"Take over the studio. It'll be... less expensive than renting the high school gym for your classes."

“Hank...”

He led her once more up the dimly lit stairs to the apartment. Surrendering a manila file from his desk drawer, he pattered in the kitchen as she browsed the pages.

“Shit, Hank!” she gasped.

He appeared on the threshold. “Well?”

“Yes.”

They met half-way across the warped pine floor, her face buried in his chest as she sobbed.

“Pity?” he chuckled.

She murmured, “I love you, you old sod.”

Again calm, they enjoyed a sedate dinner of salad and carrot juice. Evelyn had finished washing the dishes and was about to select a DVD to play on the television, when she noticed Hank’s head resting at an odd angle on the recliner.

She checked his pulse.

“Oh, Dad...”

A Brush with the Sea

(Based on *Pirates of the Caribbean*)

She'd grown up with the stories and, frankly, tired of their frequent repetition. Having Henry Turner as a classmate in the one-room Port Royal School grew quite annoying after nearly a decade.

Magenta Crux – named so by the Sisters of Charity who staffed the orphanage and ran the school, because of her flaming red hair and the rough-hewn wooden cross hanging around her neck when she'd wandered in from the jungle – developed a strong distaste for everything the staid, starch-wimpled creatures attempted to teach her. Beyond basic reading and mathematics, she cared little for religion, history, languages... she spoke English and Spanish, and that proved sufficient for oral communications.

She preferred emphasizing an opinion with her fists.

Many were the boys who insulted her ill-fitting uniform – hand-me-downs from older waifs – or the vivid, jagged scar on her right cheek, who sported a black eye after crossing her path. They would hobble home, blood dripping from nostril or mouth, afraid to admit to their parents a wisp of a girl had pounded sense into their skulls.

Of course, she spent a lot of time confined to the kitchen, punishment for these infractions of etiquette and Christian deportment. Knuckles blistered from frequent canings burned as she chopped vegetables or scrubbed pots.

She lived for the day when she could spit a curse on the entire Port Royal enclave and board a ship to Europe or even the not-too-distant shore called Florida.

Muttering to herself as she was supposed to be reading her catechism, tawny-haired Henry Turner poked her shoulder from behind.

“Leave off!” she protested.

“Shhh, or Sister will scold you again.”

“I don't care.”

“That's how Jack Sparrow always got in trouble: not considering the consequences of his actions.”

“Oh, shut up.”

Jack Sparrow, Jack Sparrow. Turner always used that recalcitrant pirate as an example of how not to behave. His rather unsavory adventures, skirting the tenuous line between the tangible world and that of the accursed and occult – anathema to the good Sisters – must've been related by Turner's mother, who'd

known the pirate personally, as a means of educating him in proper decorum for the grandson of the island's late, lamented governor.

Magenta had, fortunately, never met Elizabeth Turner, née Swann. She'd heard gossips at the street market commenting on the beauty's past improprieties: spurning a British Navy officer in favor of a blacksmith-turned-pirate, escaping prison to search the high seas for him, and consorting with those murderers against the East India Trading Company in a bloody battle, swords dripping.

"She pretends to be a lady," snaggle-toothed elders cackled. "She's as much a lady as my whore of a mother."

The prospect of becoming a lady, of entering a suitable marriage, did not appeal to Magenta. Nor did the other option presented by the women who monitored her daily activities: taking vows as a nun.

There had to be something more in life for a female with a curious mind and strong will.

"Maggie! Pay attention!" chided wizened Sister Angela. "Read what the catechism has to say about the Holy Trinity."

"To hell with the Trinity," the teen retorted, tossing the book on the floor.

As girls gasped in horror and boys sniggered behind their hands, Magenta Crux rose and stomped from the wood-slat structure.

The streets were oddly quiet for that mid-day hour. The shops, the taverns... not shuttered, but lacking the normal business traffic of a Friday. As she traversed the cobbles toward the water, powerful hands seized her biceps and jerked her into a gloomy dry goods store.

"What the devil!"

"Devil, indeed!" echoed the burly clerk. "Do you want to die?"

Magenta struggled against the iron grip. "Die? What do you mean?"

"A ship flying a pirate flag has been sighted in the harbor."

"So? Why isn't the fort firing on it?"

"Oh, you fool! A standing order prevents the military from provoking any confrontations with that sort. The people are tired of having to rebuild after every skirmish."

The young woman grasped the seriousness of the situation. She'd witnessed bombardment by cannon, looting, pillaging... the military did little to help in the recovery after being instrumental in creating the destruction.

"So, we're all hiding until the ship leaves?" she ventured.

"Precisely."

"To hell with that!" Kicking the clerk's shin, she fled the building when he released her, hopping around the floor in pain. As she breezed toward the docks,

she glimpsed frightened faces at the windows, miming their warnings with frantic gestures.

She ignored them, as she almost ignored the clothes flapping in the wind, strung on ropes between hitching posts, though the prospect of clean garments drying in this humidity ran slim. Magenta paused, scanned the street for prying eyes, then purloined a set of trousers and a cotton shirt. Huddled in an alley, she shed the frock that had marked her as a charge of the Sisters and secured the boyish garb at the waist with part of a discarded leather horse rein.

Rather than tuck her fiery red curls beneath a hat – not that one was available – she unhooked a butcher’s knife from beside the meat market’s door and sheared off the locks, stuffing them among debris cluttering the ground. Dousing her head in a barrel of rain water, she felt the mop tighten atop her cranium. A glance in a nearby trough confirmed she resembled a gangly lad of 15.

Good thing, too. As she rounded the corner, the sight of less than savory individuals bouncing down a rickety gangplank from a three-masted craft pocked with cannon ball-sized holes froze her in her tracks. Sucking air through clenched teeth, she presented a bold façade to these interlopers, the horrendous stench of their unwashed bodies wafting past.

“Cap’n Jack says to be quick about gatherin’ supplies,” grumbled a partially bald, stout figure. “He wants to get back to open seas with the tide.”

A parrot, riding the shoulder of a grisled elder, squawked, “Wind in your sails!”

Bearing full, greying mutton chop-style whiskers, a barrel-chested, shirtless crew member in a skin vest confirmed, “Aye!”

No more than a dozen, total, but all bore swords and expressions of disdain. Magenta exhaled loudly once they were out of earshot, whirling toward the nearest route of escape.

To be confronted by the strangest looking human she’d ever seen.

Hair a disheveled array of loose dark strands, dreadlocks, beads, silver medals and a sun-bleached reindeer shinbone fell from beneath a tri-corn hat. A faded red swatch of cloth obscured his forehead. Brown eyes framed by smudges of coal, for lack of a better description, met her gaze for a brief instant; she could tell he’d imbibed too much rum. His lips twitched nervously beneath an untrimmed black mustache, gold teeth flashing. A chin-beard had been braided with more beads. The dirty white shirt, frayed cloth weskit and stained frock coat did not impress, nor did the scuffed boots into which trousers with gaps in the seams were tucked.

He staggered sideways, his hands – silver rings on every digit – waving wildly, as if to maintain his balance against hurricane force winds.

“Did ye see a group of...”

Magenta supplied, “Pirates?”

“Aye, lad.”

She thrust a finger in a southerly direction.

Assuming a prayerful pose of gratitude, he jolted away.

Recognition dawned as she watched him unsuccessfully avoid stumbling on the uneven track. “Jack Sparrow!”

She didn’t realize she’d spoken aloud until he halted and spun toward her.

“*Captain* Jack Sparrow,” he corrected.

The curse in Spanish went unheeded.

“You know me?” he demanded, again inches from her face.

“I... know *of* you.”

“How? I’ve not visited Port Royal these five years.”

“I... am acquainted with a friend of yours.”

“Friend? More like an enemy, savvy?”

She gulped, “Perhaps.”

Before the conversation could continue, Sparrow’s crew reappeared, laden with parcels, crates of foodstuffs and barrels of rum and ale.

“We’re set, Cap’n,” proclaimed Mutton Chops.

“Excellent, Mr. Gibbs! We’re off, then.”

Without so much as a farewell scowl, Sparrow accompanied his jovial men toward the ship. An idea swirling inside her brain, Magenta trailed them at a discreet distance.

She loitered on the dock, afternoon shadows concealing her presence, until she noticed the crew had cleared the deck. Their snores – the result of partaking newly-purchased (or pilfered) libations – reached her ears, signaling safety.

Skulking up the gangplank, she ducked behind stairs leading to the quarter deck, waiting to be sure her intrusion hadn’t been discovered. Within the hour, Sparrow ascended to the wheel, bellowing for the crew to assemble. In this confusion, Magenta descended one of the ladders, finding herself in the captain’s cabin.

“Oh, bugger!” she lamented, unable to withdraw due to a clamor outside the door – some manner of bulky item being transported from above.

As the varnished panel swung inward, she darted beneath a carved walnut desk, tucking her legs awkwardly beneath her.

A heavy chest thumped on the floor, vibrating the boards. The men who'd carried it spoke not a word, but their labored breathing denoted the exertion. The door slammed; Magenta relaxed – albeit briefly.

The ship's accelerated movement nauseated her in short order. She scrambled from her hiding place and threw wide the casement, leaning over the stern and vomiting into the water, as Port Royal receded on the horizon.

Her stomach finally emptied of what limited nourishment the Sisters had provided to the orphans, the girl straightened, though her search for a kerchief to wipe her lips and water to rinse the taste from her tongue was thwarted by the presence of Jack Sparrow framed in the doorway.

“A stowaway, eh?” the pirate drawled.

“I...”

“You know what happens to stowaways, boy?”

Magenta lowered her eyes.

“They're thrown to the sharks. Though, as close as we are to shore, you might have a chance to survive the swim.”

“I... wanted to sign on to your crew... Cap'n,” she sputtered. “When I came aboard, you were asleep...”

Sparrow sniffed, “Convenient excuse.” He sized up the intruder, as if seeing her for the first time. “A runaway?”

“An orphan.”

“Your father a pirate?”

“I haven't a clue.”

“Never knew him?”

Auburn curls shook in the negative.

“Know how to navigate by the stars?”

“No, sir.”

“Can you handle a rope?”

“I'm not sure.”

“Can you cook?”

A smile crept over her lips. “That, I *can* do.”

“Good. We need a cook.” Sparrow waggled his thumb toward the passage. “Get to the galley.”

As she passed him, he patted her on the back – as if in welcome – then abruptly grabbed her shirt and drew the fabric taut.

“A woman!” he barked.

Shaking free, she pleaded, “No one needs to know.”

“Oh, they’ll know, soon enough,” he guffawed. “They’ll smell the truth of it like they smell gold on the ships we attack.”

“I’ll wager you’re wrong.”

She’d sparked his interest. “A wager?”

“Passage to your next port of call – even Tortuga, if need be – against you throwing me to the sharks.”

Brown orbs squinted, testing her sincerity. He extended his right hand.

“We have an accord.”

She clasped the filthy paw firmly, and he seemed pleased with her strength.

“Be off wi’ ye,” he ordered.

“Aye, sir.”

The crew didn’t realize they had an additional member until the evening meal was served. Rather than plain slabs of underdone meat and raw vegetables, they consumed a gently-spiced mixture that delighted the palate.

Converging below the main mast, they deliberated this new development.

“Cap’n!” cried Gibbs. “Who did the cookin’?”

Focused on a ship visible in his glass, Sparrow spat, “The new cabin boy.”

“Cabin boy?” the men chorused, except for the parrot’s, “Walk the plank!”

On his own initiative, the balding sailor dragged a tall companion with a patch over his right eye into the ship’s bowels. They unceremoniously escorted Magenta onto the deck, where two dozen satisfied souls offered a resounding cheer.

She felt herself blushing and retreated down the ladder.

One conundrum she could not resolve: where she would sleep. The men shared a common space in the hold, with hammocks suspended between beams. Such accommodations would be... uncomfortable, to say the least.

With Sparrow above deck, she risked sneaking into his cabin and making use of the narrow bunk against the stern bulkhead. Six bells had just chimed when she rolled over to find him lying beside her.

She bolted upright, jaw agape.

“If I don’t mind the arrangement, why should you?” he grunted.

“It’s... not proper.”

“If you wanted proper, you wouldn’t have stowed away on my ship.”

“True, but...”

“No buts. If I’d intended to... assert my manly prerogative, I would’ve already taken my turn at you, then let the crew have you for sport. I’m not that kind of pirate.”

“A pirate is a pirate.”

He shifted so their noses were barely an inch apart. “Not so, missy. There are those who abide by the Code, and those who don’t. Those who don’t deserve whatever the British Navy inflicts on them. Those who do should be left to live peaceably.”

“Except, you don’t live peaceably. You murder, steal...”

“We only steal from those who can afford to lose a portion of their excessive wealth.”

“Like the British government?”

“And the Spanish, or the French.”

“And, private citizens?”

“Those who travel the seas at their own expense are fair game.”

“What about the slavers?”

“The ones we’ve encountered, we’ve sunk, but only after bringing their captives aboard and freeing them at the nearest port.”

“Or allowing them to join you?”

“Some do, aye.”

Magenta deliberated whether Henry Turner’s tales of Jack Sparrow had been unfairly exaggerated.

“You’ll honor our accord?” he prompted.

“Aye, but...”

“Women always want to alter the established protocols...”

“It’s not that.”

“Then, what?”

“Would you please remove your sword and pistol in bed?”

The scabbard and weapon slid to the floor. He pecked her on the cheek and gave her his back.

Oddly, the crew didn’t question where Magenta slept as the weeks passed, presuming she had created a space in the galley. She noticed a unmistakable change in their demeanor, though, as if proper nourishment calmed their troubled spirits.

That is, until one balmy May evening.

Revelry after defeating a Spanish galleon en route from Mexico raised the men’s energy. They prepared for a feast, especially with the abundance of fresh food transferred from the now-torched ship.

Magenta created a concoction using the beans and other ingredients, flavored with native peppers. At the first bite, screams of anguish reached her ears. A mad rush for the water barrels preceded further hue and cry on deck.

“We’re poisoned, Cap’n!” came the clamor. “A foul plot!”

Dragged into their midst, Magenta tried to discount the burning sensation while stifling her laughter at their efforts to quench the heat of their tongues. Her words were drowned out by their accusations. Drawn swords pointed at her torso chilled her blood.

Pintel, the balding pirate, swiped at her. She recoiled, defenseless.

“Oy!” shouted Sparrow.

She detected the shimmer of forged steel as it flew toward her. She caught the gold-filigreed hilt and leveled it, inexpertly, toward the crew.

A moment later, Sparrow joined her, also armed. “Obviously, you’ve never partaken of Mexican fare,” he stated. “Break out a supply of rum, and wash away the pain.”

The stand-off lasted an eternal minute, then blades dropped and the throng dispersed. Magenta nearly collapsed, her knees abruptly gelatinous. As her sword clattered on the boards, Sparrow caught her by the belt. He guided her to the railing, urging her to breathe the salt air deeply.

Eventually, she recovered her composure. She patted Sparrow’s chest in gratitude, but he didn’t yield his hold.

“I’m... fine,” she insisted.

“Aye, you are.”

The kiss was passionate yet tender, lasting a prolonged second. When they parted, Magenta’s hazel eyes glared at the tipsy captain.

“What was that for?” she huffed, groping for the belaying pin wedged against her spine - a possible deterrent against aggression.

Her reaction clearly disappointed him. “Curiosity.”

“Well, I hope you’re satisfied. I appreciate you coming to my defense, but...”

“Always ‘but’.”

“Indeed.”

“Was it a ‘but’ that prompted some rejected lover to carve your cheek so deeply?” he queried, gently tracing the damaged flesh.

Relinquishing the potential weapon, she caressed the scar, managing a wry chuckle. “Oddly, it was that friend of yours.”

“Friend?”

“Or, more precisely, the son of that friend. Henry Turner.”

“Not... the brat of Will...”

“I believe that’s his father’s name.”

Sparrow contemplated the wound. “How...”

“We were at school together,” she explained. “Just children. He was pretending to be a pirate, flashing a dagger he’d borrowed from home.”

“He did that to you?”

“Accidentally.” She felt her gorge rising at the memory. “He was showing off for the other boys and made a broad sweep. I walked into the blade, and it caught me...”

Tears trickled warm along her nose.

Sparrow raised his sleeve to dry them. “It... gives you an air of mystery.”

Embarrassed, she slipped from his embrace and returned to the galley, the lingering taste of his lips a not unpleasant sensation.

A stop at Tortuga later that week offered her an opportunity to remain ashore; prospects for women in that bustling metropolis amounted to little more than prostitution. She opted to remain on the *Fionula*, this former British craft Sparrow had commandeered in the wake of losing his beloved *Black Pearl* to the mutinous Hector Barbossa and, later, the rogue Blackbeard.

Magenta might have loved Jack Sparrow, except for his continual drunkenness, his failure to wash regularly, and his cavalier attitude toward life in general. She did grow to love the wind on her face, standing in the bow as the crew scrambled through the rigging like monkeys. Rather than terrorizing the towns where they dropped anchor, she led surprisingly dignified outings to acquire the best food available.

Even more than spending their gold, these men enjoyed dining well. Some even took to not merely rinsing their hands and using the utensils she provided, but dressing like would-be gents at table.

Until, however, that fateful day when the British frigate bore down on them, cannons blazing.

She’d been peeling onions for a stew when the initial volley rocked the deck. Rushing into open air with a juice-soaked cleaver, she watched the crew struggle to extinguish a fire ignited when the damaged mainsail knocked hot coals onto the gunpowder. Sparrow stood on the quarterdeck, shouting orders and, as she climbed to him, screaming balls of iron dislodged the ladder and sent her over the railing into the splinter-capped waves.

Sparrow had strained to catch her, unsuccessfully. When her head broke water, the *Fionula* was already 100 yards distant, fleeing their demise.

Reluctantly, Magenta praised the Sisters who’d taught her to swim. She remained afloat until a longboat from the undamaged frigate fetched her. Rifles with bayonets aimed at her, she was declared a prisoner until they realized her true gender beneath the soaked shirt.

“Apologies, miss!” lamented the stiffly uniformed first mate. “We thought you...”

She chose not to dispute their assumption, subsequently provided with a comfortable cabin and suitable attire, unconcerned from whence they’d come.

A fortnight saw her deposited once more in Port Royal, where this contingent of sailors was stationed. A generous settlement from the captain made it possible for her to book passage within the month on a ship bound for Portsmouth. Knowing Jack Sparrow roamed those waters, she hoped against hope he would rescue her from an otherwise dreary existence, in vain.

The voyage transpired without sighting one pirate flag.

As for the crew of the *Fionula*, she always wondered if they missed her cooking.

The Madness of Creativity

The weirdness started with two houses: 1406 and 1410 Langley - identically constructed tri-level dwellings, one with red brick exterior, one beige vinyl siding - in a neighborhood of rental properties.

As Jinx Wallburn watched from her living room window across the street, Chris Johnson's family moved their scant furniture and belongings from one to the other.

The nine-year-old scrambled from the brown corduroy sofa, crossing the foyer to her father's office in what previous owners had used as a dining room.

"Daddy, what's going on?" the girl chirped.

"What do you mean?"

She thrust a bold finger at the open casement. Manny Wellburn brushed aside his longish black mop and stared through the glass.

"The Johnsons couldn't pay their rent, so they've been evicted," he explained.

"But, why are they moving next door?"

"You see, kiddo. I own 1406. Sam Hatch owns 1410. They couldn't pay me, but Sam's church is fronting the cost for them to have a roof over their heads."

"Should I be sad?" Jinx puzzled.

"Sad that I lost out on three months' rent, yes. Sad for the Johnsons? No."

Shuffling toward the kitchen, Jinx tried to grasp her father's attitude. After breakfast, she went outside to play in the yard. Chris, a year older but in her same class at school, crossed the street to join her.

The other girls who occupied desks in Mrs. Ridgely's third grade home room giggled at how Chris' brown wavy hair framed his dark, wide-set eyes and narrow chin, calling him "cute." Jinx gagged at such nonsense.

She sensed a different kind of darkness in his soul, an abiding anguish, unhappiness. "What's up?" she asked.

"It's the third time this year we've had to move," he lamented. "Getting pretty old."

"Doesn't your mom work?"

"Yeah. Two jobs. When Dad left, though, she was stuck with his debt. Been trying to pay it off ever since."

As the years passed, that seemed the story of Chris' life. The Johnsons' living arrangements changed on a regular basis, to the point where they owed almost every landlord in what barely qualified as a small city of 13,000 people.

Chris himself missed a lot of school but, as he'd told Jinx more than once, he hated the teachers because they really didn't want the kids to learn anything more than what they needed to pass state-required tests.

How he acquired the guitar, she never knew. She heard rumors among her classmates that he'd been seen by some older kids in a south end bar, playing with a band on Saturday night. They, like him, were under age, so she didn't trust such gossip. What would a 13-year-old be doing in that kind of smoke-filled dive, anyway? The cops would arrest him if it were true, as well as the owners.

But, then, the owner *was* a cop. She recalled her father complaining after a rather contentious city council meeting where parents protested corruption among the local authorities.

"What our public servants do in their off hours is their own business," stated one elected official - who wasn't re-elected that autumn.

Chris Johnson made quite a name for himself as a musical talent, well after he permanently dropped out of school. Jinx happened to see a concert advertised on the state college student union bulletin board the first semester of her freshman year, and bought a ticket, hoping to catch a glimpse of him.

A stained red tank-top revealed arms covered with random tattoos, multiple piercings in his ears, with safety pins dangling from the holes. His brown mane looked like it hadn't been shampooed in weeks, lank and uncombed.

She'd grown into a pretty young woman, and Chris noticed her from the stage between numbers. He instructed a security guard to deliver a note to her seat, inviting her backstage during the intermission.

Not that the pair found a quiet corner to reminisce. Technicians and groupies milled about, shouting and swearing - and drinking, Jinx discovered. A half-empty vodka bottle sat beside Chris' spare Fender Stratocaster. She didn't want to think about the baggie filled with pills.

"What's happened to you?" she wondered.

His cavalier response raised goosebumps on her arms. "Hey, it pays the rent."

"And your mom's old debts?"

"Uh-huh. She lives in Chicago now, a condo in a high-rise overlooking Lake Michigan."

"That's nice."

Chris took a swig from the bottle and offered it to Jinx. "I thought you'd be happy for me. A kid with little book learning, making good. Hell, I can't even read music!"

"But, at what cost?" She waved away the liquor.

He leaned close; his cigarette-tinged breath made her shudder. "You were my only true friend through those... really tough stretches, Jinx. I need your help."

Something within her longed for the simpler days of childhood, when they climbed trees or played Robin Hood in the wooded expanse beyond the subdivision. "Anything." She spoke the word without considering the consequences.

"We're heading on a European tour next month. I want you to come with me, to help me recover what little sanity I've retained."

"You want to get clean?"

He clasped her hands and Jinx noticed his trembling. "It's too crowded in my head. It's like an unending circus, and I want it to stop."

In that moment, she pitied him, while simultaneously realizing her own limitations. He needed an addiction counselor, at minimum, or, better, a psychiatrist. What good could she do...

"Please, Jinx," he begged.

A booming proclamation over the loudspeaker that the show would resume in two minutes left her sitting alone.

Fortuitous, perhaps. Despite the excessive decibel level, she had time to contemplate leaving school, leaving the country, leaving behind everything familiar, upon which she relied for comfort.

Her parents would be furious.

Still, she felt about Chris as he did about her - they'd been friends, untainted by the conditions most friends imposed on each other. He'd related how his older sister had resorted to prostitution, just to put food on the table when his mom was fired for being late to her job at the department store once too often because he'd been ill. She'd listened to his insights after he'd read a book on abnormal psychology - at the age of 12! - and self-diagnosed stress-related issues which continued to manifest as he passed through puberty.

She'd witnessed, first-hand, the impact on those who dealt with addictive personalities day-in, day-out. Her uncle had plunged into the depths of an addiction to pain killers after a bad car accident broke his left leg. Jinx's mother, two sisters and their spouses had tried intervention after intervention, without luck. He'd died of an overdose the previous summer, aged 42.

If she could walk with Chris, guide him toward the professional treatment he needed, provide a bit of healthy companionship and strength...

When thunderous applause faded an hour later, she hadn't budged from the stool, staring at the concrete block wall. Chris breezed past, scooping her upright.

"We're heading for the club," he declared lightly.

She resisted, gripping his forearm. “No, we’re not.”

He spun, right eyebrow arched. “Eh?”

“We’re going home.”

“You mean, it’s yes?”

She nodded short blond curls, and found herself in the midst of a grateful embrace.

His kiss - not at all like the time he’d pulled her behind the garage and pecked her on the lips at her thirteenth birthday party - revolted her. She freed herself from his hold, wiping her mouth with her sleeve.

“What’s the matter?” he grumbled. “I thought...”

“I don’t want your drunken, drug-fueled affection. Once we get you sober...”

Within seconds, she realized how difficult the task would be. The band’s lead singer, Tim Benton, appeared with a girl under each arm. “What’s the hold up, Chris? We’re gonna lose the buzz!”

The guitarist glanced from Jinx to his associate, hopes dashed.

“I... gotta go,” Chris stated.

Her tone firm, she seized his wrist with unyielding digits. “No, you don’t.”

“Who’s this bitch, Chris? She got something on you?” Benton snarled.

Despite the difference in their height - and weight - Jinx raked his stubbly jaw with a deft backhand, knocking him, and his women, off balance. “From now on, *you’ve* got nothing on Chris, except during rehearsals and performances.”

Shock morphed into anger, and Benton’s fist aimed inexpertly at Jinx’s nose. Chris stepped in to block the punch, taking the blow in the chest. Jinx held him steady, appreciating the gallantry as a sign of his determination.

“I’ll see you in London on the first, Tim,” Chris asserted, hugging Jinx’s waist.

Benton reclaimed his companions and backed toward the exit. “Whatever... this is about, it better not fuck up your groove.”

“If anything, it’ll improve it!” He was chuckling as he turned to gaze down at Jinx. The tears in her green eyes confused him.

“I’m okay,” she sniffed. “It’s gonna be a long, hard road.”

“As long as you’re with me, I’ll be okay.”

Looking back, ten years later, Jinx wished she could’ve told the documentary producer that Chris had gone cold-turkey off drink, drugs and smokes. He’d shown initial enthusiasm, and kept himself straight for eight months. When Jinx had to fly home from Rome for her father’s funeral after an unexpected

stroke, Chris fell off the wagon in a big way, winding up in jail and paying a stiff fine for injuring a young man in a bar fight.

The second time around, recovery proved more difficult. Jinx stood firm and Chris weathered the storm, though he frequently claimed the “circus” inside his head threatened his sanity.

Then, their son - Christopher Jinx Johnson - was born.

The couple never married; Jinx believed that would add an unnecessary complication to their relationship and the task before them. Chris continued to play, he started composing his own music, and produced a solo album, as if driven by some unseen creative madness to keep busy. They bought a home in Malibu, and another in Geneva, Switzerland.

The damage of years imbibing substances, though, had taken its toll. Jinx detected Chris stammering during interviews, and forgetting lyrics on stage. She had to force him to see a specialist, who ordered the brain scan that detected the diminished capacity of his functions.

Eventually confined to a wheelchair, one blustery California night, Chris had maneuvered himself from his bedroom, throwing himself down the curved marble staircase. Jinx had been awakened by a resounding clap of thunder, rushed along the hall and found him sprawled on the terrazzo floor, skull crushed.

Insurance funds created a foundation for musicians seeking addiction recovery. Jinx returned to school and took degrees in psychology. She vowed never again to watch anyone self-medicate in an effort to quell the madness sparked by creativity, and vice versa.

Her father’s death the following summer included a bizarre bequest: the house located at 1406 Langley. Having sold the other properties, she willingly moved into the modest residence, with its far more pleasant memories of her youth.

When young Chris, age 11, plucked his father’s prize Fender from the living room display cabinet, Jinx bit back a protest, praying the future would not mirror the past.