

Broken Promises, Broken People

By Sonny Kohet

We are all of us broken people, but we don't have to live broken lives.

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John and Lorraine

Lori sat at her cherry wood kitchen table. She loved how cherry wood changed, became darker over time, as if the furniture were alive, transforming as it aged along with her.

How it changed depended on light and the characteristics of each tree, so her furniture was matching, but not identical. It gave her home a unique character. The same motivation for the teal highlights in her hair.

She bit into her grilled cheese on toast, savoring the simple flavor. After depressing the plunger, she poured the coffee into her cup, raised it to her nose and inhaled. Lori screwed her nose up. *Musty cardboard. Must find a better coffee.*

She opened her iPad, typed coffee in the search field and tapped go. A blog caught her eye. *Judy Vernon. Didn't know she wrote blogs, too.*

When Lori reached the end of *The John Farrington Blend* blog, she tapped a link to a blog for cookies that paired well with the coffee.

Alice's White Chocolate, Mandarin, and Macadamia Cookies: Each Bite a Different Version of the Dance.

She finished her breakfast while she read. *Those cookies sound delicious. Think I'll get some, and that coffee too.*

Lori entered Alice's Bakery and was surrounded by the sweet, yeasty aroma of bread and cookies. *...mmm love that smell.*

There was a queue. It took fifteen minutes for her to be served. She didn't mind. The bakery smelled welcoming, like home, but whose home she didn't know, neither she nor her mother baked.

After making her purchase, she headed for Coffee Roasters. It wasn't far. Entering the store, an intense, spiced burnt caramel aroma of roasting coffee assaulted her senses after the subtle ambrosia of the bakery.

As she waited to be served, another customer stepped up to the counter beside her.

The lanky, almost gaunt guy behind the counter asked, "What can I get you, ma'am?"

"Hi, I umm... want to try that John Farrington Blend coffee I read about."

The spindly guy, who seemed all arms and legs, smiled and glanced at the man standing beside her. "There's a one kilogram minimum on blended coffee."

"Okay." *He looks like a stick insect.* "What makes this blend so special?" Lori asked.

The stick insect shrugged. "Ask John," he said, nodding towards the man beside her.

She looked at him for the first time. He was smiling. She returned his smile.

The man reached out his hand. She took it and shook it lightly. "John Farrington," he said.

Her gaze shifted to his eyes. *Kind eyes, warm and honest.* Her smile broadened. *I like him.* "Lorraine Galotti... Lori. So what makes your coffee so special?"

John shrugged. "I wish I could impress you with a vast knowledge of coffee, but the truth is, I got lucky."

A warmth filled her chest as his smile extended to his eyes.

"I'll have to try for myself, I guess," Lori said.

"Tell you what, let me treat you. Then if you don't like it, you've lost nothing." To the stick insect, he said, "Ed, put that on my account, and I'll take two kilos."

Ed nodded. "Sure, John."

Lori said, "That's too kind. It's really not..."

"How do you brew your coffee?"

"I use a French press."

"An Italian percolator is best. It releases the aroma which maximizes the experience."

"I'll get one."

"Ed, can you throw in an Italian percolator with the lady's coffee?"

"*Lori*, and you don't need to do that."

"*Lori*. It's nothing. I want you to fully enjoy the experience."

She cast an appraising eye over him. "I'd like to *fully enjoy* the experience."

Ed bagged their purchases in Coffee Roasters' distinctive burlap carry bags.

John picked up both from the counter. "I'll carry it to your car."

"Didn't bring my car. I'll flag a taxi. I don't live far."

"In that case, I'll drop you home. On my way to work, so it's no trouble."

"That's unnecessary. You've done enough."

"All part of the service, ma'am," John joked.

Lori studied him. *In good shape*. She moistened her lips while she considered his offer, but didn't protest further, in case he listened.

John used the remote to unlock his Buick Lacrosse Essence. After placing their purchases in the trunk, he opened the door for her instead of telling her to get in.

Clean and well maintained, like him. John was ticking all of Lori's boxes.

He checked out her legs, perhaps hoping for a glimpse up her skirt, as she swung them into the car. She flashed him a smile and thanked him.

"Just here on the right," Lori said as they reached her row house. What it lacked in size, it made up for in location.

John pulled over, popped the trunk and was opening her door, almost before she had time to unfasten her seat belt. As she swung her legs out of the car, she saw his eyes rivetted on the gap between them. *Did I flash my panties?*

Lori said, "Have you got time to come in for a coffee? The least I can do."

Their eyes connected. "Sure, love a coffee. It's Saturday, doesn't matter what time I go to work."

She waited while John retrieved her items from the trunk and then led him into the house. One side of her mouth curled into a smile as she sensed him checking out her ass.

Lori unboxed and rinsed the Italian percolator, and John got it going, explaining the steps as he did. *Simple enough.*

“Take a seat John, I’ll get the cups, and I bought some cookies... Milk and sugar?”

“Just milk,” John said as he sat at the kitchen table.

As she took their cups and a milk pitcher from the cupboard, she observed him looking around the room. He smiled, and his eyes settled on her again.

Lori could always feel when men were watching her. Sometimes it made her cringe. Mostly she was indifferent, but John’s gaze warmed her.

The percolating coffee filled the room with the aroma of nutty burnt caramel. Lori inhaled. *My god! Amazing. Nothing like that shit I had this morning.*

She placed the cups and milk pitcher, now filled, on the table and a trivet for the coffee. *Need to be careful with cherry wood.* Lori extracted the cookies from her bag and arranged them on a plate, which she placed on the table.

John smiled. “My favorite cookies.”

“There was a link to them on the review I read about your coffee.”

Lori retrieved the coffeepot from the stove and placed it on the trivet. John poured their coffee.

She raised her cup and once more inhaled. *Wonderful.* She took a sip. “Fuck me! That’s amazing.”

John was smiling with a spark of amusement in his eye. Lori studied him and then realized what she’d said. *Happy I like his coffee, or did I unintentionally put an image in his mind?* Still looking at him, she reached for a cookie and nibbled it. *Wow!* Finishing the cookie, she slowly and suggestively licked the crumbs from her fingers.

“Delicious!” She took another and assessed the man sitting opposite.

Large frame, but fit, dark brown neat collar length hair, with eyes almost the same color. Clean shaven, and an easy smile. A polo shirt, dark blue shoulders but fading to light blue at the bottom, and dark blue slacks. She recalled he wore polished black shoes. Lori always paid attention to men’s shoes; how a man cares for his shoes, told her a lot about him. He wore a wedding ring, and a *LIGE* watch with a dark brown leather band.

His appearance revealed everything she needed to know, but she asked. “So what’s the John Farrington story?”

“Not much to tell. Married, two kids. The usual.”

“Been married long?”

“About twenty years. You?”

“Divorced over ten years ago, and glad to see the back of the lying bastard.”

John nodded. “Seeing anyone?”

“Not currently. Happily married?” Lori was fishing. Her favorite answer was ‘sometimes’.

John shrugged, “I suppose... haven’t thought about it.”

That’s a lie. “Let me guess, the magic has gone...”

“Never was any magic. Comfortable and compatible. She’s a good woman.”

This was not a new conversation for Lori. After her divorce, she decided life was less complicated playing with someone else’s husband than having her own. Her last ten years had been a series of affairs with married men.

Experience told her what was coming next. She attempted to control her words, but they were out of her mouth. “And after all this time, she still doesn’t understand you?” She cringed at herself and took a sip of coffee in an attempt to hide it.

John sipped his coffee too and locked his gaze on hers before responding. He smiled. “She understands me better than I understand myself. It’s just...”

“Just what?” *There’s always a reason for them to justify cheating to themselves.* Not that Lori cared.

John’s eyes bore into her soul, but she refused to look away. She matched his gaze and waited.

John broke eye contact first. He took a sip of coffee and ate a cookie. She could see from his expression he was thinking and was content to wait in the comfortable silence. *He’s different. Not like the others. Something about him.*

He sighed. “To be honest, I *have* been thinking about things. There’s nothing wrong with my marriage. She’s a good wife and I try to be a good husband. It’s... We don’t feel like a couple. More like siblings, I guess.”

“Do you still have sex?” Some may consider the question forward, but Lori knew a woman who asked blunt direct questions intrigued married men. ‘Refreshing honesty’ they called it.

“Occasionally. Neither of us seems interested.”

“Sounds incestuous. Do you love her?”

John shrugged again. “I do, but it feels like the way I love my sisters. I think it should feel different.”

“How many sisters do you have?”

“Two, and our Judy. We sort of adopted her into the family.”

Lori gave him a quizzical look.

“A friend of my late brother Frank, he passed a couple of years ago. Frank sometimes brought strays home who became part of the family. Our Judy and, when he was at college, our Billy. He’s gone now too.”

“Sorry to hear about your brother.”

Lori reached out and rested her hand on John’s arm, then frowned. *Frank Farrington? Sounds familiar.* She excused herself, going to her study. She glanced at the bookshelf, also cherry wood. It was easy to find the book she was looking for. She removed it from the shelf and examined the cover. *Frank Farrington: A Man of Rare Character and Integrity.*

She returned to the kitchen and sat down, placing the book on the table. “Is this your brother?”

“Yes, Frank was a rare man.”

Lori nodded and studied the book cover again. *Oh, Judy Vernon.* “Is that your Judy?”

John smiled. "Yes, that's *our* Judy."

Explains the coffee blog. Lori glanced at their now empty cups. "Time for another coffee?" *Hope he does.*

John glanced at his watch, thought for a moment, and then nodded. "Always have time for another coffee." He winked and smiled. She was sure she caught a glint in his eye.

Over their second cup, John asked, "What about you, any family?"

Lori nodded, but drank some coffee before answering. "A sister..." She sipped more coffee. "Haven't spoken to her in ten years. Not since I came home from work early and found my husband waist deep inside of her."

He appeared to be about to say something, but didn't.

"Mom always nags me to forgive her. Maybe I should. She did me a favor. Turned out she wasn't the only one."

After this, they drank their coffee in comfortable silence. Lori smiled, pleased he didn't give her some bullshit line about her husband being crazy to cheat on a fine woman like her, like most men did. Usually, while they were cheating on their own wives with Lori.

John said, "Both my sister's husbands cheated on them. Susie divorced hers. Jenny's still married. It doesn't seem to bother her." He finished his coffee.

Lori nodded. "I think husbands who don't cheat on their wives are the exception." She contemplated the man sitting opposite. *He's an exception.* Their eyes connected again. *He's also my type.*

John looked away. "Guess I better get myself to work, need to finish a report. Umm, perhaps we can exchange numbers. I'd like to have coffee with you again sometime."

"I'd like that, John, very much."

After exchanging numbers, they stood and walked to the door. Lori hugged him. "Thank you, John, that's exceptional coffee." *And you're an exceptional man.*

They kissed, but who kissed whom? Lori wasn't sure. Minutes later, they were undressing each other on their way to the bedroom. It took her by surprise. She'd resolved not to seduce him, not that she didn't want to, and he'd not given her the usual lines married men did when they wanted to bed her.

John Farrington studied the woman snoring softly beside him. Long black wavy hair, with a few teal highlights, not many, but enough to be distinctive. Clear hazel eyes—closed now—but alive and engaged, with a hint of mischief. Slightly olive skin, Mediterranean heritage, he supposed, and full lips.

She was his type. Her slim body was not unlike his wife's, but she was curvier with larger breasts, which he preferred. Her breasts were what John considered the perfect size, and firm, made more alluring by large, dark nipples. He smiled, remembering how they'd hardened in his mouth.

John glanced around the room. He hadn't paid attention when he first came in. His eyes focused only on the woman he was about to make love to. Thirstily drinking in every detail of her petite, yet curvy body.

The room was tidy, with standard bedroom furniture, which, although apparently solid wood, had soft lines. Cherry wood, he guessed. He stroked the smooth surface of the bedside table as he reached for his phone. *Quality and class, just like her.*

He switched his phone on. After it powered up, he selected the contact at the top of the list and sent a text.

#Caught up here. Late home. Leave dinner in oven.#

The response was fast and brief, as he hoped.

#K#

He turned his phone off and returned it to the bedside table. *What kind of world do we live in when we need to abbreviate OK?*

He glanced at the woman who lay beside him. Her eyes now open, looking at him. *Awake. Fuck.*

“Having second thoughts?” she asked.

“No.”

“Feeling guilty?”

“No.”

“I had a puppy once. Chewed up a cushion. When I walked into the living room, he stopped what he was doing and looked at me, trying to pretend it wasn’t him. You have that same look on your face.”

“I, um... I needed to tell her I’d be late.”

“And thinking of her made you guilty about...”

“No, no. Not at all. That’s not it. I feel strange texting her when I’m with you.”

“By *her*, I assume you mean your wife.”

“Yes, I...”

“Then say your wife. You don’t need to belittle her. I knew you were married. What’s her name?”

“er... Alison... Ali.”

“And you think I’ll be pissed off you texted Ali to tell her you’ll be late home and not to worry?”

“I... it’s what I always do if I’m going to be late.”

“I’m not pissed off John, it shows me you’re considerate. You didn’t lie to me. Never lie to me, even if you’re protecting me from the truth. I can’t bear being lied to, makes me feel like a fool.”

“Okay, Lori.”

“You’re not the first married man I’ve been involved with. You have obligations and commitments. If this is more than a onetime thing...”

“I’d like it to be.”

Lori’s hand lightly caressed his chest, running her fingers through his soft hairs. She smiled. “So would I, based on this afternoon’s performance.”

John returned her smile. *I like her. Can't remember Ali ever making me feel I excelled in bed.* He slid his arm under her neck and gently pulled her closer.

"If we're going to have a relationship, I'll take a back seat to your family during holidays and that sort of thing. Won't like it, but I'll understand. Not all bad, mightn't get holidays, but I won't get your bad moods and dirty laundry either. What I will get is nice hotels, fancy restaurants and sexy lingerie."

What's she saying? Is that what she expects from me?

"God, John, the look on your face. No, that's not what I demand. It's what experience tells me will happen."

"Do you want me to take you to dinner?"

"Not tonight." She moved closer, and her hand eased its way down over his stomach to fondle his package. "I want to know if you're up for a second innings."

Love the way she touches me. John hardened. "Third innings."

"You counting?" She winked. "Kiss me."

At the knock on the door, Lori pulled her robe closed and went to collect her dinner. She didn't want to give the delivery guy any ideas.

She unpacked her delivery. Minestrone, spaghetti bolognese and garlic bread from the local Italian restaurant, Bella Roma. She retrieved her parmesan cheese and shook it over everything.

Lori was hungry. She ate in a contented silence, contemplating the man she met that day. She smiled. *I intended to sample The John Farrington Blend and ended the day sampling John Farrington.*

Art History

Ali examined her image in the mirror, striking in her tailored black suit. The jacket was the length of a short skirt, tapered at the waist, and could be worn as a dress.

She closed her eyes and imagined herself wearing only the jacket, naked underneath, and releasing the buttons to reveal her delicious nakedness to the love of her life. She shook her head to chase the fantasy away. *Not the time.* She released the buttons and smiled at her reflection.

The slacks were form fitting, which Ali wanted, but a little more than she'd intended. Like tight-fitting jeans, they hugged and highlighted everything, not only the shape of her ass. Her jacket length meant that other than herself, only Judy would see her outline.

The slacks loosened into a slightly flared bottom, revealing black high-heeled shoes. Not expensive, *Dream Pairs*, with black lace over the toes and around the heels, straps studded with rhinestones.

A white shirt and a black lace inlaid tie—both silk—completed her ensemble. The occasion required a specific outfit. Ali was a lipstick lesbian.

She sighed. *Why are hummingbirds dancing in my stomach?* She left her room in the hotel suite she and Judy shared for the occasion, and tentatively knocked on Judy's door. *Hope she approves.* They agreed not to see each other's outfits until the day of the wedding.

"Come in, darling," Judy called.

Ali opened the door, stepped inside, and froze. She stared at the ethereal vision.

Judy stood in the center of the room wearing a décolleté, flowing white satin wedding gown, trimmed with pearls and lace. Her veil, attached to a headband of miniature roses in white and pink, sat on a polystyrene head on the bedside table. The dress wasn't special, a wedding dress similar to that worn by thousands of women, but to Ali, the image was celestial.

The simple elegance of the woman she remained infatuated with brought tears to her eyes. Ali had never seen such beauty. Neither moved. Their eyes, not for the first time, creating hypnotic handcuffs.

Finally, Judy said, "You look amazing."

"Made it for you, and for the occasion. You look like... I never imagined heaven before, but looking at you..."

They stepped closer. Ali unbuttoned her jacket and pulled it open, revealing the snug fit of her slacks.

Judy gasped. "Oh... what? They're tight."

"I'll keep the jacket closed."

They moved to each other, lips touched, mouths opened, and tongues danced. Consumed by passion and desire, they caressed each other through their clothes, struggling to maintain control. When Judy's fingers traced her outline through her slacks, every nerve in Ali's body screamed in ecstasy. She was ready to explode...

No. No. No. Not like this. Not here, not now. She pulled herself back from Judy. They stared at each other, panting as they battled to control their unfulfilled desire.

When their breathing calmed and their desire settled into its usual controlled state, Ali said, “Let me help you with your veil, and we need to reapply our makeup.”

The white limousine stopped outside a nondescript square, aging gray apartment complex. Ali and Judy sat in back, holding hands. They hadn’t spoken since leaving their suite, each lost in thought.

“Are you sure this is what you want?” Ali asked. “Why don’t we just elope? We can.”

Judy smiled. “Not an unappealing idea, but we both know this is the way it’s meant to happen.”

Ali nodded, and spoke in almost a whisper, “I know, darling.”

“You know I love you. Nothing will change that.”

“I knew long before you told me, but I enjoy hearing you say it.”

Ali alighted from the car and then assisted Judy, helping her with her veil. She stepped back to examine the bride.

The satin and pearls of Judy’s wedding dress shimmered in the bright sunlight, creating a silver/white aura. Ali had never seen such beauty, a sharp intake of air as Judy, not for the first time, took her breath away. The image burned itself into Ali’s soul, never to be forgotten. A tear escaped and made its way down her cheek.

How can beauty inspire tears?

Judy brushed Ali’s tear away. “You’re handsome today.”

Regaining her composure, Ali asked, “You ready?”

Judy nodded. “I am.” She took Ali’s arm and together they walked through the nondescript, freshly painted, light gray entrance, into The Secret Garden.

Judy marveled at the beauty of a courtyard filled with rose gardens and surrounded by hanging roses from six floors of balconies, like a waterfall of green, white, pink, and red cascading from above.

That her family owned such a hidden gem remained difficult for her to comprehend. It reminded her of the rose garden hidden by trees in People’s Park, where Frank blessed her and Ali. That garden felt spiritual, but this was like leaving the city and stepping into a fairytale.

With Ali holding her arm, the two began their rehearsed, measured walk to the gazebo—covered with climbing roses—towards the back. *Why isn’t it in the center?* Color and fragrance encompassed them. The azure sky flaunted a single small white fluffy cloud. Judy imagined it was Frank watching her.

She glanced at Ali and then looked at the wedding party in the gazebo. Three bridesmaids, Susie, Jenny and Becky. John Farrington was the Best Man, Burt Rogers and Darnell groomsmen, to even up the numbers.

Perfect. Never expected this day would happen, but it’s perfect. I blame you, Frank, wherever you are.

As Judy's father had passed, Myron suggested Ali should be the one to give her away. She liked the idea.

Judy smiled at Myron, waiting for her, although she doubted he'd notice beneath her veil.

Judy Vernon stood opposite Frank's Diner, gazing up at the building, a part of her daily routine. She lived by routines, but believed she lived a spontaneous life.

It was two years since Frank Farrington left her, and six months since she'd married Myron.

Art and Ruth gave them the old, heritage-protected building as a wedding present. Judy still had difficulty coming to terms with owning a city building. *Who gives people a building for a wedding present?*

After they married, Myron moved into Judy's apartment, and rented out his furnished apartment via Airbnb as an experiment in using that platform for short-term rentals. Satisfied with the result, Burt Rogers will establish a small division for Airbnb rentals.

The only change to her apartment was the rearrangement of the office and the addition of a matching leather inlaid mahogany desk. She'd needed to cull her wardrobe to make room for his clothes.

They maintained their morning routines. Myron either played squash or ran the ten miles to his office in another family-owned building each morning, except for the Sabbath. Judy worked out at home, alternating between an exercise routine and yoga, before heading to Frank's Diner for breakfast.

Art and Ruth hadn't insisted she convert to Judaism. Judy respected them, their culture, and the Sabbath. Enough for them. Besides, Myron couldn't father children. They loved her as a daughter.

Their garden wedding was in the courtyard of one of the family-owned buildings. Ruth had suggested the location. Judy was astounded to discover The Secret Garden hidden in the courtyard of an old square building.

"The building was run down when we acquired it. The courtyard, little more than a garbage dump," Art explained. "Mama insisted we create the garden. She said, 'The tenants will respect the buildings more if they live in a garden instead of a dump.' She was right, and along with maintenance, we transformed what was little more than a slum Papa acquired cheap into a heritage-listed building.

"We saved the building. If not for what Mama and Papa did to resurrect what is a solid, well-made structure, it would have remained a slum and been torn down years ago."

Judy learned the family owned seventeen buildings, mostly in the older, original parts of the city. Run-down, poor areas, popular again because of their proximity to the city center.

Judy was in awe that the family owned so many buildings, but Art told her she needed to put it into perspective.

"It's taken nearly a century, and four generations, to acquire our buildings. We purchase them cheap in circumstances similar to the building by the docks which houses The Shipyard and The Old Seaman's Lodge, acquired to help a friend in financial difficulties, or The Secret Garden building which had been a rundown slum.

“We’re not property speculators,” Art explained. “We’re landlords. We don’t buy and sell buildings, and we give priority to repaying debt. Most city buildings are really owned by banks, which is how Papa described a mortgage. We own ours outright. Not carrying debt makes us recession proof. In times of recession or localized depression, we acquire buildings when prices are forced down and people struggle to service their debt.

“Some people who buy properties, just take, and give nothing back. They milk every cent they can get out of them, then either knock them down and redevelop the site or sell them off cheaply. Our buildings have been providing a steady income for nearly a century.”

Art’s approach to buildings was the same as Myron’s approach to business. Build a solid business over time, don’t carry debt and don’t chase a quick profit.

Myron explained, “Most people think business is about short-term gains, it’s not. Our family has been in business for a century. We’ve seen many businesses come and go during that time. In a hundred years, we’ll still be in business.”

Judy understood their businesses and admired the way they conducted themselves. They took care of people and helped the fallen get back on their feet. She was proud; of Myron, their family, their businesses, and their buildings.

Judy stood opposite Frank’s Diner every morning, and stared at her building, struggling to understand it was *hers*. After a short time, she’d cross the road and enter *her* diner.

Frank’s Diner had been remarkably successful and was popular with extended families and work groups. Darnell’s reinvention of 1950s standard fare was the subject of many favorable reviews, which helped build the business. Myron and Judy transferred twenty percent of the ownership to Rebekah and Darnell, years ahead of schedule.

Judy entered and went to the corner booth, which was always reserved for her. Situated by the window in the same position her sofa had occupied in Kansas Café. On the wall above the booth, a memorial plaque to Frank Farrington.

The Farrington family, who often frequented the diner, were always given ‘Frank’s Booth.’

The booths had pale blue, white trimmed high-backed vinyl benches, and the tabletop was Ash Wood Formica. Pastels with white walls and lots of light from the windows created an open, inviting atmosphere.

Polished chrome trimmed the tables, bench seating, counter, the fixtures, the fittings in the service areas, and even the counter stools. The gleaming chrome made the diner appear very clean.

The décor was reminiscent of a fifty-seven Chevy Bel-Air, but tastefully done, not like the diner in *Pulp Fiction*.

As she did every day before she sat down, Judy glanced at Frank’s Plaque and said, “Good morning, Frank.”

She hadn’t seen Frank Farrington since Kansas Café closed, probably a good thing. Nevertheless, she still talked to him every day while sitting and working in his booth. Her way of voicing her thoughts, bouncing ideas off herself.

Suzy Q approached Judy to confirm her order.

Suzy Q

Xu Qianli stared at the results of the University Entrance Exam on her computer. *How did I do so poorly?* Now, her only chance for an education was a shitty tier three university in a crappy small city. Better than nothing, but it wouldn't be easy to find a decent job with a low-level degree.

A gasp from behind startled her. Ma was looking over her shoulder at the results. Xu Qianli cringed and braced herself when she felt Ma stiffen. She knew what was coming. The hard slap on the side of her face nearly knocked her from the chair.

"Lazy, foolish girl, I told you to study hard. You never listen to what I tell you. What life can you have now?"

"Maybe I can find a tier three university somewhere?"

"No money for fees. Ba's business failed, like all his others. Without a good education, you'll end up with a worthless husband like your Ba."

Xu Qianli knew what this meant. No degree, even from a low-level university, would see her working in a supermarket. Long hours, low wages, and her mother would spend the rest of her life rubbing her nose in it.

Ma continued, "You'll go back to high school and do it again next year."

And you'll fill every waking moment, criticizing me for not studying harder.

"Next time, you must study harder. With a good result, you can try for a scholarship to a *Normal University* (a second-tier government university system) and become a teacher. Not high pay, but a stable life."

Ma went to the kitchen, leaving a scathing trail of disappointment with her lazy, useless daughter in her wake.

In desperation, Xu Qianli called Aunt Mei Mei. Her mother's younger sister, who lived in America somewhere. *Hopefully Mei Mei can pay my fees?*

Mei Mei answered quickly, apparently surprised her niece would call instead of sending a message as usual. "Qianli? What's wrong?"

She explained the situation, adding, "I couldn't bear going back to school and having Ma... you know what Ma's like. If you could cover my fees for university, I'll pay you back as soon as I find work."

"Not sure a third-tier university is the best option for you. Maybe you can come here. Study in America? I can't afford a high-level university, but it'll be an overseas education. Give you a better future."

Xu Qianli's head was spinning with possibilities. *I'll be away from Ma.* "That would be..." Her excitement dissipated, "but Ma won't agree."

Mei Mei said, "I'll talk to Da Jie. I can convince her. Better for her if she can tell people you're studying in America, instead of returning to high school because your result was bad."

"Do you think she'll agree?"

"Yes, don't worry."

Aunt Mei Mei lived in the city, so Suzy Q lived with her aunt and went to City College, which was unusual for international students.

Mei Mei explained, “It’s an overseas education, much better than going to a low-level university in China. Besides, all employers in our hometown will know is that you went to college in America. You’ll have a good future.”

Suzy Q enjoyed the freedom of living in America, and she reveled living with Mei Mei, who’d been in America long enough to drop the traditional custom of controlling the younger generation.

Yeye had told her that children are like sapling trees; they need to be bound tightly so they grow straight. Ma never gave her freedom. If she went out with her friends, Ma would have been messaging her, telling her it was time to come home to study.

Suzy Q disconnected her WeChat video call with Ma and stared at her iPhone. *Fucking Bitch*. All Ma had done her whole life was criticize and compare her to others. Speaking with Ma always made her feel like a failure. *Why do I call her?* She sighed. *Perhaps Ma’s right, or maybe she doesn’t want me to repeat her mistakes*. Ma always seems so disappointed, with Ba, with her life and with her daughter.

Better get ready for work. She opened her wardrobe and considered what to wear.

Suzy Q inspected herself in the mirror. A short powder blue dress with white trim and white bows, in the style of a sailor suit, becoming a pleated schoolgirl skirt from the waist. Six white petticoats protruded from the dress by an inch. She wore long white socks and red shoes. She sat an aqua wig, complete with bangs, on her head, making sure it covered her black hair completely. Her red lipstick matched her shoes, her powder blue eyeshadow, her dress.

Suzy Q’s passion was Japanese Anime. *Anime girls are so pretty*. She owned a dozen such outfits, each emulating a different Anime character. In America, it made her different, exotic, and interesting. People stopped and stared at her. They thought she looked like a cartoon character. Sometimes they took her photo. People noticed her. Back home, she was just another Chinese girl into cosplay, and no one would give her a second glance.

Judy smiled when Suzy Q approached her booth. *Quirky personality, curious, although sometimes she asks inappropriate questions*. She was amused by Suzy Q’s lack of understanding of the subtleties of using tone to change meaning in English. Like how tone can make ‘sir’ sound like ‘asshole’.

“Good morning, Judy,” Suzy Q said as she reached the booth. “Would you like your usual?”

Her outfit’s almost the same color as mine, but so different. “Hello Suzy Q,” Judy responded. “Perhaps coffee now. I’m waiting for my friend.”

“Okey-Dokey,” Suzy Q said as she headed back to make Judy’s coffee. Judy had changed her coffee preference from the cappuccino she preferred at Kansas Café to a flat white made with the John Farrington Blend, which was the specialty of Frank’s Diner.

Judy wrote fewer features and blogs—a word Judy didn’t like and called them mini-features—now, mainly because she was studying, ‘well sort of’ as she often said. Rebekah had introduced her to the concept of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Classes), which Judy

researched as a feature, completing some courses as she did. She enjoyed them and saw their value in her own life, for writing about people and their lives, and to give her a better understanding of business.

She initially gravitated toward courses on Social Psychology, which were interesting and inspired many features. Next was Project Management, because Myron and Burt often talked about it. She wanted to understand concepts being discussed in meetings. Judy was currently doing a basic Architecture course. *Important if I'm going to own buildings.*

Her food and product mini features remained popular. She'd written several about the items on the menu of Frank's Diner.

That Judy owned Frank's Diner didn't concern her because her motivation was not to promote her own business. The food she wrote about was exceptional and she would have written about it, anyway.

Suzy Q returned with her coffee, singing along with Frank Vincent's *Be Bop-a-Lula*. Frank's Diner only played fifties music, which was appropriate in a fifties style diner. Judy missed the music Dorothy played in Kansas Café, but liked the innocence of fifties music, if not the music itself. *Could be a feature in that.*

"Not too busy today," Judy commented as she glanced around the diner.

Suzy Q surveyed the customers. "No, not too busy today. Everybody has what they need by the looks, so I can relaxing now." Suzy Q sat opposite Judy.

"Are your studies going well?" Judy asked.

"Yes, can't complain... well, I can, but who would listen?" Suzy Q joked. She spent a lot of time learning idiomatic language from customers and was always looking for opportunities to use it. "In fact, I've slowed down. At first, I did as many courses as I could, wanted to finish as quickly as possible. Now I take as few as I can to finish within the maximum time permitted. I want to extend my stay in America. This semester I'm only doing two courses, because I did so many in the first year. Far less pressure, and more time for my working, so more money."

"Don't you want to go back to China?" Judy asked.

"Not really. I miss my parents and some of the food, and some of my old friends, of course, but in China I'm nothing special. In this city, I'm a little, umm... exotic. A mysterious oriental girl." She smiled mischievously. "Besides, I'm dating Leon."

Leon came from the same young offender's rehabilitation program as Rebekah and Darnell, a year after they had established Frank's Diner. Their cooks were—except for Sarge, an old army man—from the culinary program. Young people looking for a fresh start in life.

Business had been extraordinary, almost since the day they had opened the doors. They had sound working relationships with suppliers from the gourmet district, helped by Judy's connections.

A ten percent discount to employees of Myron's companies helped too. Quality meals with quality ingredients, and customers enjoyed the family atmosphere of Frank's Diner.

The staff worked together well, like a happy family, which they were, bonded not by blood, but by being given an opportunity to build a life. This energy seemed to infuse itself into Frank's Diner and into the food they served.

Suzy Q continued. “Ma and Ba would never accept Leon; his skin is too dark. Chinese are prejudiced about having dark skin, even with other Chinese. They would worry because our children will have dark skin.”

Judy said, “I didn’t realize.”

“Different than here. It goes back a long way, when rich people stayed indoors and had pale skin, which we call white, but peasants worked outside, so they had dark skin, which we call black. When I first went to college, I had some trouble because I said people had ‘black skin.’ Whatever. Chinese think if a girl has dark skin, she won’t find a good husband.”

“So things are going well with Leon?”

“We’ve been talking about getting our own place one day... a small café or something. Not a busy place like this. A quiet life for us, I think... but this is just dream. See what happens. If we get married and have kids, my parents will have to accept him. Don’t need to tell them about Leon’s past.”

Leon was half Hispanic and half African American. Jailed for mugging people to support a drug habit. He was clean, and on parole now, and like Darnell, had discovered a passion for cooking.

“Better we stay here than go back to China. Life in China is easy. Anything you want delivered to your door, and public transport goes everywhere. I think it’s easier to live in China than here, but I want to stay here.”

A feature comparing life in China and America could be interesting.

“If I was in China, people would look down on me for being a waitress, and the customers would seldom be friendly, not like here. I enjoy working here and I enjoy being a waitress and meeting people, but in China, I wouldn’t like it and I wouldn’t do it. Low wages, and no tips.” She stopped and glanced over her shoulder when the door brushed against the bell. “Just dreaming. See what happens,” Suzy Q repeated, and headed off to attend to the customers.

Judy glanced up and smiled when the bell dinged again. She loved that sound and was glad Rebekah kept the bell from Kansas Café.

Ali was wearing a powder blue skirt and matching top, almost identical to Judy’s outfit, including three buttons of her blouse undone. It wasn’t the first time they had chosen a similar ensemble. *How does she know what I’m going to wear?*

They always wore short skirts or dresses when they spent time together, almost an unspoken agreement. If Judy thought about it, she may have decided they had an unhealthy relationship, but she never did.

She stood to hug Ali. When they kissed hello full on the lips, as usual, Ali held her kiss much longer than necessary. Judy grinned. They still went out with the Farrington Girls every two weeks, still danced, and flirted, well more than flirted, but had never taken their relationship to the next level, never broken their promises.

Judy studied Ali. “Interesting color choice.”

Ali winked, “Matches your... eyes.”

They sat together in the booth. Suzy Q quickly came to take their order.

Judy smiled. “My usual times two.”

“Okey-Dokey,” replied Suzy Q, and almost skipped off, her long aqua hair dancing as she went.

“Now that girl has a ridiculously cute ass,” Ali observed. “Makes me want to eat Chinese.”

Judy studied Suzy Q. “You’re right. Hadn’t paid any attention, and Susie’s right about you. You’re becoming more dykey.”

“I think she’s right too, but don’t tell her I said so. I’m certainly feeling more attracted to women all the time. I don’t know why. Possibly because John has himself a girlfriend.”

“*What?* Are you sure?”

Girlfriends

“John’s joined a gym, goes every morning,” Ali sighed. “He’s buying new clothes and *working* late most nights. Last weekend he had an unexpected *business* trip away.”

“Why do men think we’re stupid?” Judy rested her hand on Ali’s and squeezed slightly. “How do you feel about it?”

Ali shrugged. “Can’t blame him, to be honest. We’ve been like siblings for years. I love him, but as a brother, not a lover.”

“But you’re still having sex.”

“Occasionally. Not that I’m complaining. I love him, but...”

“Like a brother.” *Married couples becoming siblings. Could be a feature in that.*

“Yes. I don’t hate sex with him, but...”

“You prefer girls.” Judy gently caressed Ali’s arm.

Ali smiled. “Well, I *think* I do. I’ll get a chance to find out for sure if this fling of John’s is serious.”

Their breakfast arrived, brought to the table by Suzy Q and Leon. “Thanks guys,” Judy said.

“Yes, thank you,” echoed Ali. Her gaze lingered on Suzy Q again as she walked away.

“Her boyfriend,” Judy explained.

Ali shrugged. “All you cute ones are taken.”

Their breakfast was the house specialty, which Judy ate every day. Scrambled eggs made with cream, butter and grated parmesan cheese, accompanied by an herb salad, dressed with the honey, mustard and macadamia dressing from Exquisite Jams. A small crispy garlic and parmesan flat bread on the side.

“This is so fucking good! My favorite dressing. Reminds me of the day we met.” Ali said.

“Thought you wanted Chinese for breakfast?”

Ali turned her head and fixed her eyes on Judy’s crossed legs. “Not the only thing I’d like to eat that’s not on the menu.”

Judy smiled at the image Ali had created in her mind.

They were listening to Eve Boswell’s *Sugar Bush*. “God,” said Judy, “I don’t even know what sugar bush means. Is she singing about a man or a woman?”

“Well, I’d like to eat *your* sweet sugar bush...” Ali laughed.

“That’s the vibe I get from the song.” *Or is it because of Ali’s suggestion?*

After they finished eating, Suzy Q cleared their plates and brought more coffees.

Checking out Suzy Q’s figure, Ali observed, “She’s like a doll.”

“What do you mean, you *think* you like girls?” Judy asked.

“Well, I certainly enjoy looking at them.” Ali said, still watching Suzy Q going about her business attending to other customers. “Been thinking since I realized John has a woman on the side. Suppose it’s a woman, couldn’t imagine him being gay. My experience with

women is limited. A couple of affairs many years ago and flirting with you. And fantasizing about you every time I masturbate.”

Judy flushed and looked out the window.

“Don’t pretend to be coy. You know I’m infatuated with you, and you revel in it.”

Ali leaned in and kissed Judy, sliding her hand between Judy’s legs, which automatically opened to accommodate her. Judy flushed again and eased Ali’s hand away. “Not here, darling,” she whispered.

Ali smiled and moved her hand to the safety of Judy’s hand, gently fingering her palm. “Point is, we romanticize our memories, and we definitely romanticize our fantasies. I’m stuck between a memory that’s long dissipated into something magical and a fantasy that’s everything I imagine I want.

“Wondering if the reality of the life I want will even come close.... If John leaves me, everything changes. We made promises about not being disloyal to him.”

“I promised Myron we wouldn’t go beyond flirting.”

“Please. You don’t believe that any more than I do. What we have is way beyond harmless flirting. Every time I come close to touching your thigh, your legs spring open. You want it as much as I do. We take it to the edge and go home to finish ourselves off. You can delude yourself with talk of nothing more than flirting, but we both know that’s bullshit.”

“I promised we wouldn’t have sex.”

“And you break that promise nearly every time you see me. We mightn’t bring each other to orgasm, but that is where it stops.”

“We agreed never inside our underwear.” Judy wasn’t willing to concede the point, even though she knew Ali was right.

Ali rolled her eyes. “Some of your underwear is so sheer you may as well not be wearing any.”

“I made him a promise, and I need to be able to tell myself I’m keeping it.”

“You can *tell* yourself that, but... besides, Myron never asked for your promise.”

“How do you know that?”

“He told me.”

“Oh, I...” Judy frowned. “Why would he tell *you that*?”

“That is *the* question. Perhaps ask him?”

Judy sipped her coffee and looked out the window, unsuccessfully trying to collect her thoughts. “Perhaps I will.”

“You’re trying to appease your conscience, which I was okay with because of John. With him out of the picture, it changes things. John doesn’t know about us, but Myron does and he’s fine with it.”

I don’t want anything to change. “I wouldn’t feel right breaking my promise. Besides, you don’t know John’s going to leave you. You *suspect* he’s having an affair.”

“You like things the way they are, and you don’t like change. Don’t worry, I’m not going to force the issue, and the last thing I want to do is come between you and Myron.”

Sometimes I hate when she reads my mind. Judy was about to say something, but decided not to. She released Ali's hand and stared out the window again.

"Mind you, being *between* you and Myron is not an unappealing prospect."

It was a fantasy Judy had enjoyed often, but she never mentioned it, not even to Ali. Judy's head snapped round, and she stared at Ali. The way the light caught Ali's face turned the canary specs in her green eyes gold and they shone like emeralds under a spotlight. *That would be perfect.* She smiled at the image but didn't respond.

Ali smiled too. She knew Judy would obsess over the idea.

"For now, I'll hit some lesbian bars and try the life on. See if it fits or if it's only *you* I want. Happens, you know. People fall in love with someone, and their gender is irrelevant. Been doing some research, it's possible, but I don't think so..." Ali was again admiring Suzy Q.

Judy frowned. Ali's words had chased the image from her mind. *Lesbian bars? Try the life on? What's she saying?* "What?"

"You have Myron, if John goes, I'll be alone. You can't expect me to stay home alone while you're with Myron. So, I'll see other people too, and if you don't like it, give me a reason not to. You know I love you, but..."

"Everyone knows," Judy said.

"Except John. Anyway, if he leaves, I'll explore my sexuality. Perhaps I'll meet a nice girl to share my life with..."

Judy stiffened. *I don't want that.* She glared at Ali.

"When I made that promise to myself not to cheat on John again, I never so much as looked at a woman for years. It wasn't an issue. When you walked into my life, everything changed. I *am* becoming more dykey, as Susie says... Between our promises about Myron and John, *flirting* with you has been safe, and fun, but frustrating."

"It really doesn't bother you that John might be cheating on you?" Judy asked, looking for an angle.

"Honestly, I'm relieved. Been feeling guilty because of my feelings for you. And I *am* becoming more attracted to women, which sounds much better than the way Susie says it," she laughed. "If John were happy and settled with someone who treated our kids well, I would be more than okay with it..."

Judy wanted the conversation over, but couldn't stop the words coming out of her mouth. "Why are you becoming more attracted to *other* women? Are you bored with me now?"

Ali studied Judy and shook her head. "We carry on like a pair of thirteen-year-old girls, touching each other up through our clothes and scared to go all the way. It's becoming tedious."

Judy smiled despite herself. "I was thirteen, my first time. What are you saying, Ali?" *Now I'm tedious?*

"I'm saying I'm a grown woman. I have needs. I need to be made love to. Masturbating in the shower, while you're home fucking Myron isn't gonna do it for me. Being with John and fucking occasionally was the way it was, but if I'm out of that commitment, it changes everything."

Judy's heart was pounding, her breath shallow. *Don't want anything to change.* "Are you saying you don't like me fucking Myron?"

Ali shook her head again. "That's *not* what I said. I don't have any problem with you and Myron, and I'm not jealous. Perhaps I should be, but I'm not and don't resent him for having what's mine. Probably because you were together when we met. I'm not saying I want you to stop fucking Myron. I want you to make love to me, too."

Judy calmed herself, but emotion was building behind her eyes. "You know I want that too, but I can't cheat..."

"I need intimacy, not flirting. I need to feel naked skin next to mine, caressing, touching, tasting. I need to feel the satisfaction of bringing a woman to orgasm. If you can't or won't give me that... then I'll have to find a woman who will."

If you want to go with other women, go with other women, but don't put it on me. "That's your choice..."

"No, it's not *my* choice. It's *your* choice!"

Judy was becoming frustrated. *Don't want to talk about this anymore.* "Are you sure you're fine with John leaving? If that's what he does."

"I think so. I hope he doesn't lie to me and treat me like a fool. If he's honest, treats me with respect, and doesn't screw me financially, everything will be fine between us. I don't think that's too much to ask from him, do you?"

"No. I think John will do the right thing by you."

"I do too. If she treats our kids well, no reason we all can't get along."

"Idealistic?"

"Maybe, but as long as there's no bitterness and blame, there's no reason why not."

Judy was becoming calm, but the idea of Ali being with other women still niggled away in the background. "Hope you're right."

"Now the kids are in high school, I might go back to work."

"What will you do?"

"I used to be a hostess in a restaurant. How I met John. Not glamorous, but I enjoyed meeting people and watching the dynamics between them."

Judy took Ali's hand. "You'll be good at it... suits your personality. Doesn't matter what people do for a living... what matters is whether people enjoy their work. Wrote a feature..."

Ali rolled her eyes. "Of course you did."

"In the end, our Billy made his living giving blow jobs in a park toilet and he enjoyed his work... most people would consider it, and him, disgusting."

Ali shuddered. "Yuck! Could think of nothing worse. My guidance counselor at school used to say, 'Learn what you like doing and find someone who will pay you to do it.' Guess that could apply to giving blow jobs. Mind you, my guidance counselor didn't seem to like his job very much. It depends on whether John is serious about this woman or whether it's just a passing fling."

In the kitchen, Rebekah asked Suzy Q, “Is Judy still here?”

“Sure, she’s hanging with her girlfriend.”

“I want her to try this. Can you make them some more coffees please Suzy Q?”

They always referred to her as Suzy Q, never Suzy.

Rebekah came to the table with fresh coffees and two plates.

“Hello Aunt Judy. Hi Ali. Would you mind trying this for us? Welsh Rarebit.”

“Of course, Becky.”

“Invented in the eighteenth century or something, and became popular here in the fifties. A sauce made from beer, cheese, and mustard, with Worcestershire Sauce, which is a couple of hundred years old too, so may have been in the original recipe and a blend of spices Darnell developed.

“Anyway, the sauce is poured over toast. We’re using rye bread because we think the texture works well with the sauce. Plan to add it to the breakfast menu, an exotic cheese on toast. Served with a warm cherry tomato and herb salad.”

“Wow,” said Ali, “Delicious.”

“Wow indeed,” Judy echoed. “This’ll deserve a mini feature.”

Rebekah smiled and happily headed back to the kitchen to report to Darnell.

Judy and Ali sat quietly while they finished their coffee. Fats Domino’s *Blueberry Hill* was playing, Ali gently stroked Judy’s hand, and rested her head on Judy’s shoulder.

Judy smiled contentedly. *Nothing needs to change.*

Ali’s words ended Judy’s moment of contentment. “I’m going shopping. I’ll need some new outfits if my life is going to change. Come with me darling, it’ll be fun.”

Judy stiffened again. *I’m not going to help you buy outfits to chase stray women.* “Can’t today. Got research I need to do for my feature.”

Ali nodded, but said nothing.

They finished their coffee, kissed again and left the diner, going their separate ways.

Family Matters

A few days later, Judy stood across from Frank's Diner, looking up at the building. *When will I come to terms with owning the building?* She'd experienced the same sense of disbelief when Frank's Diner had opened. *Took almost a year to accept I owned a diner.*

She crossed the road, entered the diner. Susie was waiting in Frank's booth. *Of course she's early.*

Susie, who stood to greet her with a hug and a kiss on the cheek, said, "I'm hungry. How about mac and cheese in honor of our first lunch together?"

"Sure, love your mac and cheese."

"Haven't made it since this place opened. Darnell's is better than mine, plus I feel close to Frank when I come here."

"Agree... about feeling close to Frank. Your mac and cheese *is* as amazing as Darnell's. He uses your recipe."

"Not *my* recipe, and Darnell's *is* better." Susie frowned. "The light from the window is showing your grays."

"Oh... I," *Don't know if I'll ever get used to her directness.* "Guess I'll have to drag out the Ash Blonde."

"You mean make an appointment at the Salon. Can't imagine you've ever dyed your own hair."

Judy shrugged.

They were listening to Andy Williams' *Baby Doll*.

"This is a little darker than most of that sugary fifty's music." Susie observed.

"Certainly is. Not the usual innocence I associate with it."

Katie loved working at Frank's Diner. She smiled as she came to take their order. *Susie usually orders mac and cheese. Her recipe, Darnell said.*

Judy's Booth always made her think of the day she started.

The door brushed against the bell as Katie pushed it open. A young girl standing behind the counter smiled at her. "Good morning."

"Oh, hi," Katie responded. "I have a meeting with umm..." she glanced at the scrap of paper in her hand. "Rebekah."

"I'm Rebekah." *Seems young to be running a diner.*

"Oh, hello. I'm Katie."

"Thanks for coming."

Katie gave her a quizzical look.

"The last applicant didn't turn up. Go to the corner booth in the back by the window. I'll make us some coffees and join you in a minute. There's an application for you to complete on the table."

She's making me a coffee? "Okay, sure."

Katie turned and headed to what she would come to know as Judy's booth. She surveyed the diner. *I like this place. Everything looks so clean, and the chrome is gleaming.*

She noticed the reserved sign on the booth as she sat. She glanced at the document on the table. *Standard application.* She picked up the pen left beside the form. *Thoughtful.* Katie began completing it, almost on autopilot. She had nearly finished when Rebekah arrived with two coffees and a small plate of cookies.

My last boss would have never made me a coffee, and if I made my own, he'd charge me for it.

When Rebekah sat opposite, Katie slid the application across to her.

"Enjoy your coffee and a cookie while I read this," Rebekah said.

"Thank you," Katie raised her cup to her nose and inhaled the aroma. *That's wonderful.* She took a sip. *Taste as good as it smells.* She returned her cup to its saucer and reached for a cookie. She took a small bite. *Oh wow!*

"Both the coffee and cookies are amazing," Katie said.

"Flat white, made with the John Farrington Blend, our house coffee, and macadamia, white chocolate and mandarin cookies." Rebekah explained.

"They're delicious," Katie said and took another bite.

"We need a lunchtime waitress," Rebekah said. "What hours would be most practical for you to work?"

Huh? "Umm... What are your standard shifts?"

Rebekah—whose hiring policies were influenced by Myron—said, "We don't expect our people to build their lives around the job. We can adjust to fit your needs."

What? "I need to drop my kids at school in the morning, but I could arrange for someone to collect them after school."

Katie looked up when the bell sounded as someone opened the door. She expected Rebekah to get up and attend to them. A girl, dressed as a cartoon character, came from what Katie supposed was the kitchen to attend to the customer.

Rebekah smiled, "Suzy Q, our breakfast waitress, working a double shift today. Why don't you start after you drop your kids off and finish in time to collect them?"

Is this for real? "That would be perfect. I hate asking my ex-mother-in-law for anything. Are you sure that'll be okay? I mean..."

"Sure, cover the lunchtime rush and be less stressful for you."

What's the catch? "I wouldn't want to leave you shorthanded..."

"We won't be. One size doesn't fit all with clothing. Why should one size fit all with working hours?"

"I suppose, I... this really would be perfect. I appreciate..."

"Nonsense, you're doing us a favor. You can start now. Suzy Q will show you the ropes. Work until it's time to collect your kids, get a feel for the job. If you like it, start your regular hours from tomorrow. Standard industry rates, and tips are pooled and shared between all staff."

Katie grabbed the opportunity without hesitation. *Most employers act like they're doing me a favor by giving me a job.*

"Finish your coffee and cookies, and I'll send Suzy Q over when she's finished with the customers."

From the moment she started, Katie felt she belonged. Everyone enjoyed coming to work, which created a family atmosphere customers could sense as soon as they walked in the door. One reason, along with the quality of the food, they had many regular diners.

"What can I get you today, ladies?" Katie asked.

"Mac and cheese for two," Judy said.

"To drink?" Katie enquired.

"Peanut Butter Milkshake," Susie said and looked at Judy, who nodded. "Two."

Katie headed off to the kitchen with their order.

Judy asked, "How're things going with Jeremy?"

Susie met Jeremy at Moonglow—a nightclub on the edge of the Gourmet District—on a Farrington Girl's Night Out. "Early days, he's a decent guy, but his ex-wife left him pretty screwed up, which is challenging."

"How so?"

"From what I gather, she constantly criticized him and complained about everything he did, and how he did it. She's shattered his confidence and made him feel inadequate, with no self-belief. His default response is defensive."

"Why do people do that?" Judy asked, not expecting an answer.

"Whenever I make a suggestion or offer an opinion, he thinks I'm criticizing him, which I'm not, and he becomes defensive. Then he goes quiet, sullen. Frustrating."

"Can't understand the logic in destroying your partner's confidence. Perhaps to make them dependent on you? Might do some research..."

"Could be a feature," Susie said, before Judy could and laughed.

Susie continued. "Whatever the reason, it's hard work being with someone with no confidence and a fragile ego. A shame because he's quite capable. Some men are useless, but not Jeremy."

"You seem to find a use for them," Judy laughed.

"Not everyone has a great husband *and* a girlfriend to keep them company. Besides, they say a man is a useless piece of meat at the end of a penis. Talking of which, has Myron's stamina waned since you guys married?"

"A little, but I'm not complaining."

"How about our Ali? Have you two..."

"No, but if we were single, we would in a heartbeat."

"One of you may be single soon."

Their lunch arrived. The mac and cheese they'd both ordered was served in oval, pale blue Malacasa baking dishes which were hot from the oven, popping and sizzling in stereo. Dean Martin sang *You Belong to Me*, in the background.

Judy asked. "Did you talk with Ali?"

"These milkshakes are superb," Susie observed, and licked excess milk from her lips.

"They use handmade ice cream matching the ice cream and syrup flavors. A little expensive for a milkshake, but they're popular."

"Can taste why," Susie said. "No, John called in. He's thinking of leaving Ali."

"She suspects he will. Did he mention his girlfriend?"

"She knows? He doesn't think she does.... Fucking men are clueless. Told him she would. Yes, met her in Coffee Roasters, buying his coffee. She read about it in your blog thingy... so I guess it's your fault."

Judy laughed. "What's he thinking?"

"Says Ali is more like a sister to him."

"Ali says she loves him like a brother."

"At least they're on the same page. Told him to be honest with her and not treat her like she's a fucking idiot... like mine did with me," Susie explained.

"That's what she wants. She doesn't blame him. After all, she's..."

"A dyke?"

"Well, she thinks she is." Judy said. "If she becomes single, she'll umm... explore."

"Let's hope they can be mature and reasonable," Susie said. "I think John's going to talk to you first, wants your advice on how to talk to Ali."

"As long as I don't get caught in the middle."

"I want it to be amicable so we can keep the family intact. I like the way we've bonded and become a proper family since Frank passed and you entered our lives," Susie said. "You brought us together as a family, and I love you for that."

"No. You're the glue that holds the Farrington family together."

"Hope they can be amicable enough to attend our family barbeques together."

"Depends on Ali. The kids'll take their cue from her about how to treat John's woman."

"If we could add her to the family, and not lose Ali..."

"So, John's serious about this woman? What's her name?" Judy asked.

"I didn't ask. Maybe I don't want it to be real. If she has a name, it becomes real, but yes, he's serious about her."

Judy, an only child, smiled. *Sisters, gossiping about family, never thought I'd have this experience. Could be a feature...*

The next morning, Suzy Q, wearing a Japanese schoolgirl outfit, complete with long white socks, black shoes and bright red hair, was gazing out the window of Frank's Diner. She noticed Judy standing across the road, looking up at the building. *Why does she do that?*

As she entered the diner, Judy smiled at Suzy Q. "Just a coffee for now. Thank you, Suzy Q," she said, as she headed to her booth.

Judy retrieved her iPad from her ever-present companion, her shoulder bag, now showing signs of aging and needed to be replaced, but she didn't want to part with an old friend.

She went to Wikipedia to search for Welsh Rarebit, some background information for her mini feature. The origins of the dish were certainly vague, either eighteenth or nineteenth century, and may be Welsh in origin, or not. It experienced a resurgence in popularity in American Diners of the fifties.

Judy was contemplating her mini feature when Suzy Q arrived with her coffee.

"Can I ask you a question Judy?" she enquired.

"Sure."

"Why do you always stand and look at the building before you come into the diner?"

"When we married, my parents-in-law gave us this building as a wedding present. I still have trouble accepting I own the building."

"I get it. When I first came here, I used to stare at American things... because I couldn't believe I was living in America. Hope I can stay here."

Judy grinned as she watched Suzy Q almost skip away, singing along to the Everly Brothers' *Wake Up Little Susie*.

Ali's right, a very cute ass. Thank God for Myron, without him we'd end up a couple of sad middle-aged dykes eying up young girls. She shook her head to clear her thoughts.

Judy looked up when the bell on the door sounded. *John*. She smiled as he quickly headed to her booth. She stood to greet him. He hugged her a little harder than usual and kissed her cheek.

"Hello John."

"Hi Judy. Just a coffee for now," he said to Suzy Q, as he sat opposite Judy. He looked up at his brother's memorial plaque on the wall.

Seems nervous.

He said, "Not sure where to start."

"You've fallen in love with another woman and want to leave Ali?"

"Oh, umm, I, err... you spoke to Susie."

"Yes, and Ali."

"Ali? Ali knows? Did Susie...?"

"No." Judy smiled.

"How does Ali..."

Judy shook her head. “Did you think she wouldn’t notice the change in your behavior?”

“Oh, I err...” stammered John. “I didn’t think she had a clue. Lori told me she’d know, or at least suspect... but Ali never said anything.”

“Lori? Is that her name?”

“Yes, Loraine.”

“Do you love her, or is it just sex?”

John stared at her. He seemed shocked at her directness, which she supposed he’d expect from Susie, but it was unlike her. His gaze moved, now fixed on the salt and pepper shakers he started fiddling with.

She grinned. “I’m not judging. There’s a difference between falling in love and finding someone who’s a great fuck.”

He looked Judy directly in the eye. “I’m deeply in love with Lori, and I want to spend the rest of my life with her.”

Judy nodded. She noted the calm surety of his demeanor.

Suzy Q arrived with John’s coffee.

Judy said, “Let’s order breakfast. My usual.”

John said, “Make that two.”

“Okey Dokey,” Suzy Q said, and skipped back to the kitchen, bright red hair dancing behind her.

He continued, “I *do* love Ali, and I don’t want to hurt her, but this is different. Ali is... umm... sort of like my sister. We’re friends. It’s not the same... and well, as it happens, Lori *is* a great fuck... at least she’s interested. Ali hasn’t been for years.”

No, she’s more interested in fucking... “Can’t say that any of this is a surprise and it won’t be to Ali. When you talk to her, be open and honest about your feelings, she’ll understand. Treat her like a friend and an intelligent woman. She’s not less because you fell in love with someone else.”

John nodded, then frowned, and began fiddling with the condiments again.

“I wouldn’t go as far as to tell her that Lori’s a great fuck. I don’t think she wants to know that.” Judy almost laughed. *Probably want to find out for herself.*

“If I could sit down and talk to her, make her understand...”

“She’ll understand. You won’t need to *make* her understand. That’d be patronizing.”

Suzy Q arrived with their breakfast.

John leaned over his plate and inhaled. “Damn, that smells good.”

They ate in silence until John said, “Darnell sure can cook. Wish I could bring Lori here.”

“Why don’t you? I understand she loves the coffee.”

John smiled and looked up at Frank’s plaque. “Maybe I will if everything...”

When they finished eating, Judy asked, “What do you want? What do you expect will happen?”

"I want to divorce Ali so I can marry Lori. I don't hate Ali. Want her to be part of my life, and still see her at family gatherings, but be able to bring Lori too, without it being awkward... Do you think that could be possible?"

He's as idealistic as Ali. "If you're open, honest, and fair with Ali, and you treat her with respect, I see no reason why not."

John said, "I *do* respect Ali, and her knowing already will make it easier, I guess."

Judy studied John. She was curious about Lori. *He hasn't said much about her. Gonna have to ask.*

"May I ask you about Lori? Why did you fall in love with her?"

"Lori's face lights up when she sees me. Ali's face hasn't lit up at the sight of me for... it never did."

"You can't compare Ali and Lori. It's not fair to either of them. They're different. Your relationship is different. Don't compare, or you'll drive yourself crazy."

"You're right... I didn't mean to fall in love with Lori, it just happened."

Judy rolled her eyes and grimaced. "Why do you guys do that? I didn't mean to do it... it just happened. As if you're a victim or something. Like you're looking for sympathy, well, you won't get it from me, and you certainly won't get it from Ali."

John frowned. "I err... I didn't mean..."

"Of course, you didn't mean to fall in love, of course it just happened... That's how love works, it just happens. You're not a victim. You're fortunate to find love. Some people are desperate for love, and it alludes them, but that's another story."

"Well, yes, I'm fortunate, and I know it, but Ali..."

"Don't think Ali's a victim, either. She's not. You're not going to abandon her. Your relationship is changing, is all."

John looked around the diner, a thoughtful expression on his face. Judy followed his gaze. Suzy Q was bringing breakfast to the next booth. Judy caught the distinctive aroma of bacon. There was a hum of a dozen conversations being had over breakfast. She smiled. *Love this place.*

"Have you thought about the practicalities of divorcing Ali?" Judy asked.

"Of course I'll support my children until they finish school. Ali's been a stay-at-home Mom, so I'll probably have to pay her alimony for the rest of her life. You're right, I won't abandon her, but I want to start a new life with Lori, and paying alimony will make that difficult. I want what's fair for *both* of us."

"Did you speak to a lawyer?"

"From what I hear, getting lawyers involved can complicate things, and what's legal becomes more important than what's fair. I don't want Ali to resent me, and I don't want to resent her... I'm happy to support her while she's still taking care of the children, but I don't see why she can't support herself after they've finished school."

"I don't think Ali will expect you to, regardless of the law."

"Maybe she'll meet someone and marry him, and cease being my responsibility."

"That's cold."

“I’m trying to be practical and realistic. If I end up struggling financially because of unreasonable alimony, it’s going to put too much strain on my new life... I want to be fair, but I want Ali to be fair too.” He stared out the window, then looked at Judy intently. “Do you think she will?”

“John, you’re like a brother to me, and Ali’s like a sister. I can listen to both of you, but I won’t put myself in the middle of this. I want you both to be happy and I want the family to continue as we are.... Not that I’m family.”

“You *are* family Judy. Frank made sure of that. Not sure how it happened, but you’re the glue that bound our family together after Frank died. Something he never did when he was with us but managed to do, through you, when he passed.”

“I umm...”

“And you and Ali are *more* than sisters. She may not light up when I enter the room, but she certainly does when you do.”

Fuck! Judy flushed, “John, it’s nothing like that.... I...”

John smiled. “Susie explained it to me... I understand. Something more than sisters and less than lovers.”

Judy looked out the window. *Didn’t think he had a clue.* She asked, “What’s your thinking about the house, John?”

“Stay with Ali and the boys as the family home. At some point, it’ll need to be sold, after the kids move out. Ali and I would share the proceeds...”

“When Myriam divorced her last husband... I must see how she’s getting on. I kind of like her for all her... idiosyncrasies.”

“Other than Frank, you’re the only one who does.”

“Anyway, when he divorced her, he signed over the house to Myriam instead of paying alimony because he wanted nothing more to do with her... ever. Don’t blame him. Your circumstances are different, but something to think about.”

“Certainly is.” John glanced at his watch. “Thank you, Judy. You’ve been a big help, but I need to go to work.”

Judy stood when he did. They kissed goodbye, and John left the diner.

Hope they’ll both be reasonable. Don’t want problems in the family.

Suzy Q brought Judy a second coffee, which she always liked after breakfast.

She looked out of the window. The same window she’d been looking out when Frank passed. *Who would’ve thought looking out the window could change someone’s life as much as mine’s changed since that day?*

Judy glanced at the plaque on the wall. “If you’re watching Frank, do what you can to make this work out for everyone.”

She headed to the kitchen.

George was having his breakfast at what Rebekah jokingly called *The Chef’s Table*. A bench where the staff ate for free.

He looked up from his scrambled eggs and smiled with genuine warmth. “Good morning, Miss Judy,” he said.

She smiled and gently rested her hand on his arm. “Good morning, George.”

George

The corrections officer ushered George into the visitor's area. He never got visitors. There was no one to visit him. No family, no friends. Never had been.

He took in the unfamiliar room. White walls, scuffed and marked in need of painting. Almost gray mineral fiber ceiling panels, dark gray tiled floors. Six nondescript woodgrain Formica tables, matching black vinyl upholstered chairs. A fluorescent light suspended above each table. One of them was flickering, which was annoying. The room was unoccupied except for a white guy, reading a file opened on the table in front of him.

The officer indicated the occupied table. "Sit, George. I'll be just outside the door, so behave yourself."

George nodded. He walked to a vacant chair opposite his visitor and sat down. *What the fuck is this?*

George folded his arms, slouched into the chair and focused on the man, who didn't look up. *Testing me.* George didn't care, he could sit there all day. *Nothing better to do.* One thing prison had taught him was patience.

The man—who wore a white short-sleeve shirt, and had thinning blond hair—was shuffling papers in the folder. Without looking up, he said, "Says here your parents didn't want you, so you were put into the system but moved from foster home to foster home."

George shrugged. "Nobody wanted me."

"When you aged out of foster care, you kept moving from place to place, never settled down."

George shrugged again. "Never belonged anywhere."

The man, who had pale blue eyes, looked at George for the first time. "Do you belong in prison, George?"

"Killed a man."

"Why?"

"I was drunk. Guess he pissed me off. I hit him. He died."

"What did he do to make you angry?"

"Long time ago," George shrugged. "Don't remember."

The man shuffled some more papers. He selected one, studied it for a moment, then frowned. "Psychiatrist's report says every time you got moved to another foster home, you became angrier."

How would you feel if everyone rejected you? "If you say so."

"After your manslaughter charge put you inside, you had more problems. Getting into fights."

"People pissed me off."

"Kept having your sentence extended, racked up a dozen charges for assaulting corrections officers in your first few years."

"Someone hits me. I hit them back."

"No additional charges for over fifteen years. Guess you learned your lesson."

“They learned theirs.”

The man frowned.

George clarified. “They stopped hitting me.”

The man selected another sheet of paper, glanced at it, and then fixed his gaze on George. “They paroled you ten years ago. Says here you broke your work supervisor’s jaw.”

George shrugged. “Had it coming.”

“Why?”

“Always riding me.”

The man nodded and returned his attention to the paperwork.

“Latest Psychiatrist’s report suggests your anger management issues are under control now.”

“Nobody’s pissed me off for a while.”

The man had an amused expression on his face. He dropped the paper back in the file and focused on George. “You have a parole hearing next week.”

George cocked his head to one side. “Had many hearings, but after the last time, they never let me out.”

“If you are paroled, what work could you do?”

“Always worked in the kitchen, don’t know nothin’ else.”

The man picked up a pen and made some notes on a pale green notepad before returning his attention to George.

“You haven’t asked me who I am.”

George shrugged; his arms still folded across his chest. “Doesn’t matter to me.”

“My name is Frank Dunn. If they parole you, I’ll be your P.O.”

“Don’t think my last P.O. even knew my name.”

The man nodded. “Possibly not. If you get parole, George, you’ll be my responsibility. If you don’t make it, I failed. I don’t like to fail.”

George uncrossed his arms and straightened a little. *This guy might be all right.*

“Other than your supervisor being an asshole, was there anything else you found difficult about being outside?”

Not having time to prepare an answer, George told the truth. “Being responsible for my own life. Paying my rent on time, eating properly, not drinking all my wages. Simple stuff for most folks, but I’ve never had to do it.”

Frank Dunn nodded. “Thank you, George.”

“For what?”

“Being honest. Always be honest with me, George, and I’ll be on your side.”

George straightened up. *Think I can trust him.* He looked Frank Dunn in the eye. “You have my word.”

“What do you want most in life, George?”

George frowned. He stared down at the papers on the table; the furrow running from his hairline to his nose deepened. He sighed, looked Frank Dunn in the eye and said, "I want to die a free man."

"If you are paroled, George, we'll do our best to make sure that happens."

"Thank you, sir."

Frank Dunn stood and returned the file to his briefcase. *Getting a positive vibe about this one.*

"Thank you, George. I can't influence your parole," he lied, "But if they parole you, I promise I'll do my best to help you through it."

"I believe you."

"Officer, we're finished in here," he called out.

He watched the officer escort George out. Having made his decision, he nodded and removed his phone from his pocket, then rang Myron Myerson, who answered immediately.

"Hello Frank, what can I do for you?"

"Hello Myron, I'm looking for a favor."

"What do you need?"

"Got a guy about to be paroled, who I'm inclined to help. Do you have time to meet me at the diner?"

"Sure. Late lunch?"

"Perfect."

They rang off.

Judy was sitting in her booth as usual when Frank Dunn arrived. He sat opposite and reached out to shake her hand.

"Hi Judy."

"Hello Frank, Myron won't be long."

Katie stepped to the booth. "What would you like, Mr. Dunn?"

Frank glanced at her, admiring the tight fit of her pink T-shirt and jeans. "Maybe a bottomless coffee to start," he said.

"Sure." Katie smiled as she went to organize it.

Myron arrived minutes later. *He's always immaculate, makes me feel shabby.* He stopped beside Frank and offered his hand. Frank stood to greet him. After hugging Judy hello, Myron sat opposite him.

"What do you need, Frank?" Myron asked, as Katie delivered coffees for Frank and Myron.

"An older guy, George. Spent almost all his adult life inside. He got parole years ago, but it didn't stick. I think all he needs is to be treated with respect. For most of his prison life, he's worked in the kitchen, and I'm hoping Darnell can use a kitchen hand."

“Nice timing,” Judy said. “Becky mentioned their dishwasher had quit.”

“I know Darnell will treat him right. The reason I wanted to talk to you is... He’s never had to manage his own affairs. Some parolees working in your property company have accommodation included, and I was thinking...”

Myron said, “There’s a small apartment block fairly near here. Low cost furnished studio apartments, usually rented by young people who’ve moved to the city to start their first job. Papa says, ‘for many it’s their first place of their own and they look after the apartments very well, often leaving them better than they found them when they move on.’ I’ll call him to see if he has any available.”

“That would be ideal.”

George was in luck. Ending his call, Myron explained, “There’s a first-floor, one-bedroom apartment with a small courtyard available. Rebekah can deduct the rent from his wages and pay Papa directly. Actually, a sound idea. Perhaps we’ll enquire if any other staff would like such an arrangement.”

“That would be perfect Myron, thank you.”

Judy said, “I’m hungry. What would you like for lunch, Frank?”

“Thinking of a sandwich.”

“Me too,” Judy agreed.

Myron said, “Come on Frank, let’s go talk to Darnell and we can organize some sandwiches while we’re there.”

Fifteen minutes later, they returned. George had a job as a kitchen hand, and a tray of sandwiches was on the way.

Probably the only day in George’s life when he’s had any luck.

After lunch, Frank returned to the prison immediately. Experience taught him the importance of getting positive news to prisoners quickly and in person. After a lifetime of incarceration, they tended to expect bad news, and would sometimes act as if they had already received it.

Giving them good news quickly could save the prisoners from themselves and delivering it in person ensured there was no misunderstanding or misinterpretation by corrections officers unintentionally, or otherwise.

An officer escorted George to the visitors’ area again. *Years without coming near the place. Now, twice in a day.*

George sauntered over to the table where Frank Dunn sat and took a chair facing him.

“Did you forget something?” he asked.

“No, George.” Frank smiled. “I have some news. I understand that providing you don’t do or say anything stupid in the hearing, you’ll be granted parole.”

George stared at him. *I’m getting out?*

“I’ve organized a job as a kitchen hand in a diner. The head chef’s done time, so you’ll be treated right. Found you an apartment nearby. They will deduct the rent from your wages, so you won’t need to worry about it.”

George attempted to swallow the lump in his throat. His head was full of words, but they couldn't find their way to his mouth. "Th-th-thank you, sir."

Frank smiled. "Up to you now, but I know you won't let me down."

George whispered, "No sir, I won't."

If not for the officer escorting him, George may have skipped back to his cell.

Could be out of here in a week. Never even heard of a P.O. like Frank Dunn. Didn't get the usual 'I'll violate your ass back inside' speech.

A week later, Frank Dunn escorted George, carrying a box containing his meagre belongings, through the main gate of the prison. George was squinting, trying to adjust to the bright sunlight.

Frank popped the trunk of his government issue Sky Blue Pearl Toyota Camry. George placed the box inside and closed it, walked to the passenger side and got in the car. He didn't glance back at what had been his home for most of his life.

"You don't want one last look, George?" Frank asked.

"Never want to see that place again."

Frank stopped outside a red brick apartment block. A small lawn, and some gardens in the front. A neat path led from the street to the entrance. *So Green. Looks well cared for, not the usual shit holes I've lived in.*

George retrieved his box and followed Frank up the path and into the building. Frank stepped to a white painted door with a dark green four painted on it. He opened the door, then passed the keys to George. "Your new home."

White walls, dark gray carpet. *Clean.* George wanted to take his shoes off and feel the carpet under his bare feet, but he didn't. He placed his box on the bench, which separated the kitchen from the living room. He inspected his surroundings.

Small kitchen, benches and cupboards in olive green, stove, microwave, fridge. He opened the fridge. *Milk, bread, butter, peanut butter and jelly.*

"Picked you up a few things, just enough to get you started," Frank said.

"That's very thoughtful. Appreciate it."

Large window above the sink. George peered out. *Seems to be a small, fenced courtyard.*

He entered the living room. Small two-seater, olive green and light-yellow fabric sofa. Glass coffee table in front of the sofa. A painting of a sunset over a bay with sail boats silhouetted in the foreground. *Looks like a nice place. Wonder where it is?*

No window. On the wall beside the sofa, a set of three pictures showing a scene of a cityscape at sunset. *Someone likes sunsets.* Under the cityscape was a small table, the same olive green as the kitchen with a chair on either side.

On the wall opposite the sofa, was a mounted TV. *Didn't expect a TV. Didn't expect any of this.*

"Bathroom here and bedroom through there." Frank said, indicating a door.

George nodded and stepped into the bathroom. Standard toilet, washbasin, with a mirror above it and a curtained shower. White and copper-colored tiles, a small, frosted window. Big enough, and clean. *A step up from a stainless-steel toilet in the corner of a cell.*

He entered the bedroom. A big window on the back wall, beside a glass door.

“Leads to your courtyard.” Frank explained.

“I have a courtyard?” George opened the door and stepped out. A small, paved courtyard, enclosed by a wooden fence. A small metal table and matching chairs, nearly the same olive-green color as the kitchen, and a bench seat against the fence. George shook his head. *Can’t believe this.*

He returned to the bedroom, locking the door behind him. Wardrobe along the wall with a dressing table built in, and a chair tucked under it. A king single bed, with a wooden bedside table. The bed was made, a bed cover also in olive green and light yellow, almost matching the sofa. “It comes with bedding?”

“The owners want you to be comfortable.”

What? The owners did this? A picture above the bed, another sunset, this one with a woman in silhouette standing on a beach. George sat on the bed. *Comfortable.*

Returning to the living room, he stood in front of Frank Dunn, inches away from his face, eyes intently locked on Frank’s. “I don’t have words, Mr. Dunn. I can’t believe this. Can’t take it in. Thank you.”

“You have an opportunity to build yourself a nice life, George. Take it and it’ll be thanks enough. Here on the bench, I left instructions on how to get to work. There is a bus stop close to here. The bus will take you to the diner, about twenty minutes. There’s a Bodega around the corner, and the supermarket’s two blocks away.”

George nodded. “Convenient.”

“I’ll run you to the diner now, and you can meet Darnell and Rebekah.”

“Sure.” George didn’t know what to expect.

As they pulled up outside the diner, Frank said, “They’re waiting for us in Judy’s booth.”

Judy’s booth? What’s that? A bell dinged when Frank pushed the door open, George followed him inside. He surveyed the diner. *Wow, I like this place. Reminds me of that diner on the corner, when I was a kid.*

Reaching the corner booth, Frank stopped and said, “George, this is Darnell and Rebekah.”

They both stood to shake George’s hand and greet him. *They’re just kids.* George returned their greetings. Darnell invited George to sit down, and he slid into the booth, expecting his P.O. to join him.

Frank placed his hand on George’s shoulder. “Things to do, George, you’ll be fine here. If you need anything, call me.” He turned and left the diner.

What? No speech about behaving myself?

He studied the young, mixed-race couple sitting opposite him. *Seem friendly enough.* His mouth was dry. He wiped his palms on his trousers. *Don’t do or say anything to fuck it up.*

“Everything felt strange the day I got out,” Darnell said, “and I only did three. Can’t imagine what it must be like for you after thirty. A lot of us here did time and we’ve rebuilt a life for ourselves.”

George nodded. “That’ll make it easier to adjust.”

“One day at a time, man, but you’ll adjust,” Darnell said.

Rebekah said, “I made you a coffee, and help yourself to a cookie.”

George picked up his cup and took a sip. *Fuck, that’s good.* “Wow, that’s...”

“Fucking amazing, right?” Darnell said.

“Better than that prison shit,” George suggested.

“Try a cookie,” Rebekah prompted.

George examined a cookie, then took a bite. “God!”

“Fucking delicious too,” Darnell said.

“Oh, yeah.” *I like these two.*

“I’ve got you down for a double shift each day,” Rebekah explained. “Breakfast and lunch, six days a week and Sundays off. If that’s okay with you.”

George smiled. “Get up early anyway.”

“Standard industry rates, and all staff share tips.”

“Even the kitchen hand?”

“Yes, everyone except me and Darnell. Everyone contributes to the customer’s experience.”

George nodded, not sure what to say.

“Got some paperwork for you to sign. Application form. Filled out from what Frank Dunn gave me, but I don’t have a next of kin.”

“Don’t got no kin.”

“I’ll put Frank Dunn down.”

“No one else.”

Rebekah passed him the document. George signed where she’d indicated without reading it.

“Congratulations, George. You’re now officially part of the family,” Darnell said. “Finish your coffee, and I’ll show you the ropes, then Bec will take you shopping. You start tomorrow.”

“Shopping?”

“The day I got out, Aunt Judy took me shopping for new clothes. Having my own clothes and wearing what I wanted after years of wearing the same prison issue shit as everyone else made me more free, somehow,” Rebekah explained.

She’s done time, too. Wonder how they came to own a diner? “Don’t have much money, a coupla Cecil’s the prison gave me.”

“We’ll cover it and deduct fifty dollars a week from your wages until it’s paid back.”

Who are these people? “Are you sure? I...”

“Don’t worry about it. There’s a clothing store near here.”

Returning from the restroom one morning a few weeks after George started working at the diner, Judy noticed him bussing tables. *Like the way he always helps the waitresses when they’re busy.*

She stopped and gently resting her hand on his arm as she always did, said “Hello George.”

His eyes lit up when she spoke to him. “Good morning, Miss Judy.”

The way George said ‘Miss Judy’ made her feel like *Miss Daisy*.

“After you’ve taken those dishes to the kitchen, come chat with me.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She wanted to tell him he didn’t need to call her ma’am, but Myron had said, “Important to allow people to show respect, if they want to. I appreciate it when they do, but I’m careful to neither expect nor demand it.”

On her way back to her booth, Judy asked Suzy Q—wearing a short crimson dress, with pastel flowers, complete with the usual six petticoats, an elaborate black lace collar and a bow made from the same material as the dress tying back her bright green hair—to bring coffee for her and George.

When he joined her, she asked, “How are you finding things here, George?”

He smiled. “I enjoy the work. Darnell and Rebekah are great bosses.”

“I appreciate the way you help the girls bus the tables when they’re busy.”

George shrugged. “When I run out of dishes to wash, I know they must be busy. I could stand around waiting for dishes, but that seems pointless when I can just collect them myself. Besides, it doesn’t look good when customers come in and the tables are full of dirty dishes.”

“You’re a good man, George.”

His bottom lip quivered. For a moment, Judy thought he was about to cry. He sipped his coffee and stared out the window, gathering his thoughts.

When he spoke, it was with a quiet intensity. “I belong here. Never belonged anywhere in my life. It’s like a family. Never had a family before. People treat me with respect. Always been treated like dirt. Never believed in miracles, but I do now.”

Judy said, “Miracles are just people with kind hearts.”

“More than that. My whole life is a miracle.”

“But you work double shifts?”

George smiled, “Keeps me out of trouble. Besides, I worked three shifts inside.”

Darnell and Becky said something similar.

“Have my own place, more comfortable than I’m used to. When it rains, I take the bus to work, but usually walk because I can. Just over an hour. Walking, especially in the sun, makes me feel free. Didn’t often feel the sun when I was inside.”

“Simple pleasures.”

“Yes. Everything is simple for me. Rebekah takes care of my rent, and I give my utility bills to her, too. She pays them from my wages. I don’t know how to do stuff like that. Never learned. Eat breakfast and lunch here, and they give me my dinner too. Just need to heat it up. I call in to a Bodega and buy one beer every day, just one. I drink it in my courtyard after dinner, so I can see the stars, never saw the stars when I was inside. A simple life, but a free life. I like to stop in the park on the way home, sit on a bench and read my book.”

“Oh, so you enjoy reading?”

“One thing prison did for me was give me a love of reading. It was the only way I could escape. A lifetime of being surrounded by concrete and steel has given me an appreciation of nature, of grass and trees, of birds chirping or singing in the trees and of children playing in the park.”

“Is that what you like most about your life now, George?”

I love every minute of my life, not going to fuck it up this time. He drank some coffee and glanced out the window.

“After thirty years of sharing a cell with all manner of others, some I liked, some I hated with a passion, but most I was indifferent about, I enjoy living alone.”

I like being able to jerk off without worrying if my cellmate knows what I’m doing, but mostly I like not waking up to the stench of someone else’s shit.

“I can understand that.”

You’ve got no idea.

He finished his coffee. “Thank you for the coffee, and for listening. I’d better take my smoke break now, and then get back to it.”

Judy smiled. “I enjoy talking with you, George.”

He took their cups to the kitchen, retrieved his cigarettes from his locker, and went outside for a smoke.

George could see Judy sitting in her booth. He lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply, closing his eyes as he allowed the nicotine rush to wash over him. *No one ever told me I’m a good man before. Never. Thought I was going to cry. When was the last time I cried? Can’t remember, maybe that first foster home? Something special about her.*

He took another deep drag on his smoke and contemplated Judy. *Love the way she always gently rests her hand on my arm when she says hello. Love the way she says my name. Love the way she listens when I speak. She ignites a spark in me whenever I see her.*

George visited a woman once a week, whom he paid to attend to his needs. When she did, he always imagined she was Judy. When he masturbated, his mind filled with images of Judy.

Suppose this is what love feels like, not sure.

He took his last drag on his smoke, stubbed it out in the pocket ashtray he always carried, and glanced at Judy one more time. *Better get back to it.*

A Farrington Divorce

John placed a bag containing two bottles of red wine on the kitchen bench, removed one, retrieved a corkscrew, and uncorked the bottle, which made a squeaky pop as he opened it. He glanced at Ali, who was sitting at the dining table, reading Judy's latest feature. The kids were in bed. He grabbed glasses from the cupboard above the bench. He was moving in slow motion, nervous, trying to gather the courage for *the talk*.

"Glass of red?" he asked.

"Sure."

He poured two glasses, brought them to the table, and sat opposite his wife.

Ali smiled, sipped her drink, then frowned. "You've been to Franco's. Special occasion?"

Fuck! The wine was a mistake. Franco's distinctive 'house red,' Antinori Tignanello, from Tuscany, a blended red wine with herbal, fruity and floral qualities, coupled with notes of mint, cocoa, vanilla, and licorice. *Of course she'd recognize it.*

"Umm... nearly, but in the end no."

"Why not?"

"Well, I... umm."

"Relax John. I've been expecting *the talk*."

He exhaled. "Our Judy said you knew."

"I know you."

John smiled. "Better than I know myself."

"Just tell me."

He took a deep breath. "I've fallen in love with someone."

Ali smiled. "And..."

"I want to be with her..."

"Of course you do."

"I want a divorce, Ali. I don't want... I mean, you're my best friend, and I don't want to hurt you, but..."

"I understand, and I'm fine with everything, as long as..."

"I'll do the right thing..."

"I know you will. You met someone and fell in love and want to be with her. I get it and I'm fine with it."

"Really?"

"Yes," she said. "The important question now is, how are we going to do this?"

"I'm thinking, I'll pay child support and alimony while you're still taking care of the kids, but after they've gone off to college in a couple of years, and you don't need to be here for them, perhaps you could go back to work."

Ali opened her mouth to speak, but John held up his hand. "Let me finish."

She nodded.

"I don't want to pay alimony all my life. So, I'll sign the house over to you. I mean, I'll give you the house instead of paying alimony. I think that's fair and..."

"Yes, more than fair. I'll agree to that arrangement."

That was easy. Hope telling the kids goes as well.

Ali continued, "I'm not the enemy, John. I only want what's fair. You need to see a lawyer and formalize everything. Bring me the agreement with the divorce papers and I'll sign."

"Thank you, Ali. I appreciate..."

"Nonsense. How about another glass?"

John drained his glass, retrieved the bottle from the bench, and refilled their glasses.

Ali said, "So, are you going to tell me about her? What's her name?"

He took a large gulp of wine and swallowed his butterflies loudly. *What should I say? Don't compare.*

"Lori, umm... Lorraine. I met her at Coffee Roasters. We went for coffee. I wasn't looking for sex... I've never done that."

Ali rested her hand on his arm. "I know, you're not like Jenny's Dave."

"Can't understand why she puts up with him. Anyway, we went for coffee, and over coffee I fell in love with her, I guess. It was only coffee, honestly."

"I believe you."

"I've never felt like this before, I..." *Shouldn't have said that.*

She smiled and took a sip of wine. "It's all right."

"It's umm..." *Don't know what to say.*

Ali sighed. "You don't need to protect my feelings. We never had that kind of marriage. Comfortable and compatible. Friends."

"Yes, and I've been happy. I thought that's what marriage was. I don't want us to stop being friends."

"We won't. No reason to. I'm not pissed off. I *am* happy for you."

"Perhaps you'll meet a man, and we can all be friends." *God, that sounded condescending.* "I think you'll like Lori..."

"I hope so. It'll be better for everyone if we can be friends."

"Yes, I agree. I..."

"But I won't meet a man, John."

"Well, you might..."

"John, I'm a lesbian."

He was suddenly cold, his heart racing. He shuddered. *What? A lesbian. How can she be a fucking lesbian?* "A lesbian? Why did you marry me?"

"I didn't know when I married you."

“Okay, I...” *Has she been sleeping with women since we married? Didn’t have a clue. I’m a fucking idiot.* “So, you found out after we married?”

“Yes, I did. I’m sorry.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me you like women?” *How did I not know?* “Have you had girlfriends during our marriage?”

“Yes, John.”

“How many girlfriends have you had?”

“It’s not like that.”

“Really? What’s it like?” He finished his wine and poured himself another, emptying the bottle. *What the... not sure if I’m angry or relieved. Somewhere in between, I think. Wish I could talk to Lori. A fucking lesbian!*

“I’ve had two girlfriends. A long time ago. These days, I’m a lesbian in theory, not in practice.”

“If you told me you’re attracted to women, I wouldn’t have liked it, but I would have understood.” *Maybe not, but I’d like to think I would.*

“I didn’t know until it happened.”

“Okay.” *That doesn’t make sense.* “I’m not sure I understand how it could happen if you weren’t...”

Ali smiled. “Sometimes we just go for coffee.”

Bitch. Knows I can’t say anything to that. “You said it was a long time ago. Can you tell me about it... not the...”

“It happened. When it ended, I needed to know if I was a lesbian or if it was only her. So, I found another woman. At first, I told myself I wasn’t cheating, because it was with a woman.”

Bullshit!

“But that was bullshit.”

Yes.

“Being honest, I thought about leaving you. Nearly did. I needed to talk to someone, so I spoke to Frank.”

“Frank knew?”

“He was the only one who did.”

“And he told you not to leave me?”

“No, he didn’t. He asked me three questions.”

John drained his glass again, and Ali drained hers. He stood to retrieve the second bottle. *Glad I bought two bottles.* The cork squeaked and popped again as he extracted it.

“What questions?” He asked as he refilled their glasses.

“Doesn’t matter, but the answers helped me put things into perspective. I chose to stay with you and committed to being the best wife and mother I could be.”

“You’ve been a supportive wife, Ali, and an excellent mother.”

She smiled. "I made myself a promise not to cheat on you again, and I never did."

I believe her. "So, you chose me over being a lesbian?"

Ali drank some wine and looked at John intently. "Being a lesbian is *not* a choice. It's who I am. My choice was between you and me. I chose you."

She chose me, and when it was my turn, I didn't choose her. "I'm sorry. Must've been difficult for you all these years."

"No, it wasn't. I put that time out of my mind, and never even looked at another woman for more than a decade."

John nodded. *Yes, she could do that.*

"A couple of years ago, everything changed. It all came flooding back. I needed to talk to someone and with Frank gone, I talked to Susie."

"Susie knows?"

"Everything, and I talked to Jenny too. We compared our past sins."

Jenny has past sins? "And our Judy? You told her too?"

"Didn't need to. She knew the second she looked at me."

"She would." *But it would be the moment you looked at her, I think.* "Guess that explains why you're in love with our Judy."

"You know? It's not like that, we've never..."

"I may be slow on the uptake, but I can see the way you look at her. I know it's not... Susie told me."

"Susie?"

"Susie can read people. If there was anything going on between you two, she would've picked it up."

"And she would tell you?"

John refilled their glasses, drank a little wine, and fixed his gaze on Ali.

"Susie's good at reading people, but she's bad at lying. If she lied to me, I would've known. I always know when *she's* lying."

"If not for you and Myron, Judy and I would be together."

"I see the way she looks at you."

"Oh, I umm..." Ali stared at the wineglass in her hand.

"The same way she looks at Myron." John smiled. "It's the way Lori looks at me." *Probably shouldn't have said that.*

"I *am* happy for you. Honestly."

John studied her. *Best change the subject before she points out the obvious. She fell in love with Judy and didn't cheat. I fell in love with Lori and did.* "It's not that I don't love you. I'll always love you, but..."

"It's different. I love you too, John. Let's make a promise to remain friends and be honest with each other. If you ever need advice about..."

"I can talk to you, I know, but I doubt I'd feel right about that."

Ali offered a toast. "New beginnings."

John echoed her toast. "It's getting late. We should go to bed, I guess."

She nodded. "We can, and you can lie beside me wishing you were with Lori, or you can go home to Lori where you want to be."

She's right.

"Oh, I meant to ask what the nearly special occasion at Franco's tonight was?"

"I was going to propose to Lori, but I didn't. Wouldn't have been right to propose when I wasn't free to marry her. Not fair to either of you."

"You are a good man, John. Lori is very lucky to have found you."

"I'll tell her you said that." He winked.

"I'll tell her myself."

What? She wants to talk to Lori? Why? "I'd better go. I need to talk to Lori about..."

"Marrying her?"

"Not tonight. I need to talk about everything so she can tell me what I already know."

"And what's that?"

"I should appreciate the sacrifice you made for me."

Ali followed him into the bedroom while he threw a few clothes in an overnight bag. "We should tell the kids soon."

"Tell them what?"

"Everything. They're gonna find out soon enough. Better we do it together and openly. Let them see everything's going to be okay."

"You're right, of course. When?"

"I'll go out in the morning. You can come and get your stuff and move out. Tomorrow night, we'll have a family dinner and talk to them."

Be easier to move out if she's not here. "Sounds like a plan."

Ali walked him to the door. He kissed her goodbye and left to start his new life. *Well, that went easier than I expected.*

Ali stared at the door as John closed it behind him. Watching him leave made everything real. Her head bowed, she raised her hands to her face and sobbed uncontrollably.

She remained beside the door for a long time. Her body shaking as waves of emotion broke over her. She didn't know why. *Isn't this what I want?*

Ali composed herself enough to go to the bathroom and wash her face. She changed into her nightgown and climbed into bed.

Feel so alone. Why did I tell him to go? Maybe we could've made love and I could've convinced him to stay? What am I gonna do without him?

Ali began crying again, quietly. Her head buried into the pillow. Her mind full of images of John, of their life together. *I've made a mistake, shouldn't have let him go.*

Don't know what to do. Isn't this what I want? Why does it hurt so much if it's what I want? I need my Judy. Need her here, but she can't be, never will be. Why did I have to fall in love with her?

Ali didn't sleep that night. She shared the night with her memories, her feelings, her conflicted thoughts, and her tears.

Judy stood across from Frank's Diner, looking up at her building on her way to breakfast. George was having a morning cigarette break.

"Good morning, George," she said, lightly resting her hand on his arm.

"Good morning, Miss Judy."

"What are you looking at?" She asked.

"Oh... the diner," he said. "Sometimes it's difficult to come to terms with my life. Now I'm free. So, I stare at the diner where I work, or my apartment, or the park where I read... Sometimes, I sit at the bus stop watching the people coming and going at will. Letting the reality of my life sink in, to remind myself that it's real, and to make sure I don't do anything stupid to risk what is a dream life for me. Not much of a dream, but it's the life I dreamed of for all those years when I had no life. Does that make sense?"

"It does to me," She said. "You know smoking isn't healthy, George."

"I know ma'am. Cigarettes were like gold inside, since they banned smoking in the prison. I'm not a heavy smoker, but I enjoy a few cigarettes each day. One benefit of my freedom."

Judy nodded. "I understand." She squeezed his arm gently and crossed the road.

Judy was smiling a little broader than usual when she entered Frank's Diner. Partly because she enjoyed talking with George, but mostly because Ali was waiting for her in Frank's Booth.

She greeted Suzy Q, who was wearing a white blouse under a tightly laced bodice. Frilly black shoulders and cuffs, a frilly white collar, and a black bow tie. A short black skirt of layered frills with a single white petticoat protruding an inch from the skirt and knee-high black boots, with frills at the top. Her hair bright blue and short today.

Judy smiled; the customers loved Suzy Q's strange outfits. She suspected several guys called in for breakfast every morning to see what she wore that day.

Ali stood to greet Judy and almost clenched her. Instead of their usual kiss, Ali buried her head in Judy's shoulder and cried.

"John's gone," she said. "I didn't think it would hurt so much. I wanted to be free."

Judy wiped Ali's tears away, kissed her gently, and eased herself into the booth. Still holding Ali's hand, she pulled her in beside her.

"It's normal. You've suffered a loss. Of course, it's going to hurt. It's not as if you hate him, and you're relieved the nightmare's over. You haven't lost him. Your relationship has changed, and you need time to adjust."

"I know you're right, but I feel lost. John's not there for me anymore. He's with someone else."

“He’s still there for you. You’re the mother of his children and his first love. Your relationship changed a long time ago. You became companions, friends, almost siblings and stopped being lovers. John has acted upon that change, as you would’ve done if circumstances had been different.”

“Like if you didn’t have Myron?”

Judy smiled and held Ali’s hand. “The important thing now is not to panic and overreact and desperately try to hold on. I’ve seen that happen many times, and it never ends well.”

“Been thinking I should do something.”

“Don’t. If you part John and Lori, you’ll end up resenting yourself and he’ll resent you, too.”

“You know her name?”

“John told me.”

“Guessed he’d spoken to you,” Ali said. “He had the separation details all worked out, pretty much what I wanted.”

Suzy Q arrived with their coffees. “You want breakfast now?” she asked.

“I’ll have my usual,” Judy said.

“And I’ll have... the same.” Ali added.

“Okey-Dokey,” Suzy Q said as she went to seat a customer who’d just arrived before heading to the kitchen.

Ali nodded. “You’re right. I need to be strong and get through this.”

“For a moment, I thought you were going to ask for Chinese,” Judy observed.

“For a moment I was. The girl gets cuter every time I see her.”

“What will you do now?”

“John will come for dinner tonight, and we’ll tell the kids what’s happening.”

Suzy Q brought their breakfast and skipped away. Ali stared at her wistfully.

“Ridiculously cute ass,” Judy said.

They ate in silence, as they usually did.

Almost as soon as they’d finished, Suzy Q was back to collect their plates.

“That’s why she’s a great waitress,” Judy said. “She pays attention.”

Ali surveyed the diner. “And the customers certainly pay attention to her.”

“That too,” Judy agreed.

“I feel much better now, darling. I needed you to help put everything into perspective.”

Their eyes connected. Ali said, “I love you, Judy.”

“Love you too, darling.”

They kissed, softly.

Ali slipped her hand between Judy's thighs, which automatically opened to accommodate her. Judy allowed herself to enjoy Ali's touch but didn't reciprocate, although she wanted to.

Judy gently lifted Ali's hand away and held it. "Behave yourself."

"Take me home and make love to me."

"You know I can't."

"Please, I need a pity fuck. What do you say? Wanna take pity on me?"

"If I fucked you, it would be out of love, not out of pity."

"But you won't fuck me?"

"Not *today*."

Ali nodded and rested her head on Judy's shoulder. They sat quietly, holding hands until Suzy Q brought their after-breakfast coffees.

"Never had an Asian girl," Ali mused.

"I have."

"We could do her together."

Judy smiled and squeezed her hand. "I was thinking, thank God for Myron. He saves us from ourselves. Without him, I can only imagine what we'd become."

Ali smiled and sipped her coffee, but didn't respond.

Fabian's *Turn me Loose* was playing in the diner. "Well, this is appropriate now John's turned you lose."

"Yeah... *I'm gonna kiss a thousand chicks*," Ali laughed, quoting a line from the song.

After coffee, Ali said, "Something I need to do, unless you wanna make me a better offer."

Judy smiled. "Okay darling, breakfast tomorrow?"

"Sure. In bed?"

They kissed goodbye, and Ali left the diner.

Aunt Judy's Mini Features

Darnell and Rebekah were in the kitchen preparing breakfasts for customers, usual at change of shift. Darnell ran the kitchen during breakfast and again for dinner, Rebekah during lunch.

Leon worked the breakfast shift and did lunch preparation. Mark, the newest addition from the Culinary Parole Program, worked lunch and dinner preparation. The night team comprised Darnell, Sarge—the most experienced of their cooks. Much older, he'd learned his trade in the Army Catering Corps—and Joey also in the culinary program.

George worked the breakfast and lunch shifts. Dave, who was working his way through university, was the kitchen hand at night six days a week, and Sunday Brunch. Sunday was George's day off.

Rebekah and Darnell greeted her. "Good morning, Aunt Judy," almost in unison.

"Hi guys," replied Judy. "I'd like to film you making a Welsh Rarebit so I can write a mini feature. It'll save me taking notes."

"Sure, I can do that for you now," Darnell said.

Judy set her iPad to record, but still watched him intently.

Darnell placed five cherry tomatoes on the vine in the oven to warm.

He melted butter in a small saucepan and added a little flour, various seasonings, *Lea & Perrins's Worcestershire Sauce*, and wholegrain Dijon mustard from Exquisite Jams, which he blended together and cooked until it bubbled before removing it from the heat.

Darnell cut three slices off a loaf of rye bread from Alice's Bakery and placed them in the oven to lightly toast.

He poured milk into his sauce base and returned it to the heat, stirring until it came to the boil, and then off the heat again. Darnell never took his eyes from the mixture, ensuring it didn't overheat.

Returning the sauce to the heat, he slowly poured *Oceanside Oxymoron Black IPA* in, continuously stirring, and brought the mixture to the boil once more.

"The beer's a little expensive, but has a unique taste," Darnell said.

Still on the heat, he began adding the cheese—a blend of gruyere, aged cheddar, and parmesan—stirring to ensure he incorporated it into the sauce, then added more cheese. When the mixture thickened, he removed it from the heat, then added a little sauce to an egg yolk and whisked.

"Need to temper the yolk before I add it, otherwise it'll cook," he explained.

Darnell took the slices of rye bread from the oven and spooned the sauce onto them, being careful to cover each without spilling over the edges.

He returned the bread to the oven to toast until the cheese sauce was bubbling and popping.

"People expect two slices," he suggested. "Three delights them because it's unexpected. The cost of adding a slice is minimal and more than pays for itself in goodwill, repeat customers, and word-of-mouth referrals."

Darnell prepared a Vietnamese inspired herb salad of mint, Thai basil, dill, cilantro with a dressing made from lime, chili, lemongrass and a hint of fish sauce. A few crushed peanuts for added texture.

He placed the warmed tomatoes, still on the vine, on top of the salad, and added the toast to the plate.

Watching Darnell cook fascinated Judy. He moved with the ease of a seasoned professional. His every action was effortless, fast, sure, and economical in terms of movement, almost graceful. *He really is a natural.*

“Plating is important,” he said. “We want our customers to photograph our food and put it on their social media. We don’t want people seeing it to think *that looks nice*. We want them to think, *Wow!*”

“It certainly looks, *Wow!*” Judy confirmed as she used her phone to photograph the Welsh Rarebit from several angles. She would choose the best one for her mini feature.

When Judy finished, Darnell placed the plate on the chef’s table.

“George, come and have some breakfast.”

Darnell nodded with satisfaction. *Love creating new dishes.*

He loved Frank’s Diner, his and Rebekah’s Diner. Maybe they only owned a small piece of it, but in their minds, it was theirs, a belief encouraged by Myron and Judy. Sometimes, after they closed, he and Rebekah would sit quietly in Judy’s booth and marvel at their lives. Frank’s Diner was much more successful than they hoped, and they had difficulty coming to terms with their new reality... so far from what their lives had been when neither believed they had a future.

Darnell glanced at Rebekah. *Love my life, can’t believe it’s real. Better than any life I imagined when I was inside.*

He smiled at Judy. Darnell loved her like a mother.

Judy returned to her booth and enjoyed another coffee, which Susie Q automatically brought her. *I’m too predictable.* She was unaware her life remained a blend of routines and habits, which changed periodically.

When she finished her drink, she returned her belongings to her constant companion; her aging shoulder bag. She knew she should replace it, but it met her criteria: practical, comfortable, and quality. She left the diner and headed home to write her Welsh Rarebit mini feature.

Judy stopped in front of the diner, reading her framed mini features on display in the window.

She often saw people stop to read them prior to entering. Whether they entered because of the mini features, or whether they were coming anyway, she couldn’t say.

After finishing her first draft, Judy walked to the gourmet district, buying a small sourdough loaf from Alice’s Bakery, where she bought her bread nearly every day for a dozen years. The sweet yeasty aroma of freshly baked bread and cookies always reminded her of her grandmother.

After Alice's she went to Lexington Deli as she did most days, to buy some pastrami and Swiss cheese, both sliced to order and a small salad to complete her lunch.

Judy prepared lunch and took it to the office to eat while she reviewed her Welsh Rarebit mini feature and her latest feature before uploading them to her online library, where online or print media publishers could access and purchase them.

Algorithms dictated that whenever she uploaded new features or mini features, an email would be generated to her client base, often resulting in same day sales. Her Welsh Rarebit mini feature would start appearing on Blog sites the next day, or perhaps the same day. *The speed of communication these days amazes me.*

When Judy returned to the diner, there were papers and notes spread across the table in her booth. *Becky must be working on something.* She sat and waited for Rebekah's return.

She was listening to *Sixteen Candles* by The Crests. She needed to google the song to learn the band's name. *How did they choose the name of their band? Not important, just another band that nobody remembers.* She opened her iPad and added *Forgotten Bands* to her list of features.

Why do people use the term google even when they're not using the Google search engine? Can't recall hearing anyone say, 'I'll just Bing it.' She remembered when she was young, people would Xerox papers instead of copying them. She added *How do Brands Become Verbs?* to her list.

Judy spent a lifetime turning what were nothing more than random thoughts everybody has into features. She remained unaware she did so.

Whereas most people allowed their random thoughts to appear and be quickly forgotten, Judy researched and developed hers. She didn't know it was why she had a quiet, confident depth to her.

If her features were her random thoughts, her mini features were her everyday experiences of living, eating, drinking, shopping, going to places, and doing things.

The creation of her online feature banks made it easy for publishers to access and purchase her work. Sin—Linda Sinclair, who managed the feature banks—wanted Judy to accept commissions for mini features, but she refused.

She believed being paid to write mini features would cause them to lose integrity. Even before she married Myron, she hadn't needed the money.

Rebekah came out of the kitchen intending to return to her task. She glanced towards Judy's booth and noticed she'd returned. She made Judy a coffee and prepared a slice of Kansas style cheesecake; the New York style cheesecake that had been the specialty of Kansas Café. *For two.*

"Hello, Aunt Judy. Thought you'd like a coffee," she said as she sat opposite.

"Oh, I would Becky, thank you, and my favorite cheesecake."

Rebekah smiled. "It's still popular. Thought we could have a chat. Then I'll get my stuff out of your way."

"Nonsense, I just called in to let you and Darnell know the Welsh Rarebit mini-feature is up, so you may have people asking about it tomorrow."

“Thank you, Aunt Judy. We’ll run it as a breakfast special this month and if it’s popular, we’ll add it to the menu.”

“What are you working on?” Judy asked.

Rebekah studied the woman sitting opposite. *She’s more of a mother to me than my own ever was. The only time she spoke to me was to enforce Papa’s rules.*

She couldn’t put her finger on when it happened, but in her heart, Myron and Judy had become her parents. There was ‘something about Judy’ everyone noticed, but didn’t know what it was. Uncle Myron described it as, ‘a depth of everyday things.’

“Analyzing patterns. We’re gonna need some more waitresses. We’re becoming too busy. Poor Katie was late picking her kids up twice this week because she couldn’t get away. She’s not complaining, but it must be stressful for her.”

“Breakfast is busier, too,” Judy said. “Suzy Q’s run off her feet some mornings.”

Rebekah sipped her coffee and savored a forkful of cheesecake. *Still can’t believe I can make cheesecake this good.*

“Yes, despite George helping her bus tables.”

“Are you thinking two waitresses per shift?”

“I was, but now I’ve played with the numbers, I think we need to introduce two extra shifts. Two extra waitresses, not three. A morning shift, covering breakfast and lunch, and an afternoon shift covering the second half of lunch and the first half of dinner.”

Judy nodded and sipped her coffee.

Rebekah smiled. *I like that they never question my decisions.* Judy’s phone dinged as she received a notification.

Judy glanced at it. “Already had some sales of my Welsh Rarebit mini feature. Only uploaded it this afternoon. Don’t know why they’re so popular.”

Rebekah said, “I believe it’s because they’re everyday experiences people can relate to, relayed with enthusiasm. You can turn a mundane everyday happening, such as eating a hamburger, into a magical and memorable experience.”

Judy smiled.

“Uncle Myron says, ‘In a mundane world of everyday life, people are crying out for magical experiences, and your mini features give them that.’ He’s right. Darnell and I emulated your experience of going to Ozzie’s Burgers.”

“Ozzie makes a great burger.”

“It’s more than that. I read comments people write on our social media pages. They talk about taking the time to enjoy their own experiences in a magical way.”

Judy looked at her but seemed deep in thought. Rebekah took the last forkful of cheesecake while she waited for Judy to finish thinking. She spent enough time with Judy to know how she worked.

She recalled Judy’s blog about making a ham and cheese sandwich. Judy began with her early experience of a sandwich made with processed white bread with a thin slice of processed ham, and a slice of processed cheese, and a scrape of margarine.

She described the sandwich she was preparing. Freshly baked sourdough bread from Alice's Bakery, which she sliced thickly, no butter and no margarine, two slices of ham, carved off the bone to her order at Lexington Deli, two slices of extra tasty cheddar cheese, also sliced from the block to her order, and a little handmade Dijon mustard from Exquisite Jams.

Finishing with the experience of eating what she prepared. The ham was full of natural flavor from being cured on the bone, moist, a little salty, but with a hint of natural sweetness. Contrasted by the sharp bite of the aged extra tasty cheddar cheese, and a subtle heat provided by Dijon mustard. Seeds popped with each bite. The thick sliced sourdough added another dimension of texture.

This is what a ham and cheese sandwich should be, she'd concluded. Her readers could emulate her sandwich and her experience in their own homes, and with any combination they chose.

"Aunt Ruth said, your *Ham and Cheese Sandwich* mini feature made her want to eat a ham and cheese sandwich, even though she doesn't eat pork products, and never eats meat and dairy together. A double no for her, but you made her want to say yes."

Judy finished her thought and then finished her coffee and cheesecake. "Think I'll write a feature, *Do What You Feel, and Feel What You Do*. Something like that. Anyway, I'll get out of your hair and let you get back to work."

"Okay, Aunt Judy, I'll see you tomorrow," Rebekah said as she stood to hug her goodbye.

It's A Pity

When Ali left the diner, she knew where she was headed. She was apprehensive, a blend of excitement and disappointment. *Should have been more direct with her. Made my intentions clear. I asked. She declined. Knew she would. Judy's decision, not mine.*

A few weeks earlier, when she suspected John was going to leave, Ali had researched the location of every lesbian bar and hook-up place in the city. *More than I imagined.* Each with its own characteristics and demographics. The guide she found most useful: *Lipstick on Lipstick* had reviews, cataloging whatever type of female company a girl was looking for, and when she was looking for it.

A bar called Afternoon Delights catered to women with family commitments who sought to connect in the afternoon. *Perfect.*

The prospect of her first time with a woman in nearly fifteen years excited her. *Hope I remember how.* Her chest tightened. *I'm not cheating on Judy. Told her what I needed.*

Ali stood outside. Afternoon Delights in hot pink neon glowed faintly in the daylight. The 'O's' in 'afternoon' were two pairs of lips with bright red lipstick. She pulled the door open, took a deep breath, and entered.

Art—mostly couples, women in various states of dress, embracing, kissing, or otherwise delighting each other—adorned the walls *Not exactly subtle.*

The furniture was two-seater sofas in dark green crushed velvet, each with a wooden coffee table dyed purple. *Pink walls, purple ambiance, mood lighting coming from spotlights on the art. No doubt I'm in the right place.*

The tall purple bar had high stools, covered with the same velvet as the sofas. The shelves behind the bar contained an array of high-end liquor in a kaleidoscope of colors, lit by spotlights. Tegan and Sara's *Closer*, was playing softly in the background. A diffuser on the corner of the bar filled the room with the scent of ylang ylang.

No sooner had Ali sat at the bar than the bargirl was in front of her. Short black hair—nearly the same color as Ali's—common brown eyes, a little purple eyeshadow, and bright red painted lips. She wore a dark green man's suit, with a white shirt and a matching bow tie.

Cute. A warm tingling between Ali's legs was followed by a rush of warmth to her face, as if the girl would know Ali's body had reacted to her presence. She fidgeted and wiped her palms on her skirt.

The woman smiled. "Hello gorgeous, haven't seen you in here before."

"First time... I mean first time in the bar, not my first time..." *For fuck's sake. Calm the fuck down. What's wrong with you?*

The woman had an amused expression on her face as she stretched out her hand. "Monica."

"Ali." They didn't release their handshake immediately. Their eyes connected. Hands and eyes lingered, Ali's breathing quickened, she swallowed.

"Would you like to see the Pusseytail menu?" Monica asked.

"Pusseytail?"

Monica smiled. "No cocks in here."

This place is like one big cliché. "Sure."

When Monica passed her the menu, their hands touched and again lingered. Monica retracted her hand and Ali studied the menu. Blushing pink background, green drink names, and purple descriptions.

A woman at the far end of the bar signaled to Monica, who slipped away.

A lot of pink drinks. Cupid's Panties intrigued her, but it was a little early in the day for a shot, even one topped with whipped cream. A drink called *In the Pink* was a simple pink gin and tonic. *Perfect.*

Monica returned in less than a minute. "Lady wants to buy you a drink."

Ali glanced at the woman. *Attractive... from this distance.* "Sure, *In the Pink.*"

Ali surveyed the room. There were few customers. Perhaps six women, in pairs on sofas talking quietly, herself and the lady sitting at the bar. Ali's eyes settled on her. *Difficult to discern her features in the dimly lit bar.* The spotlights—all facing walls—made it hard for her eyes to adjust. Ali smiled at the woman, who was looking at her.

Monica placed Ali's drink on a white napkin, with the double painted lips from the logo, in front of her. The glass carried the same double lip motif.

"My shift finishes at eight. If you're ever at a loose end in the evening, swing by," Monica said.

Ali studied the woman in front of her. She moistened her lips. "I don't often have a free evening to be honest, but if I do, I'll be here."

"Look forward to it... very much," Monica said as she turned away to attend to another customer.

Ali raised her glass in acknowledgement to the woman who'd bought her drink. The woman returned the salute, stood, and made her way to Ali, at a confident, relaxed pace. Shoulder length light brown hair, a simple white blouse, three open buttons, a short white skirt, and matching white heels. *Nice figure.*

She reached Ali and extended her hand. They held rather than shook hands. "Eva."

"Ali."

"May I?" Eva asked, indicating the stool beside Ali.

"Please."

As Eva settled on the stool, Ali studied her. Brown eyes, bright with a hint of humor. Up close, Ali could see gray roots in the woman's hair. Lines extending from her eyes, and beside her narrow mouth, subtle pink eyeshadow, and pale pink lipstick. *Not young. Perfect.*

"First time?" Eva asked.

"No, I've been with women before."

Eva smiled, the humor in her eyes now more than a hint. "I mean here, the bar."

Ali flushed. "Sorry, I'm a little... Yes, first time here."

"This place is owned by a couple of middle-aged straight guys. They must have googled lesbian stereotypes when they designed the place, but I kinda like it."

"I was thinking it's all a little cliché."

"Totally cliché."

Ali offered her glass to Eva, who clinked it and made a toast. "Afternoon delights."

Ali returned her toast, sipped her drink, and after a little deliberation, placed her glass on the bar. She was nervous, her mouth dry.

As Ali retracted her hand from her drink, Eva placed her hand on Ali's, her finger caressing the white band on Ali's finger. "Newly single?" she asked.

"Yes, my husband and I separated. He's met someone, which I'm happy about."

"And you're looking to get back into the scene?"

"I've never been part of the er... scene, to be honest. A couple of affairs a very long time ago. Gave it up for my husband and kids... Don't know if I remember how, but it's who I am. I..."

Ali's mouth was dry. She picked up her drink with her free hand and gulped.

Eva moved closer. She slid her knee between Ali's, who felt a rush of arousal. *I so need this.*

"Relax, darling," Eva said, "It's like riding a... dyke, you never forget."

Ali smiled, her pulse and breathing quickened. She finished the remains of her drink in one swallow.

Eva said, "I need the restroom, and you need another drink." She signaled Monica, indicating another round. "Don't go anywhere."

Ali watched Eva walk away. *I'm not cheating on anyone. I told her what I needed and told her if she couldn't give it to me, I'd find someone who would. That's not cheating. If she could give me what I need, I wouldn't look at anyone else.*

Monica placed the drinks in front of Ali. "Eva is a kind and generous lady," she said. "Exactly what you need today, I think."

Ali nodded. *Yes, she's exactly what I need. I love you Judy, but...*

Eva was on her way back and Ali used her foot to maneuver Eva's stool a few inches closer.

As Eva sat, Ali opened her legs, allowing Eva's knee to resume its position, this time between her thighs instead of her knees. She drank about half her drink, with Eva mimicking her. They placed their drinks on the bar.

Their eyes connected, they leaned in, Ali moistened her suddenly dry lips, hoping her action would appear suggestive. Eva's lips parted a little as they reached Ali's and they kissed.

"You seem to be ready to get back in the saddle." Eva suggested.

"More than ready," Ali said.

"I don't live far. We can walk."

"Let's go."

Ali was a little shocked upon entering Eva's apartment. The carpets, walls, and curtains were white, and it didn't stop there. Eva's furniture was white, all of it in every room. White towels in the bathroom, white bedspread, shiny white drawings of naked women on a matt white background on the walls. There was nothing that wasn't white. *It's like I've entered a void.*

The women embraced and kissed. Eva began, and Ali mimicked her. They unbuttoned each other's blouse, and slid them from the other's shoulders, allowing two blouses to fall to the floor. They reached behind the other's waist and unfastened skirts, which dropped to join their partners.

Ali studied Eva, who wore a white silky bra and matching panties.

"I like white," Eva explained unnecessarily.

Their lips pressed together, and they caressed each other. *Exactly what I need.*

Ali arrived home, still basking in the glow of an afternoon of lovemaking with Eva. *Shower first, then prepare dinner.*

She undressed in the laundry, dropping her clothes into the hamper before walking naked to the bathroom. She glimpsed her reflection in the mirror. *How did she get lipstick there?*

Ali turned on the shower and stepped in, disappointed to wash Eva's scent from her body. *White.*

I'll remember her as white.

Ali smiled and turned off the shower. She went to the bedroom to dress, opened the wardrobe, and gasped. *John's clothing gone.* A sense of loss overwhelmed her, tears built behind her eyes.

She staggered backwards until her legs brushed against the bed and sat staring at the empty space where John's clothes had been. *He's really gone, leaving an empty space in my life.* She focused, forcing herself not to become emotional. *Focus on what you've gained, not on what you've lost. You haven't lost anything. He isn't gone, he's not dead. He just lives somewhere else.*

Ali stood and steeled herself. She spread some of her clothes out, beginning to fill the gap John had left in her wardrobe and in her life. She selected an outfit and dressed. White lingerie, white slacks and a white blouse.

She smiled at her reflection in the mirror. *White.*

She was ready to prepare dinner when her children arrived home from school, a little later than usual. She chose fish, which she wrapped in foil with lemon, cauliflower with a white cheese sauce, mashed potatoes and cream of mushroom soup.

Someone pressed the bell on the front door. Ali opened the door, surprised John was waiting on the doorstep. "Strange, you ringing the bell."

"I don't live here anymore. Lori said it was the right thing to do."

Ali smiled. "I like her."

John grinned.

"Dinner's ready," Ali said.

"You're almost glowing."

"Had an, umm... enjoyable afternoon." Ali grinned. *Like being able to talk to him about things.*

"Our Judy?"

"I wish. No John, she won't cheat on Myron like I wouldn't cheat on you."

John nodded, and she thought she saw a flash of guilt on his face. "Be happy, Ali."

"You too, John."

"I'll organize the kids. Not sure how they're gonna take it."

"They'll take their cues from us."

Ali took the bowls of soup to the table and returned to the kitchen to plate their dinners. When she turned back, John and the boys were already at the table eating their soup. Ali smiled. *Nothing needs to change.*

She stared at their plates. *White.* It didn't occur to her when she prepared the food.

The usual family small talk accompanied dinner. John didn't always eat with the family. Recently he'd been working late many nights, so him not eating with them regularly wouldn't be so unusual.

After dinner, John said to their children, "Your mother and I have an announcement to make."

Three pairs of eyes turned expectantly towards John, who looked at Ali.

Of course, it'll be down to me. Fucking men.

Ali glared at John and shook her head resignedly. "Boys, your father and I have separated, and are going to divorce."

Frankie studied her, then turned his gaze to his father.

It's as if he was born with that mildly amused, curious look in his eyes.

"Most of the kids at school's parents are divorced."

If Frankie's eyes were always curious, Charlie's eyes always seemed to be accusing. He glared at Ali, then at his father.

"Why? You two don't fight all the time."

Ali glanced at John, who returned her gaze with pleading eyes, but remained silent.

Jesus, those Farrington eyes. Curious, accusing, pleading.

Ali sighed. "Your father's fallen in love with another woman and has decided to spend the rest of his life with her."

John grimaced, then fixed his eyes on his empty plate.

Frankie glanced at his father, then focused on Ali. "Okay."

Charlie glared at his father. "Why? There's nothing wrong with Mom!"

Ali gave her youngest an amused smile. "Thank you, Charlie."

John said, "You're right Charlie. There is nothing wrong with your mother. It's just... I, umm... fell in love with another woman. I didn't mean it to happen..."

Ali rolled her eyes.

"So, you fell in love with someone and decided to stop loving Mom?" Charlie accused.

John studied his son. “No Charlie, I haven’t stopped loving your mom. I still love her. It’s a different kind of love, is all.”

Charlie stared at his mother. “Mom?”

“It’s all right Charlie. I’ll always love your father. We’re family, and always will be.”

He gave her his accusing glare. “So you’re gonna find a new husband, too?”

“No Charlie, I’m not. There’s something else we need to tell you.” Ali fidgeted in her chair, glanced at John, who nodded his support. She took a deep breath and said, “I’m a lesbian.”

“A lesbian?”

“Yes, Charlie. It means that I prefer girls.”

“Jesus, Mom, I know what a fucking lesbian is.”

“Charlie!” Ali said.

John said, “You watch your mouth, Charlie. I don’t want to hear that language from you.”

He glared at his father, but softened when he looked at his mother. “I’m sorry Mom. I didn’t mean it like that. We have lesbians at school. We had class about it in family education. Some people are born with different feelings. I get it, but I don’t understand how you can be one.”

“We are what we are, Charlie.” Ali replied, knowing it was inadequate. She glanced at Frankie, who smiled and gave her a knowing look. *Surely, he can’t remember. He was just a baby.*

“It’s okay, Mom,” Frankie said, “My friend Johnny has two fathers.”

“If you two still love each other, I don’t understand why everything can’t stay as it is,” Charlie said.

Frankie’s gaze focused on his brother. “Love has no meaning, Charlie. I mean, it has meaning, but it doesn’t have a fixed meaning you can look up in the dictionary. People change the meaning all the time. When people say, ‘I love you,’ it means whatever they want it to mean, whatever it means to them. To the person they say it to, it means whatever they want to hear. Even though someone says the words and someone else hears them, the meaning is not the same.”

How old is this kid? Seventeen or seventy?

Charlie said, “I don’t understand, Frankie.”

“Love can’t be defined by words, Charlie. When it comes to love, we need to listen with our heart, our feelings. I can feel Mom and Dad love us, and I can feel they love each other. That’s all that matters.”

Ali stared at her eldest son. *He doesn’t talk much, but when he does...*

“That’s why I’m confused,” Charlie said.

Frankie continued, as if his parents weren’t there. “This isn’t a bad thing for us. We’ll get to do all sorts of cool stuff with Dad, because he feels guilty. Mom will overcompensate trying to make us okay with her being a lesbian, and Dad’s new wife will be nice to us trying to make us like her. What’s her name, Dad?”

“Err... Lori,” John said, staring at his son.

Who is this kid? Ali said, “Frankie, how do you...”

Frankie shrugged. “I’ve seen what happens with my friends when their parents’ divorce. I know how it works. Come on Charlie, let’s go talk.” He stood and left the room.

Charlie followed.

John stared at Ali. “How can he know all that?”

“He watches, John. He observes everything and takes it all in. Always has, even when he was a baby. He reminds me of your brother.”

“Yes,” John agreed. “He’s like Frank, and he reminds me of our Judy, too.”

He’s right! If Frank and Judy had a child, it would be our Frankie.

“Well, that went better than expected,” Ali said. *No thanks to you.*

“Thank God for Frankie,” John said.

She stood. “I should do the dishes, and you need to say goodbye to the kids and go home to Lori. She’ll be anxious to learn how it went.”

John nodded. “You really are a good woman, Ali.”

“I am. Don’t forget that.”

He nodded again and went to say goodbye to his sons.

Ali rinsed the dishes and loaded the dishwasher; her head was full of Judy.

I wish...

White Coffee

Judy sat in her booth at Frank's Diner, watching people pass by as she'd done for a dozen years. She was waiting for Ali to join her for breakfast.

Ali, wearing a white knee-length dress, strolled into view. The morning sun silhouetted her body through the fine cotton material. Judy's eyes widened, her jaw slackened, pulse quickened, and she twitched. *My God!*

She was aware of Ali smiling at her as she passed the window, but frozen with a blend of admiration, love, and desire, she couldn't respond. Her eyes glued to Ali all the way to the door of the diner, transfixed by the graceful movements of her lover's silhouette. Fidgeting, she almost jumped out of the booth to embrace the woman she loved.

She kissed her more passionately than she normally would at the diner. She pulled Ali into her, whispering, "My God, you look... I want you now."

Ali beamed. "Behave yourself. Not here, but anywhere else you want."

They sat in their booth and kissed again. Judy's hand found its way inside Ali's dress. She ignored Ali's attempt to brush her hand away. Ali grabbed Judy's wrist and extracted Judy's hand from between her legs.

Suzy Q was on her way to take their order. Judy, breathing heavily, stared out the window, trying to calm herself. *What's wrong with me?*

Ali ordered their usual. Judy vaguely heard Suzy Q say, "Okey Dokey." Her attention focused on bringing herself under control.

Ali rested her hand on Judy's arm. "What was that about?" she asked.

"I... I don't know what happened. I saw you coming and thought you looked beautiful this morning."

"Just this morning?" Ali joked.

"I was already aroused, but when you embraced me, I couldn't control myself. I..."

Judy turned to study Ali and stared at her, allowing what she was sensing to register. *She's glowing. She got laid.* Judy stiffened. "You've been with someone."

Ali nodded and smiled. "You can tell? John could too."

Judy removed her arm and glared at her. "Well, that didn't take long."

"It was easy," Ali said. "I wasn't in the bar for a minute."

"I mean, you've only been separated for five minutes. You didn't even wait a day."

"And what difference would waiting a day have made? Did you talk with Myron last night?"

"No, I..."

"I knew you wouldn't."

"Waiting for the right time." *I don't like this. Don't want her with other women.* "I didn't think you'd rush off chasing pussy so quickly."

"I told you what I was going to do, and I told you what to do if you don't like it."

"It's fine. If that's what you want..."

Ali interrupted her. "It's not what I want, it's what I need to do because you won't give me what I want."

Don't put it on me. "You can do whatever you want."

"What I want is to go to your place after breakfast." Ali stroked her arm gently. "So let's do that and we'll never have to go through this again."

Judy shook her head. "I want to, but I can't. I..."

"I told you I needed you to take pity on me yesterday, practically begged you, and you rejected me."

"So you went off and found someone to take pity on you?"

"Yes, and she did. Twice."

Bitch! Judy glared, then turned away. *Can't bear the thought of her being with someone else.*

Suzy Q delivered their food and left without a word. *Guess she can feel the tension.*

Judy didn't glance at her breakfast. She could hear Ali eating hers.

Ali asked, "Are you going to eat?"

"Not hungry."

Ali placed her hand under Judy's chin and pulled her head around. She locked her eyes on Judy's who wanted to look away, but couldn't.

"I love you, Judy Vernon. I need you to understand what this means when I say it. What I feel goes beyond love. You are the love of my life, my soulmate. I'm a part of you and you're a part of me. We don't just belong together, it's like we're one, spiritually, or something. I don't know how to explain it, but I feel it, and I know you feel the same."

Judy smiled and softened, but the sting remained.

Ali continued. "I'm closer to you than I thought possible to be with another person. Sometimes it's as if I'm in your mind."

That's annoyingly true.

"I want you, completely. I want to make love to you. I already share you emotionally with Myron, and I'm happy to share you physically, too. Together or separately."

Judy opened her mouth to speak, but Ali stopped her. "Let me finish, darling."

She nodded and sipped her coffee.

"I love Myron too. Differently than I love you, but not like a brother as I do John. It's something different."

Ali paused, sipped some coffee, then returned her gaze to Judy. "John's a considerate lover. I always enjoyed being with him, but I learned long ago it doesn't compare to being with a woman. I confirmed that yesterday."

Judy squeezed her hand, waiting for Ali to invite her to speak.

Ali continued after eating more of her breakfast. "For fifteen years, I denied myself, which I don't regret, but I can't anymore. I need the intensity I experience with a woman, and I need it with you. If I can't, I'll find it elsewhere."

Don't know why I can't find the words to talk to Myron.

"I can't explain why I need it so much, but I do. Yesterday made that clear. I have a need and where it's satisfied is up to you."

Judy said, "I understand, but..."

"Do you? Can you really understand? I doubt you've had to deny yourself anything in your life."

"I've denied myself you."

"You don't *have* to."

"I must speak with Myron first."

"I understand, but when?"

"I don't... I'm waiting for the right moment."

"I don't want to hurt you, and I don't want to pressure you."

"Yes, you do," Judy said.

"While you're waiting, I won't deny myself what I need. If you prefer, I won't tell you about it."

"I don't want that. I don't want us to have secrets. Besides, I'll know anyway. You can tell me, but perhaps not the er... details."

Ali smiled. "You don't want to know what you're missing?"

"I already know."

Ali scooped a forkful from Judy's plate and raised it to her mouth. "Open. Your breakfast is cold."

Judy said, "What, you're gonna treat me like a child now?" She opened her mouth and enjoyed Ali feeding her despite her mood.

"If you're going to pout like a spoiled little girl, that's how I'll treat you."

"Are you going to spank me next?"

Ali grinned. "That could be fun."

Judy winked. "Something to look forward to."

"Eat your breakfast. Mine's cold now, too."

After breakfast, Suzy Q cleared away their plates and brought fresh coffees.

Judy noticed Ali checking out Suzy Q, who was wearing, a white blouse with a large bow at the back, a very short gray pleated skirt, with two petticoats, black stockings that finished halfway up her thighs complete with suspenders, and gray shoes. An aqua cravat and light brown hair completed her outfit. *More normal today, but much sexier than usual.*

Judy studied Ali. "Promise me, nothing close to home."

"She's particularly hot today." Ali moistened her lips, then grinned. "I promise, I'll keep it anonymous."

"Are you going to see that woman again?"

"I was planning to. That's why I wore white, but no."

White? Judy gave her a quizzical look.

“Not important,” Ali said.

“What’re you thinking?”

“No point in getting too close to anyone. My heart’s taken.”

Judy smiled and kissed her.

They finished their coffees in silence, comfortable, but perhaps not as content as usual.

Ali said, “I better go. I have a few errands to run today.”

They kissed goodbye and Ali left, noticing Suzy Q behind the counter, crouched down, staring at her phone. Her short skirt revealed black panties tight against that *cute little package between her legs*. *God, I’d like a taste of that*. She shook her head and left.

Ali had dressed in white, planning to return to Afternoon Delights. Her idea was to approach Eva, buy her a White Russian with a line about Eva liking white. Now, she thought it wouldn’t be wise. She wasn’t looking for a relationship.

I’m free of John, and not sexually committed to Judy, yet. For the first time in my life, I’m free to explore. I don’t know if this will last a day, a week, or a month. However long it lasts, I’m going to make the most of it.

Ali wasn’t sure where she was headed. Her mind consumed by the image of Suzy Q, crouched behind the counter. Her short skirt, revealing in Ali’s imagination, more than those black panties had revealed in reality. *I want to try an Asian girl*.

Ali grabbed her phone from her bag and searched the address of *Tokyo Jo’s*, a bar and bistro where *Lipstick on Lipstick* had informed her she was likely to encounter Asian lesbians.

She smiled, checked her map app, and set out for her next sexual adventure.

Having showered, Judy stood naked, admiring her reflection in the mirror. She was happy with her appearance. *I still look good, better than anything Ali’s gonna find in a bar. Why don’t I just have the talk with Myron? Sure he’ll be okay with it, but what if he isn’t?*

Her phone rang. She retrieved it from the bed and glanced at caller ID. *Of course it is. Seems whenever I’m naked, either Myron or Ali call, as if they have a sixth sense*. As she was thinking about Ali, of course, it was Myron. She smiled.

“Hello darling, I’m just out of the shower.”

“Well, that explains why I’m hard,” he said.

“You’re always hard.”

If it was Ali, we’d have had the same conversation, except she’d be wet. Perhaps she’s right, maybe the three of us could... She shook her head to focus on what Myron was saying.

“John Farrington wants to meet us for dinner at Frank’s tonight.”

“Okay, anything in particular? Meet Lori?”

“Said he has a couple of things he needs advice on.”

“Okay.”

Wonder what John wants? Interesting Myron and Ali seem to be on the same page... and I am that page. Amusing herself with her own humor, as she often did. *What would it be like to have them read the page together?*

What to wear? She chose a white dress from her casual evening selection, and matching white aphrodisiac lingerie, mimicking what Ali had worn that day.

She again studied herself appreciatively in the mirror. *Am I becoming more vain as I get older?*

Collecting her shoulder bag from her office, she left for Frank's Diner, a twenty-minute walk from their apartment.

Judy wore a satisfied expression when she entered the diner. It was busy. She greeted Johanna, the evening waitress.

Johanna was married, with three young children. Her husband was a construction worker who began work early in the morning and finished midafternoon. After work, he would take care of the children, and cook the dinner, his wife prepared during the day. Johanna worked evenings. The arrangement suited them because they both needed to work, and separate shifts saved on childcare expenses.

Judy sat in her booth, waiting. John arrived first.

She stood to greet him with a hug, a little longer than usual, and a kiss on the cheek. "Are you doing okay, John?"

"Yes. Ali and Lori have made my, err... transition, easy. The boys, too."

Judy nodded, then glanced up as the bell on the door jingled.

"Myron," John commented, without looking around, despite his back being to the door.

"How..."

"The way your face lit up, it was either Myron or Ali."

"Oh."

Myron reached the booth, and Judy stood to greet him. They kissed.

"Hello beautiful," he said.

John stood, shook hands, and exchanged greetings.

"I'm going to order a coffee and have a quick word with Darnell," Myron said. "Do you guys know what you want?"

"Coffee?" Judy asked. "You won't sleep easily."

"I'll think of something to do if I can't sleep," Myron grinned, and Judy flushed. "Besides, whenever I see John, I want his coffee."

John said, "I think I'd like Susie's mac and cheese tonight."

"Not sure," Judy said. "Ask Darnell to make me something."

"I love that you guys still banter," John said, as Judy watched Myron head to the kitchen, stopping to order coffee from Johanna on the way. "I have that with Lori, but never did with Ali."

“Don’t compare, John.”

He frowned, then nodded.

Johanna delivered Myron’s coffee.

He returned minutes later.

“What do you need, John?” Myron asked.

“I need a lawyer, possibly two,” John said.

“Two?” asked Judy.

“I need a friendly lawyer to draw up the divorce papers and the agreement with Ali. I don’t want lawyers fucking things up.”

Their meals arrived, mac and cheese for John, a lamb shank for Myron, and something that appeared to be chips and gravy for Judy.

Darnell brought Judy’s meal to the table himself. “I’m using you as a guinea pig again, Aunt Judy,” he said. “It’s my take on poutine, which originated in Quebec in the late fifties. I’ve made Belgian style fries which are crispy from being twice cooked, and the cheese curds differ from a traditional poutine recipe because they’re fried in a beer batter. Covered by brown beer gravy with pieces of pulled, slow cooked pork. I was going to call it *American Poutine*, but a company’s using that already. So, I’m calling it *Frank’s Poutine*. Anyway, enjoy and let me know what you think.”

“It looks amazing, Darnell,” Judy said. She leaned over her plate and inhaled. “Mmm smells great.”

“Thank you for trying it, Aunt Judy,” Darnell said, and headed back to the kitchen to the sound of The Orioles version of *Crying in The Chapel*.

Judy picked up her fork and tried *Frank’s Poutine*. She placed the food in her mouth and closed her eyes to savor the flavor before chewing. She swallowed. “This is delicious. How Darnell can make chips and gravy taste this good, I’ll never know! Try some John.”

John sampled Judy’s dinner. “That’s amazing. You should try some Myron.”

“Pork.” Myron explained.

“Oh... right,” John said, as he tried more of Judy’s meal. “This would be perfect with the mac and cheese. I mean, two people and two shared dishes...”

Judy reached over with the familiarity of family and took a forkful from John’s plate without asking. “You’re right.”

Darnell returned. “Good idea. I might make a *Chef’s Recommendation*.” He placed a small plate containing a serving of Belgian fries and beer battered cheese curds, but no gravy in front of Myron. “I thought you might like to try some too, Uncle Myron.”

“Thoughtful of you, Darnell.”

“Bec reminded me,” he smiled.

Myron tried them. “Excellent,” he said. “You have an extraordinary ability with food and flavor.”

Darnell beamed. “Thank you, Uncle Myron,” he said, and returned to the kitchen.

John said, “Myron, Coffee Roasters are going to retail my blend nationally, and have asked me to sign a consent to use my blend and my name. There’ll be royalties involved.”

“That’s great news,” Judy said. “Congratulations John.”

Myron explained. “A coffee blend is a form of intellectual property. One of our companies manages intellectual property ownership. We record and legitimize the distribution of the intellectual property rights. That means, for example, if Coffee Roasters were to sell the blend in the future, you would be sure to receive your proportion of the proceeds.”

“To be honest, I’m happy they’re giving me anything, so I’m not going to be greedy about it. I guess a lawyer could argue my rights and play hard ball for a bigger share... but I’m not like that. Maybe I’m stupid, but it’s not me.”

“I don’t think you’re stupid,” Myron said. “Let’s sit down with Coffee Roasters and see what’s on the table. If you’re happy with it, we’ll just formalize the agreement. It’s in their interest too, to have their ownership of the blend registered and perhaps patented.”

“Sounds good, Myron, thank you. I’ll call them tomorrow and set up a meeting.”

“It’ll be me, Simon Sharpe, the manager of the Intellectual Property Management company, and Judy, who’s a director of the company, and has a relationship with Coffee Roasters.”

John gave Judy a quizzical look. “I don’t do much,” she said. “A monthly newsletter for our staff.”

“Simon’s also our family lawyer. He can handle the divorce for you, too.” Myron suggested.

“Thank you, you’ve helped me a lot,” John said.

They walked John to his car, and then held hands as they strolled home.

Myron said, “I’m awake after that coffee.”

“Let’s see if I can tire you out.”

“I think I’ll take some tiring,” Myron patted her ass.

“I hope so.” Judy smiled.

“You *do* have a damn fine ass.”

“So, I’ve been told.” She giggled.

Not A Single Story

Ali sat in Judy's booth. She was a little early. Suzy Q brought her a coffee.

She wore a long, flowing crimson dress with a pink ribbon threaded above the hem. A single pink petticoat protruded from beneath her dress. An oversize black collar with a pink ribbon below the low-cut neckline. A silk kimono style belt wrapped her waist and matching black shoes completed her outfit. Today's hair color was silvery white, adorned with a jeweled hair pin.

"Thank you, Suzy Q," Ali said, watching her skip away.

Interesting. Watching her makes me think of Su-Lin. When I was with Su-Lin, all I could think about was Suzy Q.

Ali entered Tokyo Jo's and glanced around. *A typical bar and bistro.* Cane chairs and tables and a cane fronted bar greeted her. Beyond this, it didn't seem particularly Asian. It certainly didn't scream lesbian as Afternoon Delights had.

Most of the customers were women, sitting in pairs or groups, but a few tables had a single occupant. Many, but not all the patrons were Asian. On her way to the bar, she walked past a young Asian girl sitting by herself. Ali smiled.

The girl returned Ali's smile and made eye contact long enough to communicate interest. Ali ordered a pink gin, turned, and surveyed the room. She appraised the girl, who accepted Ali's gaze and maintained eye contact.

Ali sauntered to the girl. "May I join you?"

"Please."

She sat, then offered her glass in a silent toast. The girl clinked it. They drank and placed their glasses on the table.

She extended her hand. "Ali."

The girl took it. "Su-Lin."

They held hands and locked eyes until Ali felt herself twitch. She moistened her lips and took a breath. "This is the first time I've been here. Seems like an interesting place."

Su-Lin smiled. "Not really, but I like the people who come here."

They clinked glasses again. Noticing Su-Lin's was almost empty. Ali drained hers. "What're you drinking?"

"Singapore Sling."

"May I buy you another?"

She smiled. "Sure."

"I might try one myself. Been looking forward to a taste of Asia." Ali smiled and held Su-Lin's gaze.

On her way to the bar, she glanced over her shoulder. Her lips curled up when she saw Su-Lin's eyes fixed on her.

As they drank, the women relaxed and chatted easily. Su-Lin bought them another.

Ali asked, "Do you have any plans for this afternoon?"

Su-Lin smiled. "I do, but I didn't know who with, until you walked in."

Finally. "Perhaps we can go somewhere more private, and you can tell me about your plans." Ali suggested.

"I'd like that, but I live with my parents."

Ali winked. "My place then."

She stood and offered her hand, which Su-Lin took, and they left.

During her afternoon with Su-Lin, Ali had been consumed with images of Suzy Q.

Ali glanced up when the bell dinged as the door opened. She smiled. Lost in thoughts of yesterday afternoon, she hadn't noticed Judy walk past the window.

She smiled and stood against the wall to allow Judy to slip into the booth and slide across to the window where she preferred to sit. Judy dropped her shoulder bag on the seat, and the women embraced and kissed.

Judy's breathing quickened and the pressure of her kiss intensified as her hand slid down Ali's back. Before she realized what was happening, Judy's hand was rubbing between her legs.

Ali's eyes opened wide when Judy's hand slipped inside her panties. *What's she doing? Isn't this against the rules? Did she talk with Myron?*

It was what she wanted, but it wasn't right. *Not here, and not now.* Ali pushed her own desire back and shoved Judy into the booth.

"Slide over," Ali slid in beside Judy, who stared out the window, breathing heavily. Even with her head turned away, Ali saw her swallow hard.

She reached across and took Judy's hand, resting in her lap. "What's going on with you?" *Probably overreacting.*

Judy didn't answer.

Ali squeezed her hand and said, "Talk to me."

"I don't know. I was fine until I hugged you, and then I became incredibly horny. The same as yesterday, even hornier."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I just did."

"Is it the thought of me..."

"I try not to think about *that*."

And how's that working out? "Okay."

Suzy Q arrived to take their order. Ali smiled, remembering her afternoon with Su-Lin. "We'll have our usual. Thanks, Suzy Q."

"Okey-Dokey," Suzy Q said and went to organize their food.

"What, no quip about wanting Chinese for breakfast?" Judy asked.

"I had Chinese for lunch yesterday."

Judy stiffened. *God! Are we gonna go through this nonsense every day?* “Did you talk to Myron?”

“No, it wasn’t the right time.”

Never is. Ali contemplated Judy, who was still staring out the window. *That’s not it.* “You’re not waiting for the right time. You’re waiting until you’re sure how he’ll react.”

Judy’s head spun around, and she glared at Ali.

Ali smiled. “I know. You don’t like me in your head.”

“How do you do that?”

“It just happens, like your hand just happened to find its way inside my panties.”

“I didn’t think you liked it, the way you pushed me away. You didn’t push that Chinese girl away.”

God! “I didn’t promise *her* I would.”

“So, she can touch you, but I can’t.”

For fuck’s sake. “You made me promise. I didn’t want to. Talk to Myron and you won’t need to overreact.”

“I don’t overreact!”

You do. “No, darling, you don’t, I’m sorry. It’s not what I meant.”

“What did you mean?”

Ali reached her hand behind Judy’s head and pulled her close. She kissed her gently. “I love you Judy, and I have to admit, I like you jealous.”

“I’m *not* jealous. You’re free to do what you want.”

I am. “I don’t want to be free, but that’s your decision. Here’s Suzy Q with our breakfast, so behave yourself.”

Suzy Q delivered their plates quietly and left. Ali watched her walking away, again thinking of Su-Lin.

“While you were with that girl, you were thinking of our Suzy Q.”

“No, I wasn’t,” Ali lied.

“Yes, you were.”

“Eat your breakfast.”

After they ate and had a second coffee, Ali said, “I’ve got something to do. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Another bar?” Judy asked.

Ali smiled. “Not today. I’m going to a bookstore.”

“I’m sorry...”

Ali stopped her words with a kiss. “I love you, Judy Vernon.”

Judy smiled. “I know. As long as I can feel your love, I know everything’s going to be fine. I love you too, darling.”

“Well, everything will be fine for the rest of your life, because I won’t stop loving you.”

Ali collected her bag and left. She knew exactly where she was headed.

Su-Lin was much younger than the other women Ali had been with, which aroused her curiosity. She wanted to experience being with a young woman. *I need to experience as much as I can while I have this opportunity. I don’t want to be free, but while I am...*

Through *Lipstick on Lipstick*, she learned about a bookstore near city college, which had a café located adjacent to the *Woman’s Issues* section of the bookstore. It attracted students who were particularly interested in women’s issues.

Ali flagged a taxi and gave the driver the address of *UniBook*.

Judy watched Ali leave the diner. She fidgeted. She was fighting the urge to return home to masturbate. She didn’t want to. She wanted to take the woman she loved to bed. *Why am I so horny whenever she comes close to me?*

Don’t like knowing she’s off looking for another sexual adventure. We both want me to be her sexual adventure. Can’t blame her. It’s my fault.

I think Myron will be okay with it, but I don’t want anything to change between us. I like things exactly as they are. If I take this next step with Ali, everything could change, even if he’s okay with it.

Judy signaled Suzy Q for another coffee. She needed to think. If she went home to work as she normally would, she would neither work nor think. She would be on the bed in minutes, releasing the effect Ali had on her. *Ali’s right about Suzy Q, or is it just that Ali’s left me so horny?*

Darnell and Rebekah were discussing something behind the front counter. She could see from their body language they loved each other, and their relationship was good.

Rebekah was an excellent cook who was becoming a chef as she progressed through culinary school. Her execution and presentation had been described as flawless, but it was the way she’d learned her trade of managing the diner that impressed Judy most. *Obvious why she was put in the gifted young program in high school.*

Darnell was different. He was at the same level as Rebekah training wise, but what he possessed couldn’t be taught. He had an instinct, a natural understanding of how flavors worked together, and how they combined to enhance each other. *Darnell could be anything in the culinary world. I’m concerned the diner will hold him back.*

Rebekah and Darnell joined her in the booth.

Rebekah, beaming, announced, “Darnell proposed!”

Noticing the ring on Rebekah’s waved finger, Judy said, “You obviously accepted. Congratulations.”

Judy stood, leaned across the table, and hugged them both.

“We haven’t set a date yet,” Rebekah said.

“But it won’t be long. No point in stalling,” Darnell added.

“We want to marry in The Secret Garden, and I’m going to ask Uncle Myron to give me away.”

“He’ll be honored, but what about your Papa?”

“I’ll invite Mama and Papa to the wedding, but they won’t come. Probably won’t even open the invitation. I’ve written them a couple of letters, but they come back ‘return to sender’ unopened. Don’t suppose they can receive mail from a dead daughter.”

“I’m sorry, Becky.”

“My own fault. I was a horrible little bitch. Don’t blame them. Wanted to be free of them. I got what I wanted, but it didn’t occur to me there’d be a price to pay. I destroyed two families. They lost a daughter, and poor Tony’s parents lost a son.”

“We can’t change the past, Bec,” Darnell said. “All we can do is learn from it.”

Rebekah smiled. “You’re right Darnell.” She focused on Judy. “I can’t make amends, and if I try, I’ll only hurt people again in an attempt to ease my guilt. I thought about writing to Tony’s parents, but that will only open their wounds. They’ll never forgive me, and I have no right to ask them to.”

Judy glanced out the window. George was having a smoke break. She smiled and focused her attention on Rebekah. “You can’t change the past, but don’t underestimate the good you’ve done here. You’ve helped give many people a future they may not have had without you.”

Rebekah nodded, glanced at Darnell and said, “We’re trying to pay it forward.”

“Myron and I are proud of the both of you, not only for what you’ve achieved here, but for the way you look after your people.”

“Oh, Aunt Judy, I was going to ask you and Ali to be my Matrons of Honor.”

“We’d be honored,” replied Judy, who had no hesitation in speaking for Ali.

“Better get back to the kitchen,” Darnell said.

“Congratulations again,” Judy said.

“Would you like another coffee?” Rebekah asked.

“Please Becky, I’m gonna be here for a while.”

Rebekah and Darnell made their way to the kitchen. Rebekah had a quick word with Suzy Q on the way.

Neither is a single story. Darnell is African American, a poorly educated drug dealer, an ex-convict, a rape victim, a child without a father, a cook, a restauranter, a genius with flavor, a loving partner, and so much more.

Rebekah, reasonably well educated, had a supportive family who disowned her because she was also a criminal. An ex-convict and a rape victim, she’s a restauranter, a capable businesswoman, and a loving partner... differences and similarities.

Suzy Q delivered Judy’s coffee and skipped away. Judy smiled, but the thought of Ali being with her, or someone like her, still pierced her heart.

Don’t understand why I can’t just talk to Myron. At least that’s what she told herself, but she did, and so did Ali.

She raised her cup, inhaled the aroma, muted by the milk, took a sip, and stared out the window.

As she often did, Judy began talking to the long-departed Frank. “It’s funny how we see people as a single story, isn’t it, Frank?” She drank a little more before continuing. “We see people and label them as this or that, which is seldom more than a superficial single story. We’re more than a single story. We’re a tapestry of stories woven together through time and experience to create a unique work of art, seldom recognized.” She opened her iPad and added *Tapestry* to her list of features.

“Why do people need to label everything?” she asked, knowing she wouldn’t receive an answer. “I suppose labels help people to understand, but only if people share the same definition of labels, which they seldom do.” *Labels are simultaneously helpful and unhelpful.*

She stared out the window, lost in thought, which distracted her from her desire for Ali.

Judy glanced at Frank’s memorial plaque and resumed talking to him. “Wars have been fought over nothing more than the use of a different label.” She reached for her iPad and added *Labels* to her list of features.

Her thoughts turned from labels to words. *It’s not only labels. People interpret, define, and understand words differently.*

“Don’t you think, Frank, that people’s definitions often differ from the dictionary definition? Sometimes nuanced, but other times very different. Do people communicate at all? I guess people only approximately communicate.”

Empathy is more important than language in determining how effective communication is. She added *Empathy vs Language* to her list of features and then *Defining Words*.

Judy enjoyed the aromas of Welsh Rarebit and bacon as Suzy Q delivered an order to a nearby table. She drained her coffee and signaled for another. *I shouldn’t but I’ll be here for a while, I think.*

She returned to her usual occupation of staring out the window and thinking. *Perhaps a series of features. All will be difficult to write.*

Suzy Q brought her coffee, accompanied by Dion and the Belmonsts version of *Where or When*. *I like the Sinatra version better.* Judy focused on Suzy Q, who returned to the counter, leaving the sting of Ali being with other women in her wake.

She took a mouthful of her fresh coffee and forced her thoughts away from Ali.

Pavlov’s dog. The media conditions us to embrace superficial single stories based on cultural stereotypes.

Judy recognized the same patterns in herself. She’d certainly been guilty of writing Frank off as a single story, as a fat angry man when she’d first encountered him. She glanced out the window where she had first glimpsed Frank and then witnessed his death. It was, in reality, the only time Judy had actually seen him, but she didn’t realize this.

She gazed at Frank’s memorial plaque. “Sorry Frank,” she said.

Like most people, she still grouped people based on a single story or a single aspect of their story. *Perhaps we shouldn’t categorize people at all.*

She considered her own situation; she no longer had a label for herself. In college, she’d identified as gay. *A happy dyke.*

Dyke is an interesting word. We can use it as a term of endearment, but also as a term of contempt. It depends on the context in which it's being used. I like the word.

Her life experience taught her she was not just a lesbian, and she began identifying as bisexual. A *cute bi-girl*, she called herself.

Now, pansexual would be a more accurate description. *Can women be pansexual?* Not that it mattered, because she'd stopped trying to label herself. She didn't need a label to know who she was.

She had sex and sometimes relationships with whoever attracted her, regardless of their gender. When younger, she'd said, *I fuck whoever makes me wet.*

Now she was monogamous for the first time in her life—well, almost. She was also in a relationship with Ali, which they'd never consummated.

She thought of Brian, who'd identified as a *male lesbian*. Judy had met him when researching a feature and had been both intrigued and attracted by him, despite being skeptical about the concept of a male lesbian. They had enjoyed a relationship for a few months.

Judy conceded being with Brian was like being with a woman. The depth and nature of their conversation had a feminine feel to it, and Brian was exceptionally talented with his tongue.

In the end, they broke up because Judy found him *too dykey*.

Attaching labels to people is misleading and inaccurate. Best move away from labels altogether.

This summed up Judy's life, sitting quietly in the same place she had for years, allowing her mind to wander. Quietly contemplating life, her experiences, her thoughts, and, in the process, developing ideas to be researched, expanded upon, and written as features.

The sound of her phone interrupted her. She glanced at caller ID. *Myron.*

"Hello darling."

"Hi sweetheart, are you okay to meet with Coffee Roasters this afternoon?"

"Sure, not doing anything important."

"John and Simon Sharpe will meet us there."

"I'm heading home." *Now I'll be able to work.* "You can pick me up on your way."

Judy gathered her belongings into her shoulder bag, said goodbye to Suzie Q, and left the diner, thinking about Simon Sharpe—an interesting man who had been to hell and back—to distract herself from Ali.

Sharp By Nature

Simon Sharpe studied his notes to collect his thoughts. This was an unusual case. Seldom did a successful plaintiff appeal a decision.

He stood to address the Court of Appeal, a panel of three judges.

“Your Honors, the defendant’s actions go beyond a flagrant disregard for the law. As has been demonstrated by the budgetary projections of the project, the defendants not only knew they were in breach of the law, but calculated the cost of both the fines, and the compensation they would need to pay my client for obscuring his view of the harbor and reducing the quality of his life.”

Simon paused and studied the judges while his words sank in. The judges, two men and a woman, were all senior judges. *They’ll value quality of life.*

“Your Honors, my client has reached the age where quality of life is more valuable than any amount of money. The compensation awarded may seem generous, but it is not sufficient to replace the enjoyment of life that was taken from him by the defendant’s cynical disregard of the laws of this city.”

He paused again, allowing the judges to process his new point. *The law’s important to them.*

“The city has planning laws for a reason.”

They were more regulations than laws, but Simon wanted to emphasize the lack of respect for the legal system.

“The people want to maintain the ambiance of the city, and the government has responded to the people. Nobody wants the bay to be surrounded by high-rise monstrosities that will change the nature of the city and restrict the enjoyment of our magnificent bay to a privileged few.”

Another pause.

He waved his hand towards the defendants and their lawyers. “These people have cynically demonstrated if one has enough money, the law and legal process is irrelevant. They have shown they believe a person who works hard all their life has no right to expect quality of life as a reward for their efforts. And that the will of our citizens has less meaning than their desire to increase their own wealth.”

Simon picked up the glass from his table and sipped a little water.

“My client is asking your honors to send a message to people like this. The law applies to all citizens, even those with money. The will of the people, which is respected by our government, cannot be ignored for the sake of a little extra profit.”

Another sip of water, as he turned to wink at his client.

“He is asking the court to order the defendants to demolish the illegal floors of their building to ensure it complies with the law, reflects the will of the people of this city, and thus restores my client’s quality of life which he has earned through a life of hard work.”

Simon sat. He whispered to his client, “Now we wait for them to deliberate. It could take a while because what we’re asking is unprecedented.”

His client replied, “I understand Simon, you did a good job.”

Simon shrugged. “Their verdict will tell us if I did a good enough job.”

The Court of Appeals judges deliberated for two days.

After delivering a summary, the senior judge read the verdict. "This court therefore finds in favor of The Appellant. The Defendant will commence demolition of the illegal floors within ninety days."

The defendant's lawyers began to protest, but the judge waved them away, and the panel of judges stood and left the courtroom.

Simon's client said, "Simon, you really are an exceptional lawyer."

Simon smiled. "Sharpe by name and sharp by nature."

He heard his opponent comment, "Arrogant, son of a bitch."

Simon grinned. He was arrogant, but he'd earned the right to be.

Simon grabbed his hand towel and wiped the sweat off his brow, his breathing still heavy after two hours of exertion. He glanced at his reflection in the full-length mirror, usually the domain of body builders, pausing between sets to admire their own physique. *In good shape.*

Simon was a big man. Six and a half feet tall, and large framed. Two hours in the gym was part of his daily ritual, concerned because the men in his family easily ran to fat. Both his brother and his father were huge. They blamed it on genetics, but Simon told them it was an excuse for them being lazy sons of bitches.

He entered the dressing room, opened his locker, and checked his phone. *Deirdre hasn't answered my messages.*

Simon showered, dressed, glanced at his phone, and left.

A quick stop at Lexington Deli for chicken Caesar salad for dinner, and Lexington Wines for a bottle of Veuve Clicquot to celebrate his victory.

After he arrived home, he transferred his salad to a plate, placed the champagne in an ice bucket, which he left on the bench, and took his meal to the table, solid mahogany with matching chairs. Before he began eating, he checked his phone. *Probably in a meeting.*

Simon ate slowly, without enthusiasm. He turned on the TV to catch the news but didn't pay attention; he was even less interested in the news than he was in his dinner. He'd prefer steak and potatoes, but the thought of his father and brother inspired him to eat healthy, low-fat food. Simon glanced at his watch for the ninth time since arriving home.

Strange. It wasn't unusual for Deirdre to work late, but usually, she'd let him know. He tried calling her. *Still no answer.*

He took his dirty plate and cutlery to the sink and washed them, before adjourning to the sofa to wait.

Simon looked at his watch for the twenty-third time since arriving home and tried calling Deirdre a fourth time. *Something's wrong.*

He stood, checked the champagne on the bench. Disposed of the slush from the ice bucket and refilled it with fresh ice. He wandered over to the bar and poured himself a shot of Oban. After taking two sips, he glanced at his watch again.

He left his first-floor street fronted apartment, walked down three steps, spun round and walked up three steps, opened the door of Deirdre's apartment and stepped inside, turning on the lights as he did.

He had a cursory look around. *Everything's in order.* He glanced at a framed painting on the wall, him and Deirdre on their engagement in Hawaii. She had it painted from a photograph. *We haven't aged much in the last eleven years.*

He doubted they'd ever marry. Marriage meant cohabitation. They tried that once, but their strong wills and desire to have things their own way was like an irresistible force living with an immovable object.

In the end they compromised, a word seldom used in either vocabulary, and bought identical apartments beside each other. As close to cohabitation as they could manage.

Simon returned home, downed the remains of his Oban, and poured another. Glanced at his watch for the fifty-first time and sat on the sofa. *I don't like this. Something's wrong.*

Three strong raps on the door interrupted the silence and his thoughts.

He opened the door and looked enquiringly at the two officers on his stoop.

"Simon Sharpe?" an officer enquired.

"Yes." Simon's pulse raced, but he forced himself to remain calm and in control.

"May we come in?"

He nodded, turned, and walked back to his living room, steeling himself on the way. The officers followed.

"You might want to sit down." The officer doing the talking said. His partner looked around the room, avoiding eye contact.

"I'm fine," Simon responded.

The officer glanced at his partner, then focused on Simon.

"You're listed as the emergency contact for Deirdre Wilson."

"My fiancé."

"I'm sorry to inform you that Ms. Wilson was involved in a fatal traffic accident this evening."

No, that can't be right. There must be some mistake.

He concentrated on what the officer was saying "... we'd like you to come to the morgue in the morning to formally identify the body."

"I'm sure there's been a mistake. She's just working late. Let's go now and we can clear this up."

The officer glanced at his partner, who nodded, removed his phone from his pocket and walked away.

"My partner is checking with the morgue to see if it's possible to do the identification now."

Simon's mind was numb. He couldn't take it in. Still clinging to hope, he insisted it was a mistake.

The officer returned and nodded to his partner, who said to Simon. "Okay Mr. Sharpe, we can go to the morgue now."

Simon nodded, willing the hornet's nest in his stomach to remain still. "I'm sure it's a mistake."

The officers glanced at each other and followed Simon, who was already walking to the door.

One officer opened the rear door of the police car, and Simon climbed in. He was on autopilot, wordlessly staring at nothing, his mind dissociated from events.

Simon stood in a nondescript viewing room staring at the curtained window in front of him. The officer who'd informed him of Deirdre's passing stood beside him.

"Are you ready?" The officer asked.

Simon nodded.

The officer tapped on the glass and the curtain was drawn open, revealing a covered body lying on a table. The morgue attendant pulled the cover back, revealing the face of Deirdre Wilson.

Simon's desperate hope of a mistake left him, and with it, his strength and his will. The officer grabbed his arm to support him.

"I'm sorry for your loss," the officer said.

Simon stared at his fiancé. Her eyes were closed, but his mind saw the blue and hazel blend of her agate eyes.

The officer said, "I'm sorry, sir, but I need you to make a formal identification."

"Yes, that is Deirdre Wilson."

The officer tapped the window again, and the curtain was pulled closed. "I'll take you home now sir, is there anyone you'd like me to call?"

"No."

After they dropped him home, Simon entered Deirdre's apartment. He went to her bedroom and reached for the item of clothing on the top of her laundry hamper; it was the blouse she'd worn yesterday. He sat on her bed, lifted the cloth to his face, and inhaled deeply.

Simon held the blouse tight against his face. His shoulders shook. He sobbed.

Simon opened his eyes and attempted to focus. He was stiff, his head fuzzy. An empty whiskey bottle on the coffee table. *Fell asleep on the sofa again.*

He glanced at his watch. "Fuck! Fuck!"

He stood, retrieved his suit jacket from the chair, dragged it on, left his apartment, and grabbed a taxi.

Going to be fucking late for court again. Need to piss when I get to the office.

When they reached his office, Simon asked the driver to wait while he dashed inside. His first stop was the restroom.

He was uncomfortable. *Suit's too fucking tight. Must replace it soon.* He now wore off the rack suits, he outgrew the tailored suits he used to wear more than a year earlier.

Simon glimpsed his reflection in the mirror. Hair uncombed, two- or three-days' stubble on his chin, he couldn't recall when he last shaved. He squinted through bloodshot eyes. *I look like shit.*

He retrieved the file from his former associate's desk, the second associate to quit in the last six months, then ran back to the taxi. He almost fell into the back seat and was panting as he instructed the driver to take him to the courthouse.

Simon sighed heavily. Two hours each day in the gym had become six hours in the bar, and it had taken its toll, physically and mentally. He wasn't prepared for the hearing; he hadn't even found time to read the file.

The taxi arrived at the courthouse. Simon paid the driver, rushed up the stairs and into the courthouse. The security officer waved him through, and he entered the courtroom ten minutes late.

"Mr. Sharpe, nice of you to join us."

"Apologies, Your Honor. A pressing matter delayed me."

"Pressing the cork back in the bottle, no doubt. I can smell the stench from here. You look like you slept in the gutter."

"Yes, Your Honor. I mean no, Your Honor."

"This is the third time you've been late to my courtroom this month. Next time, I'll have the door locked."

"Sorry, Your Honor."

"Are you ready to proceed?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"Okay, call the matter."

The clerk of the court responded. "Hearing the matter of Hargreaves v O'Dea."

Simon glanced at the file in front of him, wishing he'd read it before the hearing. He stared at the client's name. Johansson. *Fuck! Fuck!*

"Your Honor, I'm going to have to ask for the matter to be held over. I'm taking this matter over from my associate, and it would appear, in my haste to get to the court on time, I've picked up the wrong file."

"Mr. Sharpe, if you had the correct file, you would know that I previously instructed your associate there would be no further delays in this matter."

"I respect that, Your Honor, but I'm asking that my client not be penalized for my error."

"As it happens, Mr. Sharpe, I agree with you. We will hold this matter over until..."

The clerk of the court said, "Thirteenth of next month, Your Honor."

"The thirteenth of next month. Mr. Hargreaves, I apologize for the inconvenience. Mr. O'Dea, I suggest you find yourself new representation."

"Your Honor," Simon protested. "You can't do that."

“I just did. Mr. Sharpe, you have come into this courtroom unprepared and incapable of representing your client once too often. I am going to hold you in contempt. Bailiff, escort Mr. Sharpe to a cell.”

“Your Honor,” Protested Simon, to no avail.

The bailiff was beside him and took his upper arm. “You heard his Honor, Mr. Sharpe. You better hope he decides not to leave you there for too many days.”

John Jenkins, Simon’s opponent that day, watched the bailiff escort Simon out of the courtroom. He knew of Deirdre’s death, but the pace of Simon’s deterioration had surprised him. *Poor bastard.* His pity was tinged with guilt.

Jenkins had been at law school with Simon, who’d been smarter than his classmates and never let them forget it. When he and his classmates sought to begin their careers at prestigious firms, Simon had opened his own practice right out of law school. A part of Jenkins was happy to see the arrogant son of a bitch on his knees.

“Permission to approach the bench, Your Honor?” he asked.

“Approach.”

Jenkins walked to the bench and spoke quietly. “Your Honor, Simon has had a difficult time adjusting to Deirdre’s passing.”

“Yes, Mr. Jenkins. I’ve been making allowances, but enough is enough.”

“I understand, Your Honor. Perhaps I could talk to him. I might have a way to help him. If I can make him see sense, would you release him to me?”

“Very well, Mr. Jenkins. If you think you’ve gotten through to him, let the bailiff know. I’ll instruct him to release Mr. Sharpe on your say so.”

“Thank you, Your Honor.”

Simon sat on the concrete bench, which was supposedly a bed in his cell. His head bowed until it was inches away from his knees. *How long is the prick going to keep me here? I need a drink.*

There was a clunk when the key released the lock. A shadow appeared on the floor, and he tried to muster the strength to look up.

“Hello Simon.”

He straightened himself and turned his head to look at his visitor. “Jenkins, come to gloat?”

“No Simon, I’ve come to offer you a lifeline.”

“A lifeline?”

“Everyone knows you’re losing clients and associates at a rapid rate.”

Simon shrugged.

“If we merge our practices, I can help you keep what’s left, and give you a chance to get back on your feet.”

“Merge our practices?”

“Jenkins and Sharpe.”

“So I’d be the junior partner?”

“Given your circumstances, it’s the best offer you’re going to get.”

“You just want to get your hands on my practice.”

“A year ago, that would’ve been true. Now, I’m just trying to save your practice.”

He’s smarter than I thought. “You want my name and reputation.”

“Neither are what they once were.”

I’m twice the lawyer he is. “I’m grieving.”

“Yes, and when you’re back on your feet, you’ll be back on top. In the meantime, I can help you have a practice when you do.”

It would take the pressure off. Someone to handle things while I pull myself together.

“What do you say, Simon? Partners?”

“I’m thinking. How would we divide the partnership?”

“I have an excellent accountant, Myron Myerson. He’ll value both practices, and we’ll base our shares on his valuations.”

“The forensic accountant? I hear he’s good.”

“Yeah, and honest. You can trust him.”

Simon nodded. “How would this work?”

“Assuming we agree to merge, I’ll send my people to your office tomorrow for a review. Need to avoid another fiasco like today.”

“That asshole walked out, leaving me holding the bag with no time to prepare...”

“That’s my point. We need to make sure we’re on top of things.”

Junior partner is better than principal of nothing, which is where I’m headed. I need a drink.

“What do you say, Simon? Let’s shake hands on the deal and I’ll buy you lunch to celebrate.”

“Don’t know when that prick will let me out.”

“He instructed the bailiff to release you on my say so.”

Simon’s mouth was dry. He was edgy. Images of Deirdre lying on the table in the morgue were creeping into his mind. *I need a drink.*

He stood and offered his hand. Jenkins took it. “Partners,” he said.

“Partners.” Jenkins repeated.

Sharpe By Name

Deirdre had been gone for five years.

Simon was sitting on a bench when he woke. The midday sun made him squint. He'd slept—lost consciousness in a drunken stupor—in a park.

Stiff and sore, he could barely move. He screwed his nose up at the stench of stale piss. He'd pissed himself, more than once, he guessed. The sun had dried it, leaving urine stains on his trousers.

People who walked past looked at him with disgust. He didn't care; it wasn't the first time they'd looked at him that way.

Simon vaguely recalled when people looked at him with awe. *Times change.* He licked his lips and tried to swallow. His mouth felt like gritty cotton wool. *I need a drink.*

He raised his arm to check the time. *Where's my watch?* He felt inside his jacket pocket for his wallet, missing too. *That'll complicate things. I need a drink.*

Simon stood slowly and shakily. He checked his trouser pockets, then his jacket, and shirt pockets. His phone was gone. *Fuck! Need a drink.*

Shaking his head and blinking rapidly to get his bearings, he took a step toward the road. *Need to find a way to get home and get a drink.*

Something told him to check under the bench. Stooping, he saw his phone. *Must've fallen out of my pocket. Lucky or it would've been stolen.* Using the bench for support, he retrieved it. He attempted to turn it on. *No power. Need a drink.*

Leaving the park, he gazed across the road and noticed a bar. *My luck is turning. Need a drink.*

He stood outside for a moment. *How should I play this? Best be honest.* He pulled the door open and entered The Shipyard.

A low-end bar, in need of a facelift. A chipped and scratched wooden counter. Usual beer taps and shelves of cheap spirits. Time worn wooden tables and chairs, and a brown-tiled floor. *All these old bars look the same.*

The man behind the bar was tall, balding, his nose bent in several directions. The glass he was polishing seemed tiny in his huge hands. *Not a man to fuck with.*

Simon offered his hand. "Simon Sharpe."

The man accepted it with a firm grip. "Dancer."

"Woke up in the park across the road, not sure how I got there. Big night, I guess. Watch and wallet stolen, but the bastards didn't take my phone."

Dancer nodded. "It happens."

"Trouble is, it's out of juice. Don't suppose you have a phone charger?"

Dancer reached below the counter and placed a tattered cardboard box containing assorted chargers in front of Simon. "People leave 'em behind. If you find the right one, you can have it."

Simon sorted through the cables and found what he needed. He plugged it into his phone.

Dancer retrieved the box and returned it to its place.

“Dancer, could you plug it in for me, please?” Simon said, nodding at a power outlet. “When it’s juiced up, I’ll call someone to collect me and bring some money. In the meantime, could you stake me for a drink, and I’ll fix you up when they get here?”

“Sure.” He took the offered phone and plugged it in, then poured Simon a shot and a beer.

“Just the shot,” Simon said. “Don’t need the beer.”

“While I’m staking you drinks, you can do it my way or take your business elsewhere. Up to you.”

Simon wasn’t happy with the arrangement, but had little choice. He downed his shot. “Could I have another, Dancer?”

“Sure. Finish your beer first.”

Simon glared at Dancer but sipped his beer.

An older man, a big guy wearing an old suit, brought his empty glasses to the bar. He stared at Simon. *Cop. What’s he staring at?*

Dancer made a note on a sheet of paper beside the cash register, then poured the man fresh drinks, a shot and a beer. “There you go, Georgie Girl.”

George nodded towards Simon.

“He’s new,” Dancer said. “Hasn’t pissed me off yet.”

Simon gave Dancer a quizzical look and drank some beer.

“I normally don’t let people drink at the bar.”

Simon glanced around, looking for a suitable table.

“You’re fine there,” Dancer said.

Simon nodded and wiped his mouth. “I wasn’t always like this.”

Dancer glanced around. “None of ‘em were.”

Simon followed Dancer’s gaze, then nodded. He drained his glass, and Dancer poured him another set without him needing to ask. He downed his shot and surveyed the bar. Everyone had the same package, a shot, and a beer.

Simon sat quietly drinking, contemplating nothing. Dancer gave him a third set.

A man entered and smiled at Simon, who nodded hello. He passed Dancer a hand full of money, which Dancer counted and made a note on his paper, before putting it into the cash register.

“Had a good day, Billy.”

“Yeah, been busy,” he said, massaging his jaw.

Dancer poured him the standard package, and Billy took his drinks to a table, downing his shot on the way.

Alternating shots and beer is smarter than lining shots up, but when the intent is to get hammered as quickly as possible... Simon sat quietly and contemplated his life, which he wouldn’t have done if he were downing shots.

As the afternoon wore on, he watched the drunks, the real drunks mostly living rough, coming in for their daily fix. *Interesting how Dancer manages them.*

Dancer handed him his phone. "Here."

Forgot about that.

"You notice the people who've been coming in?" Dancer asked.

"Sure."

"I've been doing this for a long time, and I believe you're one step away from becoming like them. If that is what you want, that's fine. For Billy over there, this is his life of choice, so if it's what you want... no judgement from me."

Simon stared at his glass. "I admit, I'm at rock bottom, but I'll get back on my feet."

"No, you're not there yet, but you're heading that way."

Simon opened his mouth to speak, but the man who'd once argued professionally in court could find no words. Instead, he surveyed the room before draining the dregs of his beer. "Maybe one more set while I'm waiting."

Dancer made no move to pour Simon's drinks. "These are the lucky ones, because they got me to manage them and their daily money. Most places will let them quickly spend it on shots and put them back out on the streets. I'm guessing you are still at the point where you can make a decision, so you need to ask yourself if you want a life like these guys, or if you want to turn things around."

"I'm not sure how," Simon said. "Perhaps it's already too late for me."

"If you want to turn things around, you can, but you can only do it yourself. No one can do it for you." Dancer handed him a card.

Simon studied it. *Alcoholics Anonymous*.

"There's a map on the back," Dancer said.

He turned it over and considered the map.

Dancer continued. "It's just around the corner. Past The Old Seaman's Lodge about half a block, you'll see a church. The daily meeting starts in fifteen minutes."

He nodded, still staring at the card.

"They can't do it for you, but they've been through it, and they can support you. You'll need support. You can't do it alone, even though you must want to do it for yourself."

Simon glanced around the bar, his eyes settling on Billy, who was staring at nothing, a blank expression on his face, occasionally taking an automatic sip of beer.

"One last shot," Dancer said. "You can call someone to collect you here, pay your tab and leave, or you can walk around the corner and call someone to pick you up after the meeting. Up to you."

Simon stood, downed the shot, put his phone in his pocket, and headed for the meeting. He wasn't sure why. It wasn't a conscious decision, but it seemed like a good idea.

Simon reached the church. A sign written in chalk on a child's blackboard informed him the meeting was in a hall at the back.

He stopped at the open door, hesitant, unsure whether to take the step inside.

A man with salt and pepper hair, unremarkable features and weary brown eyes stepped beside him. *Younger than he looks.* “First, time?” he asked.

“Yes, I er...”

“I recognize the look. C’mon inside, you got nothing to lose. If it’s not for you, you can leave.”

Simon nodded and stepped into the hall. An older man, whose appearance Simon didn’t register, was standing inside the door with a clipboard. He asked, “What’s your first name?”

“Simon.”

He wrote Simon on a label, pulled it off the sheet, and handed it to him. Simon stuck it on his lapel and surveyed the room.

A dozen black metal folding chairs placed in a circle. Eight were occupied by men and women. *Didn’t expect to see women here.* Some were whispering to their neighbor, some had their head bent staring at the floor, and some were staring at nothing in the distance.

“Take any seat,” the man said. “No pressure and no judgement.”

Simon nodded, tentatively made his way to the circle, and sat next to a balding man with his arms folded, looking pissed off. The man who’d followed him in sat beside him. He whispered, “Don’t worry, you won’t have to say or do anything.”

This is a mistake. I need a drink.

An older man, with a clipboard on his lap, said, “Hello everyone, for those who are new to this meeting, my name is Joel. It’s time for us to start. First, who’d like to talk today?”

Perhaps five hands went up. Joel made notes on his clipboard. As he did, he nodded at each person, and they lowered their hand. Joel asked for silence, and opened the proceedings with a prayer, but Simon didn’t listen.

Looking at Simon, Joel asked, “Is there anyone attending their first AA meeting?”

Simon responded, “Yes.”

“Welcome, Simon.”

The others collectively repeated, “Welcome, Simon.”

Joel called on a few people by name, each read a passage. The man sitting beside Simon—Andy, according to the sticker on his shirt—said, “We always begin with these readings, but don’t worry, you’ll never have to read one unless you want to. No pressure here.”

Joel glanced at his clipboard. “Christie, you wanted to speak today.”

A blonde woman stood. “Hi, I’m Christie, and I’m an alcoholic.”

Of course you are. Why else would you be here?

The group said, “Hello Christie.”

Christie talked about wanting to drink but being proud of herself because she didn’t. When she’d finished, Joel called on the next person on his list, but Simon wasn’t listening to their stories. *If they want to drink, just drink. Why am I here?*

After all who’d raised their hand to talk had their turn, Joel asked for silence again and closed the meeting with a prayer, then said, “Well, that’s it guys, there’s coffee, tea and some cookies on the table against the wall, if anyone would like a refreshment.”

Andy said, "Come on, Simon, let me buy you a coffee."

Simon followed Andy to the table and accepted a coffee.

"After my first meeting, I went to the nearest bar and got hammered. Took me five attempts for AA to stick. No judgment here and no pressure. We know what it's like. Some people can do it on their own, some people can't do it. Most of us need support."

Simon said, "I don't know why I'm here."

"That's probably the first question you need to ask yourself."

"I have been."

He handed Simon a piece of paper. "If you want to talk about it, or anything else, call me, anytime, day or night. I mean that, I always found it hardest around three AM. So don't hesitate."

"Thanks." Simon took the paper and slipped it into his jacket pocket. "But I don't think I'll call."

"That's fine too. No pressure."

Simon nodded. "I must call someone to collect me. Had my wallet stolen. No money to get home."

"I've got my car, happy to drop you home, or anywhere else."

Be better than calling someone in the office to come get me. Don't want anyone to see me like this. "Thanks, I'd appreciate a lift."

When Andy stopped at Simon's place, he asked, "Have you called the bank to cancel your credit cards?"

"Shit. Didn't think of that. I only carry one, the others are in a drawer. Stops me doing anything too stupid when I'm drunk."

Andy offered his hand. "If you need to talk, don't hesitate to use that number."

"I won't. Thanks again for the ride home."

Simon entered his code and walked inside. He rang the bank and canceled his credit card. *I'll need to replace my driver's license too.*

He took a card from a drawer, left his apartment, and strolled to the ATM. *Need some cash.* The ATM was in a bodega. While he was there, Simon bought a bottle of cheap whisky. *One last drink.*

Simon had sat on his sofa for the last hour, staring at the unopened bottle. He'd reached for it several times but pulled back. He stood and went next door to Deirdre's apartment. Still, exactly as it was on the morning, she'd left for work, other than a thick layer of dust covering everything.

The painting of himself and Deirdre seemed to stare at him. "I'm sorry, Deirdre. I don't know how to live without you."

He dropped his head into his hands and cried.

Simon woke, shook his head, then rubbed his stiff neck. He'd fallen asleep on the sofa again. He focused on the unopened whisky bottle on the coffee table. *It's a start.*

He stood, picked it up, went to the kitchen, and poured the contents down the sink. *Better clean myself up.*

John Jenkins glanced up when he heard the knock on his door. Simon, clean shaven and wearing a clean suit, stood in the doorway. "Simon. You're looking well. What's up?"

"Have you got a minute, John? I'd like to talk about something."

Feels serious. "Of course, take a seat. You want a coffee?"

"Please."

John buzzed his secretary and asked for two coffees.

"What do you need?"

"I want you to buy me out," Simon said.

He's more of a liability than an asset, but his name's valuable. "What are you thinking? Going out on your own?"

"No. I'm going to focus on getting myself sorted out."

"Glad to hear it," John said. "If I buy you out, I'll want to keep your name."

"That's fine."

Jenkins' secretary delivered their coffees and cookies on a tray. He thanked her and immediately sipped his coffee while he contemplated the situation.

"It'll mean you can't establish a practice under your name in the future."

"I won't want to," Simon said. "I'll be okay financially."

Won't get another chance to keep his name and lose him. "If you're sure."

"I'm sure."

"Have you thought about how we're going to do this?"

"Go out the same way I came in," Simon suggested. "Have your friend Myron Myerson value my share, including my name, and I'll accept whatever he comes up with."

"I can agree with that."

They shook hands.

John expected Simon would leave, but he didn't. He picked up his coffee and continued drinking.

Simon said, "I know your motive for helping me was more about getting your hands on my practice and my name. I respect that. As bad as I am now, I would be a damn sight worse if you hadn't bailed me out."

What's he saying? "Simon, I..."

Simon stopped him with a gesture. "I appreciate what you did for me. My advice is to tell people I retired and list me on your letterhead as a consultant. If I get back on my feet, you might want to ask my opinion on a matter, and if I need to practice again, I'll do so out of this office."

"That's generous of you."

"It will be, if I get my act together."

Simon stood, walked to the door, stopped, looked over his shoulder, and said, "I owe you," then left.

Simon's next stop was a realtor. He placed both his and Deirdre's apartments on the market.

"I'll need to come by and take a look, but given their location, they shouldn't be hard to sell," Lynn Barker, the realtor, suggested.

"Good," Simon said. "I'll need to buy a new place, too. Not big, but close to the city center, I think."

"Have you considered a row house? I've got a few listed."

"Can I look at some?"

"Sure, perhaps we can swing by your place and take a few pictures on the way?"

"Sounds like a plan," Simon said.

He viewed four row houses and agreed to terms to purchase one that met his needs. *It'll need renovating.* Two bedrooms, one of which would become a gym. He wouldn't need an office; he didn't need to work thanks to the proceeds from the apartments and the sale of his partnership.

Lynn dropped him home after calling into her office to complete the paperwork.

Simon went to the bedroom, recovered his jacket from the laundry hamper, and retrieved the paper from his pocket. He took a deep breath.

You promised Deirdre.

He called the number.

"This is Andy."

"Hello, this is Simon. We met yesterday."

"Hi Simon, wasn't sure if I'd hear from you."

"I was wondering if you know where I might find a meeting near my home."

"I can pick you up in twenty minutes. We can go together," Andy suggested.

"I'd like that."

Sober

Ninety days later, Simon moved into his new home. When he wanted a drink, he worked out in his gym until the craving passed. He went to an AA meeting two or three times every day. Resurrecting himself was all that mattered. He attacked the disease with the same single-mindedness he once applied to work and then to drinking.

This was his life now. Wake up, eat, exercise, eat, exercise, eat, AA meeting. Repeat. However, he was not getting into shape; he was consuming too many calories, more than he was working off. Simon was using food as a substitute for alcohol. When he wanted to drink, he reached for a snack, usually empty calorie snack foods which his body stored as fat. Sugar cravings are not unusual for those battling substance abuse, and despite the exercise, he remained obese.

Simon's obesity meant he was easily out of breath while exercising. He didn't realize it, but he spent more time resting between sets than he did exercising.

Simon tried various diets but couldn't maintain them. He sought guidance from a doctor who put him on a controlled eating plan, but when his craving for alcohol took hold, he ate unhealthy snacks. *Guess my willpower is too focused on not drinking.* He returned to the doctor.

"Sorry doc," Simon explained. "I can't stick to the diet. It's either eat or reach for the bottle."

"Perhaps your answer may lie in forced portion control." Dr. Stoneham suggested.

"What's that?"

"Bariatric surgery. I'd suggest the gastric sleeve process. Put simply, we cut out most of your stomach, leaving a fraction of what it was and forcing portion control."

"That'll work?"

"It will for a while, because physically you'll be unable to eat very much, but if you push it, you can easily stretch your stomach again, which you don't want to do."

"Okay, let's do that."

A little more than a year after his first AA meeting, Simon missed a meeting because he was in hospital.

Recovering from surgery was the most difficult period during what Simon called his resurrection. He couldn't use his gym, and was unable to eat more than a bowl of soup. His substitutes for alcohol being unavailable, Simon's craving nearly got the better of him. *The surgery was a mistake.*

He went to a bar and ordered a shot. Simon placed his phone on the bar beside the shot. He stared at both for forty-five minutes, struggling to decide which one to pick up. Finally, he reached for his phone and rang Andy to come and get him.

Andy collected Simon from the bar and took him to a meeting, after which he organized *Team Simon*. A group of six, committed to helping him stay sober. He could call any of them for support and they'd talk him down when he struggled not to reach for a drink.

"This is what people who don't have an addiction can't understand," Andy said. "It's not like if you don't have a drink today, tomorrow is easier. Tomorrow is a whole new battle. Every day is a new battle, and some days, we don't win."

As he recovered and could fight his cravings with exercise again, his need for a support network diminished. He returned to the pattern of his life. Working out in his gym when he was home and attending AA meetings. Beyond this, he didn't do much. It occurred to him that both may well be addictions, but he was fine with that. At least they were positive. *Need something else in my life.*

Nearly two years after he'd walked into The Shipyard and the chance encounter with Dancer, Simon's phone rang. He glanced at caller ID. *What does he want?*

"Hello, Myron."

"Hi, Simon. Are you free for lunch today? I have an opportunity that may interest you."

Wonder what this is about? "Can't hurt to listen," Simon suggested.

"Great, do you have a preference for lunch?"

"Yeah, Frank's Diner, do you know it?"

"I own it."

Didn't know that.

"Corner booth by the window. Say twelve thirty?" Myron said.

"Perfect."

Simon arrived early and was greeted by Rebekah.

"Simon, it's good to see you again."

"Likewise." *Someone in the booth.* "I'm supposed to meet Myron Myerson, he said the corner booth, but..." He looked questioningly at the woman sitting in the booth. He'd seen her there often.

Rebekah smiled. "Aunt Judy," she said. "Uncle Myron's partner."

"Is Myron your uncle? Didn't know that."

"Yes, would you like a coffee while you're waiting?"

"Please."

Judy stood when he approached. "You must be Simon."

"Yes, Simon Sharpe."

She offered her hand. "Judy Vernon. Please join me, Myron shouldn't be too long."

Rebekah delivered Simon's coffee. He sipped it, assessing Judy over the rim of his cup. *Attractive.*

"So what's the Simon Sharpe story?" she asked.

Like how she says my name. Doubt she's really interested, just making conversation.

He wasn't sure why, but he wanted to talk to her. *Something about her.*

"Myron knows the gist, so no reason why not." Simon sipped his coffee, then began. "I used to be a lawyer..."

He noticed he had Judy's full attention. When he paused to sip his coffee, she sipped hers. She occasionally nodded, but asked no questions.

When he finished, he expected her to offer some platitude, but she didn't.

She said, "Good man, Dancer."

"You know Dancer?"

"Met him researching my book. I must go see him. It's been a while."

She's right. Can't believe I never thanked him. "Me too."

Myron arrived. He stopped beside Simon, who stood to shake hands. "Thanks for coming."

Wonder what this is about. "I was wondering where I'd go for lunch."

Myron grinned, then stepped to Judy. They hugged, kissed, and sat in the booth opposite him.

Rebekah brought Myron a coffee. "What would you like today, Simon?"

"Meatloaf, I think."

Myron glanced at Judy, who nodded. "Make that three Rebekah."

"Okay." She headed to the kitchen.

"We have an Intellectual Property Rights Management Company. We don't value the property, nor assign proportions, but we record the ownership of the rights, which saves disputes in the future. Identified a need when I was appearing as an expert witness in a dispute over values and set up a service for my clients." Myron explained.

He drank some coffee and extracted a folder from his briefcase, which he passed to Simon.

He continued. "Demand grew, and we gained credibility. Now our register is accepted by the legal system. We've reached a point where we need someone with a legal background to manage it, and offer patent advice to our clients, appear as an expert witness when needed, that sort of thing." He indicated the folder. "It's all there, a summary on the first page."

Doesn't sound too stressful. Simon opened the folder and studied the first page. He raised his eyebrows.

"Standard market rate for the position," Myron said.

"You'd give me ten percent of the company up front?"

"I always give the managers of my companies a piece of the company. Fosters loyalty and commitment. Starts at ten percent and will increase over time based on performance, capped at thirty percent."

"You give away thirty percent of your companies?"

"I give people the opportunity to earn it."

Simon nodded. "It's a generous offer. Are the shareholders demanding?"

Myron smiled. "I don't have shareholders."

Rebekah brought Judy and Myron's meals, and returned two minutes later with Simon's, whose plate contained a third of a portion. She handed him a takeout box.

“There you go Simon, enjoy your lunch.”

Simon leaned over his meal and inhaled deeply. Judy gave him a quizzical look.

“Because of my sleeve, I can only eat a small portion. The first time I came here, Rebekah asked if there was something wrong with my meal. When I explained my situation, she packed what I didn’t eat into a takeout box. Now, she does so automatically. Impressive service.”

Judy smiled. “She and Darnell have excelled here.”

“I come here often, usually with friends from AA. Suits us because they have great food and no alcohol. Seen you in this booth a few times.”

“I sometimes work from here,” Judy explained.

When they’d finished lunch, Myron said, “There’s more.”

“Okay,” Simon said.

“We’d also like to retain your services as a private lawyer for our family interests. It shouldn’t be onerous, and we’ll pay your standard hourly rate. I don’t believe it’ll conflict with your agreement with John Jenkins.”

“It won’t.”

“The second page summarizes our family businesses and interests.”

Simon glanced at the page. *Fuck. Had no idea he had so many businesses, thought he was just an accountant.*

“You have a diverse range of interests.”

“Most came from accidental opportunities, like the intellectual property company.”

Not surprised. He’s a smart guy.

Myron continued. “All the information is in the folder. Two agreements in the back for you to sign, if you’re interested.”

Simon nodded and closed the folder. *It’s time to return to life.* “I’m interested. I’ll read through everything later and call you if there’s anything we need to discuss, but I don’t think there will be.”

He offered his hand. Myron shook his hand and said, “Glad to have you onboard.”

Simon left Frank’s Diner, carrying the folder Myron had given him and the takeout container from Rebekah. *Didn’t intend to take the job, but I can work my own hours. Now I have two jobs and a piece of a company.*

Simon walked home to drop his items off, then flagged a taxi and headed to The Shipyard. *About time, I paid my tab. Can’t believe I haven’t done it.*

He smiled at Dancer, who was standing behind the bar polishing a glass that looked tiny in his huge hands, exactly as he’d been the previous time Simon walked in.

“Hello Dancer,” he said.

“Now, I know you don’t want a drink,” Dancer said.

Simon took a hundred-dollar bill from his pocket and placed it on the counter. “I thought it was time I paid my tab.”

Dancer smiled. "By the look of you, you already have."

"Why did you help me, Dancer?"

"I didn't. You helped yourself. I only suggested you should think about it."

"Curious why you look out for these guys," Simon looked around the bar.

Dancer shrugged, "If I don't, who will?"

Simon nodded and offered his hand. "Thank you."

He left The Shipyard and walked around the corner. He had a meeting to attend.

Joel said, "Simon, you have something to say."

Simon stood. "Hello, my name is Simon. I'm an alcoholic."

"Hello Simon." Was the collective response.

"Two years ago, I walked into this meeting for the first time. I didn't know why I was here. I didn't talk, and I didn't really listen. Nevertheless, it was the first step on my journey to recovery and resurrection. It hasn't always been easy, and I wouldn't have been able to complete it without the support that guys like you gave me."

Simon paused and glanced around the room.

"I dismantled my life completely, and slowly rebuilt it one piece at a time. This afternoon, I was fortunate and was able to put the final piece of the resurrection of my life together. In the past, I would have had a drink to celebrate my success, today sharing with my friends at AA is the only celebration I need."

Simon waited until the murmurs of congratulations subsided.

"I'm under no illusion that my battle is over, or that it ever will be. I'll still come to meetings. I've left my number on that paper beside the coffee urn. If any of you need someone to listen, anytime, day or night. I'll be here for you. We can't do it alone, but together we can do it. My name is Simon, and I'm an alcoholic."

Alison in Adventureland

Ali tentatively stepped into *UniBook*, not sure what to expect. As she strolled through the bookstore, she became less apprehensive. The quiet atmosphere had a calming effect.

The books were sealed in shrink-wrap plastic, with an unsealed copy for previewing. *Objects of Beauty*, a book in the women's section, caught her eye. Tasteful photographs of naked women, posed with objects from everyday life.

Taking the book to the café, Ali placed it on a maple table and dropped her bag on a cream-colored fabric chair with a matching maple frame. She went to purchase a coffee.

She returned and sat. *Comfortable*. She inhaled the coffee's aroma, *Muted, not a patch on John's*. She relaxed, almost forgetting why she was there, quietly enjoying her coffee, and slowly studying the images in her book. *If I lived alone, I could hang a few of the pictures on my walls*.

Ali looked up when a girl, in her early twenties, sat in the vacant chair at her table. She wore a red and pink boho shirt over olive green hippie pants. With short auburn hair and clear, light-brown eyes, she reminded Ali of Mia Farrow in *Peter Pan*.

"My favorite book," the girl said. "I especially like the picture on page fifty-seven."

Ali smiled and turned to the page the girl suggested. It was a photograph of a dark-haired woman, perhaps a little older than Ali, sitting naked, legs crossed at the ankles, on a simple wooden chair, hands clasped behind her head. She was looking into the distance, as if deep in thought. A single spotlight lit the woman's upper body, her legs fading into darkness.

"You're right. It's simple and beautiful and yet there's something more, a poignancy that perhaps can't be seen, only felt."

The girl beamed. "You get it!" She gestured toward a group of young women talking in the women's studies section. "They've read a couple of textbooks and think they're clever, but they're not. When I show them this picture, all they see is an attractive middle-aged woman in a chair."

Is it a test she gives people? Apparently, I passed. Ali reached out her hand, which the girl took, and shook lightly. "I'm Ali."

"Brit."

Ali glanced at her empty cup. "I'm going to have another coffee. Would you like one?"

"Oh... yes, please."

"Slice of cheesecake?"

"Why don't we share one?"

"Good idea."

Ali went to the counter to order.

"Do you need one or two forks with that?" the attendant asked.

She was about to say two. *One might be fun*. "One, thanks."

When she returned with the tray, Brit had tucked her legs under herself on the chair and was browsing the book. *Cute girl*.

Ali placed their coffees and cheesecake on the table, put her empty cup on the tray and returned it to the counter. *Don't want the table cluttered*.

Ali sat, grinned at Brit, picked up the fork, and sliced a small piece of cheesecake. Raising the fork, she leaned forward, directing it towards Brit's mouth, which opened to accept the offering.

After she swallowed, Brit reached out a hand, placing it on Ali's as she removed the fork. Taking a piece of cheesecake, she raised the fork and offered it to Ali.

Brit returned the fork to the plate, picked her cup up with both hands, and sipped. "You see," she said, "This is what I mean. Older women are much cleverer than these girls, but they don't realize it."

Ali frowned. *Guess that was meant as a compliment.*

Brit indicated two girls at an adjacent table, also sharing a slice of cheesecake, but with separate forks. "They're eating cheesecake together and will forget it tomorrow. We're sharing a moment, a memory that I'll carry for the rest of my life."

She took another forkful of cake and fed it to Brit.

"When I eat cheesecake in the future, I can close my eyes and remember the time we shared," Brit said.

Ali smiled. *I like her.*

They fed each other cheesecake, drank their coffee, and studied the images in the book together. Brit turned to page fifty-seven, studied the picture, stared at Ali, then closed her eyes.

She fascinated Ali. "What are you doing?"

"Imagining."

Ali's face warmed. She was glad Brit had her eyes closed.

Brit opened her eyes and smiled. "I don't have any classes this afternoon. I could go back to my dormitory, but that'd be boring."

Ali said, "I was planning to pick up a salad and take it home for lunch. You're welcome to join me."

"That could be fun. We can share the salad. There's a place near here, makes great salads."

They left the café and called into the salad bar, which was only a few doors away. Ali allowed Brit to choose the salad. They flagged a taxi.

They arrived home and shared their salad with a glass of wine at the dining table.

After they'd eaten, Brit asked, "Ali, would you help me complete a little experiment?"

"Sure, if I can."

"I imagined you sitting in a chair like that woman in the photo. These chairs aren't wooden, but I was hoping you might assume that same pose so I can compare reality with my imagination."

Ali flushed, and her pulse increased. "I guess I could."

She stood, nervously fumbled to remove her clothes, which she folded carefully and placed on another chair. She took a deep breath, then sat naked, emulating the woman in the picture the best she could, feeling self-conscious.

“Oh, wow!” Brit exclaimed. “I read somewhere that reality is never as good as what we imagine, but that’s wrong. You are far more beautiful than I imagined.”

Not sure if that’s a compliment. Ali beamed anyway.

Brit grabbed the bottom of her shirt and pulled it over her head, dropping it on the floor beside her. She untied her pants and let them fall where she stood. She wasn’t wearing underwear.

The sight of a naked Brit made Ali’s heart pound, a combination of arousal and guilt. A double helping of guilt washed over her. Brit wasn’t a kid, but she was young, not much older than Frankie, Ali supposed. Brit’s firm youthful body made her think of Judy, whose body was neither as firm nor as young as it had once been.

Brit stepped to Ali, straddled, and wrapped her arms around her. They kissed. Ali swallowed any guilt as her arousal took over.

A faint tapping woke Ali. She looked at the clock beside the bed in horror. *Fuck! The kids are home.* She glanced at Brit still sleeping beside her, reached down and pulled the sheet up to ensure they were covered.

“Yes,” she called out.

Frankie said, “You left your clothes in the dining room, Mom.”

“Oh, sorry Frankie.”

“Shall I bring them in?”

“Yes.”

The door opened tentatively, and Frankie stepped in, depositing the clothes on the end of the bed. He glanced at his mother and the girl beside her and smiled, his eyes curious as always. “I’ll organize a snack for me and Charlie, Mom.”

“Thank you, Frankie. I’m sorry, we fell asleep.”

“It’s fine. We’re okay. You take your time.”

Fuck! Not ready for this.

As Frankie closed the door, Brit stirred. “What is it?”

“We fell asleep. My kids are home.”

“Should I go? Do you need to do something?”

“No, Frankie has taken care of everything.”

“Good,” Brit said, and kissed her, on the mouth, lightly biting her lip at first, and then moving to her neck, before slowly making her way to take first one, and later the other, of Ali’s hardened nipples in her mouth. Brits’ hands caressed Ali’s body, like an advanced scouting party, creating a path for her mouth to follow, finally settling in the valley.

Brit raised her head and smiled. “I love yodeling in the valley.”

“I noticed.”

Ali moaned.

Enjoying the contented afterglow, Ali felt strange. She hadn't made love to a woman with her children home since Frankie was a baby. It made her new life more real somehow.

She studied the girl wrapped around her. *Such a cute young thing, with a magical tongue. I wish she was Judy.*

Ali glanced at the clock. *Shit. Better make dinner.* "Would you like to stay for dinner?"

"Thanks, but no. Dinner with you and your kids, a little too domestic for me. I'd better go."

Brit stood, grabbed her clothes, and dressed. Ali pulled on her dressing gown. The women stepped together, embraced, and kissed.

"Everything about you was better than I imagined."

I'm never quite sure if her compliments are compliments. "You're a wonderful lover, Brit."

"You know where to find me," Brit smiled. "And I'd like to be found again."

Brit called a taxi, and Ali walked her to the door. They kissed goodbye. Brit opened the door and was gone.

Feeling self-conscious, Ali went to the kitchen to prepare dinner. She was determined to act as if her behavior was normal. Nothing to hide, no reason to pretend it was anything other than it was.

The boys were sitting at the table. Frankie glanced up, his eyes full of curious amusement. "All good, Mom?"

"Yes, Frankie. I'll get dinner organized."

Charlie's eyes were accusing. "Is that your new girlfriend? She seems young."

Ali smiled. "No Charlie, just a friend."

Charlie said, "You were very loud. You're never so loud with dad."

The temperature in Ali's face increased. *They can hear us having sex. Never realized.* "I... um... sorry Charlie, I..."

Frankie said, "Of course not, Dad's a man."

Ali focused on dinner, hoping the conversation would end. Her face glowing red.

Charlie didn't want to let it go. "If you like women so much, I don't understand why you stayed with Dad."

"Your Dad's a good man. I wanted to keep our family intact. I value our family, Charlie. Things have changed now, and you two are almost grown. Frankie's off to college next year, and you won't be long behind him."

"Guess Dad doesn't value family as much," Charlie said.

"He does Charlie. He's still part of our family. He hasn't left us, he just doesn't live here anymore. I love your father as part of our family, the same as I love you and Frankie. Your father loves us as family, too. That hasn't changed."

"Guess he loves this Lori woman more," Charlie said.

"Not more, differently. When you're older, you'll understand." Ali cringed at her own words.

“Do you think you’ll meet someone, and love her, like that?” Charlie asked.

Ali shrugged, “Maybe I will, Charlie.”

Frankie said, “She already has, Charlie.”

“No Frankie,” Ali said. “She was only a friend.”

“Not her, Aunt Judy,” Frankie said.

“Frankie!”

He said, “I see how you look at each other.”

The blood rushed to Ali’s face again. *He can? Not surprised.* “I umm...”

Charlie said, “I like Aunt Judy, she’s cool. Why don’t you two...”

“Uncle Myron,” Ali said.

The sound of the doorbell was a prayer answered. She wanted the conversation over. “Get the door, Frankie.”

Frankie went to open the door and returned with his father.

John said hello to Charlie and stepped into the kitchen to greet Ali with a hug and kiss. If he thought it strange that she was wearing a dressing gown, or if he noticed she was naked underneath, he didn’t say, but Ali felt self-conscious.

“Just preparing dinner,” Ali said. “I can prepare extra if you want to join us.”

He glanced at his watch, and Ali expected a comment about her making dinner late. “Better not. Lori is making dinner tonight. Next time, I’ll phone ahead and we can have dinner together.”

“Sure,” said Ali. *Maybe I should invite Lori too.*

John said, “A friend of Lori’s had four tickets to *Cirque du Soleil* on Thursday night she can’t use. I was wondering if the boys would like to come with us. We can have dinner first and after they can stay with us as a trial run. If everyone is happy, they can start spending some weekends with us.”

“That would be great, Dad. I want to meet Lori,” Frankie said.

Charlie was enthusiastic. “*Cirque du Soleil*, cool.”

Wonder if Monica will be free. Unless Judy’s spoken to Myron by then. That would be even better. Probably not. “Fine with me, John. The boys will enjoy it.”

“I’ll pick you guys up here and drop you at school on Friday morning. Should get going. Lori’ll have dinner ready,” John said.

Ali knew she was being bitchy but couldn’t help herself. “So, not working much overtime these days?”

John’s face turned red. “No, not much now.”

Ali said, “I’ll walk you to the door.”

Reaching the door, John asked, “Are you doing okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine. Umm... adjusting to my new reality. Thanks for doing this, the boys will appreciate it. They need you to be part of their life.”

John nodded. “I will be.” He kissed her goodbye and left.

Pulling the door open, Ali stepped into Afternoon Delights. *Oh, Eva's not here.* She'd decided that being with the same woman more than once didn't have to lead to a relationship. She wanted to spend more time with Su-Lin, and especially Brit.

Two couples sat on sofas, but no one sat at the bar. Monica, who she came to see, was smiling at her.

"Hello gorgeous," Monica said as Ali sat.

"Hello yourself."

"In The Pink?" Monica enquired.

Ali nodded. "You remembered."

Monica turned back from preparing Ali's drink and placed it on the bar. She offered her hand, which Ali took, and caressed.

"I was hoping you'd come back," Monica said.

"Been, umm... exploring the city. My kids will stay at their father's tomorrow night, so I'm free if you, umm... I would've called, but I didn't get your number."

Monica reached into her jacket pocket, retrieved a slip of paper and passed it to Ali. "I cursed myself after you left with Eva for not getting your number. I've been carrying this around ever since."

She slipped it into her bag. "I'll call you later and you can save mine."

Ali sipped her drink and studied Monica. *She hasn't said if she's free tomorrow night.*

"I'd love to spend time with you. I was hoping you weren't brushing me off with a line about not being free. Swing by at eight and we'll have dinner somewhere."

"Like an actual date?"

"Yes, gorgeous, an actual date."

Ali frowned.

Monica asked, "What is it?"

"I've never had an actual date with a woman before." *Only had sex dates.*

"Really? So I'll be your first?"

Ali took another sip of her drink. "Yes, sort of like losing my dating cherry, I guess."

"In that case," Monica winked. "I'll make sure it's a special experience."

"I'd like that."

"So, what have you been doing with yourself?" Monica asked.

Ali shrugged. "Exploring my, er... freedom."

"I'm from a small town. A friend of my mother's knew what I was. Well, she was my mother's friend until she bedded her daughter. When Mom found out, I left home and moved in with her. We stayed together for a few years, then broke up. I wanted more."

Ali nodded and sipped her drink.

Monica continued. "When I first arrived in the city, I explored my freedom, too. Wanted to experience everything, well, every girl and every type... wanted to learn what my type was, I suppose."

"And what is your type?"

"You."

Ali smiled. "Can I buy you a drink?"

"Sure."

Monica made another In The Pink for Ali, and one for herself.

"What about you, Ali? Are you trying to find your type?"

"No, I know my type, exactly."

Monica frowned, perhaps waiting for Ali to elaborate, but she didn't.

Better not tell her about Judy yet. Don't want to say anything that might spoil our date. Ali said, "I'm curious about different experiences."

"And you've been satisfying your curiosity?"

"My curiosity has been very well satisfied, several times."

"Good. We don't have many chances in life to be totally free. If you want my advice, don't hold back. Experience it all. I did, and I don't regret it for a minute. That's why I enjoy working here. Plenty of opportunities. Of course, if I was in a relationship, especially with a girl who was my type, that would stop." Monica looked Ali in the eye. "I'd be loyal."

Ali smiled. "Me too. That's why I want to experience everything while I have the chance."

"Like a kid in a candy store." Monica glanced up as she saw a woman, one of a couple, approaching the bar. "You ever been with a couple?"

"No, I haven't."

"You want to try being with two girls? It's fun."

Ali shrugged. *Has she got something in mind for tomorrow night?* "Sure, why not?"

She noticed the woman Monica was serving looking at her. When she took her drinks back to her table, she said something to her companion, who nodded. The woman approached Ali.

"Hi, I'm Sophia. Skye and I were wondering if you'd like to join us for a drink?"

Ali glanced at Monica, who winked. "Enjoy, and I'll see you tomorrow night. Eight o'clock."

She mouthed a 'thank you' to Monica and glanced at Sophia. Dark hair, almost black eyes and olive skin. "Sure, I'd love to."

Ali picked up her glass and followed. *Nice figure.* Sophia stood aside and motioned Ali to sit beside Skye, then sat, placing Ali between them. Ali extended her hand first to Skye and then to Sophia. "Ali," she said.

Blonde-haired and blue-eyed, Skye reminded her of Judy. She pushed down a pang of guilt. *Her choice, not mine.*

Sophia, holding Ali's hand, said, "I haven't seen you in here before."

“Newly single, enjoying my freedom.”

Sophia nodded and reached for her drink. Skye took over the hand holding duties. “We like to share our freedom.”

Ali frowned, and Sophia clarified. “We are free to enjoy whoever we want, as long as we enjoy them together.”

No idea what it’ll be like to be with two girls. Twice the fun? Ali offered to buy them another drink and settled her tab while she was at the bar.

“Are you sure you’re okay with this Monica? I wouldn’t want to do anything...”

“Sweet of you to ask, but if it wasn’t okay, I wouldn’t have suggested it. I understand where you’re at. I know what it’s like to be free after a long-term relationship. I only wish I could join you girls, perhaps another time.”

“Looking forward to talking with you over dinner tomorrow night.”

“Just talking?” Monica joked.

“Over dinner. After dinner, I expect my tongue will be otherwise occupied.” Ali smiled.

She took their drinks to the table, and they resumed their light conversation and hand holding. Skye leaned in and kissed Ali, then Sophia turned Ali’s head and kissed her, too.

Sophia said, “We were wondering if you’re free this afternoon. We need a third for a daisy chain.”

“I love the scent of daisies,” Ali responded.

The three women left the bar, heading to Sophia and Skye’s apartment.

Blended

Leaving their postponed meeting with Coffee Roasters, Judy settled into the back of the taxi, snuggling into Myron, the way she had since they became a couple. He smiled and kissed her lightly on the forehead.

He enjoyed a deep contentment from being in love with his wife. *Is there a word for that? If not, there should be. Perhaps the Danish word 'hygge' describes how I feel, maybe not. I don't really understand what it means, but something like that.*

When they married, Myron made Judy Communications Director of his companies, involving her in the business. He'd learned from Papa, who included Mama in everything. Papa told him, 'In a family business, it's important for family to understand what's going on.'

Their businesses were not primarily about making money, although they did. They were about helping people, giving them a chance, or a second chance. People whose lives took turns for the worse. Some made mistakes, some didn't handle adversity well, some simply grew old and found themselves unwanted by employers.

The meeting with Coffee Roasters had gone well, and they were on their way to Franco's, an upmarket Italian restaurant, for a celebratory dinner.

John Farrington and Simon Sharpe were there when they arrived.

Simon was saying, "You sure blended an excellent coffee. I can understand why it's popular."

"No," John said. "I got lucky. I liked the idea of having my own blend, so I tried a few combinations, until I found one I liked. I gave some to Judy when I met her after my brother died... She liked it too and wrote a blog. It's because of Judy my blend became popular."

Judy suggested, "Why not ask Lori to join us, John?"

"Thought about it, but not tonight. She's meeting the boys tomorrow night. I want them to meet her before I bring her into the family."

Judy nodded.

They placed their orders. Simon had visited Franco's with Myron several times, so the waiter knew of his dietary requirements.

Myron looked at Judy and John. "I'm guessing you both want the house red?"

Both nodded.

"I'll join you," he said.

He ordered a bottle of Antinori Tignanello, and a Bundaberg Lemon, Lime, and Bitters for Simon.

After their drinks arrived, Myron proposed a toast. "The John Farrington Blend."

The four clinked glasses and echoed his toast.

John said, "I expected a five percent royalty on sales, or something. I can't believe they are giving me twenty-five percent."

Myron explained, "Twenty-five percent of the profit on your blend. It's a smart way for them to do it, because national distribution costs will be high. If it's not profitable, it'll

cost them nothing. If they gave you a royalty on sales, they'd have to pay you even if they're losing money."

John nodded. "Can it be split so I can give some to Ali and the kids?"

"The best way," Simon suggested, "would be to register the owner as a trust. *The John Farrington Trust*. I can legally establish it for you, and Myron's accountants can handle the finances."

Myron said, "You need to tell us how you want the proceeds distributed and at what frequency. Frankie and Charlie's shares can be held in trust, so decide at what age you'd like them to receive the benefits. Forced savings until they are more responsible."

"I don't think it'll be much money. Perhaps, a little pocket money," John said.

"You could be surprised," Myron suggested.

"I hope I am," John said. "Let them have it. They can save it, if they choose. They'll learn more and appreciate it more if they can do it themselves and make their own decisions."

"That's what Mama and Papa did with me," Myron said. "It helped me to learn how to manage my own affairs."

"Could we split it like ten percent to me and Lori, and five percent each to Ali and the kids?" John asked.

"Sure," Simon said. "Any way you want."

Their meals arrived, which they enjoyed in silence, the men deferring to Judy's preference.

After the plates were cleared away, Myron said, "With your change in circumstances, it's important you make a new will, John."

"Yes," he agreed. "You're right."

Simon said, "Think about it, and let me know what you want. I'll draw it up for you."

John said, "Judy, would you not say anything to Ali? I'd like to tell her and the boys myself, when everything's settled."

"I won't tell her," Judy grinned. "But sometimes she reads my mind."

Myron said, "You read each other's minds. It's fascinating to watch."

After dinner, Myron and Judy flagged a taxi. He gave the driver the address of Frank's Diner.

Judy gave him a quizzical look.

"I need to have a quick word with them on the way home."

Judy snuggled against Myron, who remembered the first time they'd shared a taxi after dining at Franco's. When she'd leaned into him on their way home to make love for the first time. *Hygge*.

They sat in their booth at the diner, and Rebekah and Darnell joined them.

"Can we get you guys anything?" Rebekah asked.

"No, we're on our way home from Franco's," Judy explained.

Myron said, "I've made some enquiries, and it should be possible for you to obtain a liquor license."

Darnell responded. "We've discussed whether we should apply for one, but we've decided not to. Frank's Diner is family friendly, and lots of the mothers who come with their families have said they're glad we don't have alcohol because if we did, the atmosphere would be different."

Rebekah added. "Our reputation is growing with Simon's friends from AA... they like coming here because it's alcohol free. One guy explained, 'he enjoys coming here with his non-AA friends too, because it doesn't put them in a difficult position of trying to decide whether it's okay to drink in front of him.' We think it's best to leave everything as it is now."

"Besides," Darnell continued, "Business is going well, no signs of it diminishing, so we see no reason to make drastic changes. We've added a couple of new items to the menu, and we might start doing some daily specials, off-menu items for added variety without having an unwieldy menu."

"In fact," Rebekah said, "We're thinking we'll start taking Sundays off and leaving Leon to run Sunday Buffet. Give him a taste of being in charge, because Darnell and I want a honeymoon."

Myron said, "It's important to give people an opportunity to show what they can do. From what I've seen, Leon won't let you down."

"Well, that's agreed," Judy added. "Why don't you join us for Sunday Brunch at Bait & Switch?"

"It's a date," Darnell said.

After saying their goodbyes, Myron and Judy held hands as they walked home.

The next morning, Judy and Ali were having breakfast, as they've done every day since John and Ali separated. Ali had spent the morning fending off Judy's advances. Not that she wanted to.

"What's going on with you?"

Judy shrugged. "I can't keep my hands off you."

"Talk to Myron and you won't have to."

"Are we going to have this conversation every day?"

"Apparently."

"Looking forward to catching up with Susie and Jenny," Judy said. "You're still on for our Friday nights, I hope. Not going out whoring at dyke bars?"

Forgot about Friday night. "I don't like this," Ali said. "You've either got your hands all over me..."

"What? You don't like me touching you, but every dyke in the city can?"

For fuck's sake. "Jesus, Judy, let me finish. You're all over me at the diner, where nothing can happen, but won't do anything with me outside the diner. When you're not trying to put your hands inside my panties, you're being a bitch. What's going on in your head? I want us to get back to normal."

“Surprised you don’t jump into my head and see for yourself.”

Ali turned Judy’s head to face her and locked onto her eyes. “You feel threatened. You’re scared if you sleep with me, even with Myron’s blessing, you might lose him and you’re scared if you don’t you might lose me. You don’t know what to do, and you don’t like not being the one in control.”

“I umm...”

“You’re used to having everything your own way, and you don’t like change.” *That accounts for her mood swings, but something else is going on. Why can’t she keep her hands off me? If I could convince her to come home for lunch, I wouldn’t have to stop her.*

Judy’s eyes fill with tears and overflowed. Ali drew her close and held Judy against her shoulder.

“Silly woman,” Ali said. “I promise you won’t lose me. I love you. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Sometimes, I like you in my head.”

“There’s nowhere I would rather be than out with my girls every other week. I love our Farrington Girl’s nights out. I wonder if we should include Lori in the future?”

“Too soon, but you’re right. I hope we can,” Judy said. “It’ll depend on whether you and Lori can get along.”

“I need to call John.” Ali picked up her phone.

He answered on the second ring. “Ali, what’s up?”

“I forgot Friday is a Farrington Girl’s night. Could the boys stay with you until Saturday?”

“Oh right. Sure, I’ll pick them up from school Friday night.”

“Thank you. Oh, can you give me Lori’s number?”

“Why?”

“I want to talk to her if she’s going to have my children for a couple of days.”

“*Our* children.”

“You know what I mean. Nothing untoward, I promise. I want to make sure we’re on the same page.”

“Okay, I guess.” He gave her Lori’s number. “Wait ten minutes. I need to talk with her first, so she knows you’re going to call.”

“Okay, bye.”

Judy offered her hand, which Ali took. “What are you thinking?”

“I need to let Lori know she’s not competing with me for John. Plus, I don’t want us competing for the kids. When she and John marry, she’ll be their stepmother and have a place in their lives. I would hate to put the kids in the middle of any animosity between us.”

“Wise.”

“If I can organize a meeting with Lori, could you be part of it, too? I think it might be difficult if it was just the two of us... and far too awkward for John if he came too. As it is,

John will be squirming and wondering what we're talking about. The least he deserves for falling in love with another woman."

"You're glad he did."

"That's beside the point."

"Of course I will," Judy agreed.

Ali picked up her phone again and dialed Lori. Judy placed her hand on Ali's thigh for support.

"This is Lori," She answered.

"Hi Lori, this is Ali."

"John said you were going to call."

"I thought it might be better to talk in person. Are you free for lunch tomorrow? My friend Judy will join us."

"I er... I guess I could, but..."

"Nothing untoward. I'm happy for you and John. It's... you're going to be spending time with my kids and I think it's important we're on the same page."

"You want to give me the rules?"

"Nothing like that. I think it's better for them if we can be friends... or, umm..."

"You mean not let them play us against each other?"

"Something like that."

"Okay, where?"

"Frank's Diner, I believe you like the coffee." Judy squeezed her leg. "John can give you the address."

"Okay, say one?"

"Sure, see you then."

They rang off.

Ali turned to Judy. "That went well."

"The coffee remark was bitchy."

"I regretted it as soon as I said it."

Suzu Q arrived with their after-breakfast coffees.

Ali studied her. A tartan black and blue schoolgirl skirt, a frilly white blouse, with a black tie. Long white socks, black shoes and aqua hair.

"Japanese schoolgirl/Scots fusion today." She observed.

"She is cute," Judy said.

Ali took Judy's hand, which was still on her thigh and had been creeping up. "We can wait until the time's right. No hurry, I'm not going anywhere."

Judy smiled and contentedly snuggled against Ali in the booth.

Ali walked home to clear her head. *I have time.*

The best thing to do for now is focus on my date tonight.

She glanced at a store's window display. A floor length, ice-green colored, décolleté, sleeveless dress, with a split to the left of center. *Perfect.*

Ali examined her reflection. *A little long, I'll need to wear heels.* She backed up and walked three steps in the changing room to the mirror. *The split nearly reaches my hip. I'll need to choose my underwear carefully.*

She changed into her clothes and took the dress to the cash register.

"I'll take it," she said.

Perfect for my first date.

Father's Day

The question his Grams asked the last time she'd visited was engraved in Darnell's mind. "Why don't you have any of our food on the menu, Darnell?"

He wanted to add an African American dish, typical of the fifties.

"George," he said. "Come and try this."

George grinned. "If you insist, I guess I could."

Placing his creation in front of George at the Chef's table, Darnell said, "My take on *Covered Chicken with Cornbread, Collard Greens and Okra*."

George ate with gusto. He didn't savor the food, as Judy, the usual guinea pig, would.

Rebekah entered the kitchen. "New dish?" she asked.

"Yes, Bec. For my Grams."

"George likes it."

"Reminds me of when I was a kid," George said. "Haven't had this type of food for a long time."

Darnell explained, "I soak the chicken in a bath of milk and spices to keep it moist. Then bread it with a mixture of cornflakes, Panko breadcrumbs and chili flakes. Deep fried.

"The chicken gravy is traditional, made with evaporated milk and condensed chicken soup, and some chives with some spices. Normally, I don't like using cans, prefer to make my own, but this is the original recipe, so it's authentic.

"Cooked collard greens are added to the cornbread batter, with a spice mix and some cheese. *Collard Greens Cornbread*, cooked as an individual serving, using a muffin tin. The side is roasted okra with cayenne pepper."

"This is very good, Darnell," George said.

Maurice Williams stood outside Frank's Diner. Twice he approached the door, balked, turned and walked in a circle.

His mouth was dry, his mind in turmoil. *C'mon man, grow some balls. You've avoided this long enough. Too long.*

A man stood near the diner, watching Maurice.

Maurice asked, "You work here, man?"

"Yeah." He held his cigarette up. "On a break."

"I understand the food is good."

"Better than good. Darnell's a genius, if you ask me."

At the mention of Darnell's name, his stomach knotted. "Really?"

"Yeah."

"Anything you recommend?" Maurice asked, stalling.

"New dish... covered chicken. Not on the menu yet, but our sort of food. Think you could ask for it."

“Maybe I will.”

Maurice took a deep breath and steeled himself. *C’mon, get it over with. Don’t be a pussy.*

He sighed heavily, walked forward a third time, pushed the door open, causing a bell to ding, and stepped inside.

Wow. Looks like a nice place. He saw a vacant booth by the window, sat down, facing the back of the diner, and placed his bag on the seat. A blonde woman, who sat by herself in the end booth, looked up and smiled. He nervously returned her smile.

A waitress stepped to the booth and handed him a menu. “I’m Katie. I’ll be your waitress today.”

“Hello, Katie, how’s the coffee?”

“Excellent. Seriously excellent.”

“You’ve sold me. Black, please.”

“Bottomless?”

“Please.”

“I’ll get your coffee while you browse the menu.”

Maurice studied the menu. *All looks good.*

Katie brought his drink. “Have you decided?”

“Guy outside...”

“George.”

“Suggested I order the covered chicken, but it’s not on the menu.”

“I’ll ask Darnell.”

He picked up his cup and inhaled. *Damn.* He took a sip.

Katie returned. “Darnell’s happy to make it, but he said it will take a while.”

“I’m in no hurry. You were right about the coffee. Might be the best I ever tasted.”

Katie smiled. “I’ll tell Darnell you’re happy to wait.”

Maurice sipped his coffee and stared out the window. *This is a mistake, should leave well enough alone.*

Katie delivered his meal, which drew his attention from the window. *Looks tasty.* He leaned forward and filled his nose with the spicy aroma. *Smells delicious.* He cut a small piece of chicken and savored it. *Damn.*

Unlike George, he didn’t devour his lunch. He ate slowly, savoring every mouthful, delaying what needed to come next.

With every swallow, he felt another tear build behind his eyes. When he finished eating, he raised his napkin and dabbed his eyes.

Katie came to collect his empty plate.

“That must have been the best meal I’ve ever eaten. Did Darnell make it?”

“Yes, sir.”

He hesitated, but experienced a surge of courage. “Do you think I could pay my compliments?”

“Yes sir, of course. I’ll ask him to come out.”

Maurice waited for Darnell. His hands shook. He wanted to leave the diner, but couldn’t convince his legs to move. He glanced at the blonde woman again. She smiled. It calmed him.

He was still looking at the woman when he heard a voice he didn’t recognize.

“Good afternoon, sir. I’m glad you...”

Maurice turned his head to study the young man. He saw the spark of recognition that had stopped Darnell mid-sentence.

“Hello, son.”

Darnell’s eyes hardened, and his bitter tone made Maurice shudder. “What the fuck do you want?”

“I don’t know, just to talk...”

“You ain’t got nothin’ to say to me.”

“Please, Darnell, give me ten minutes to explain.”

“That’s ten minutes more than you ever gave me.”

“You’re right. I don’t deserve it, but I’m begging you, son, give me ten minutes.”

Darnell glared at him, but didn’t speak, and more importantly to Maurice, he didn’t walk away.

“Sit down for ten minutes. You don’t have to say anything, just listen. I want nothing from you, and I expect nothing. I need to explain, is all.”

“You’re twenty years too late.”

“I know that. It’s been tearing me up inside.”

“Good.” Darnell sat, but his eyes didn’t soften.

Maurice wiped his hands on his trousers. He opened his mouth to speak, but his mouth was too dry. He took a sip of water, but still couldn’t find the words. *Wish he’d speak.*

Rebekah was on her way to talk to Aunt Judy when she noticed Darnell sitting in a booth with a man. *His eyes are hard. Hate that look. Whatever’s happening isn’t good.*

She didn’t hesitate. She sat beside Darnell and studied the man. White shirt. *Raw cotton, expensive.* Gold rope chain around his neck, and a matching one around his wrist. A diamond studded gold ring on his wedding finger. *Something familiar about him.*

“Hello,” she said, reaching out her hand. “I’m Rebekah, Darnell’s fiancé.”

The man clasped her hand and smiled. “Hello,” he said. “I’m Maurice Williams.”

Rebekah shot a look at Darnell, who still glared at Maurice. *Explains why he’s defensive.*

“What do you want, Maurice?” she asked.

“I want to explain.”

“A bit late,” Rebekah said. “But as you’re here... He’s listening.”

Maurice, looking at Rebekah, but talking to Darnell, began. “We can only do what we think is right at the time. Sometimes we get it wrong. When we do, it’s difficult to go back and fix it, or even know if we should.”

“Well, you’re here now,” Rebekah said.

“His Moms and I figured it would be better for him to be another black kid, whose father walked out. The same as everyone else. Easier for him to be accepted.”

“Isn’t that exactly what happened?” Rebekah asked.

Maurice shrugged. “It is, but it’s not what I wanted. I thought it was best for Darnell. Maybe I was wrong, but given my time again, I’d probably do the same thing.”

“Is there a point to this story?” Rebekah asked, talking for Darnell.

“I wanted everyone to think that’s what happened. His Moms and I agreed it would be for the best. The truth is, I left because I’m gay, and I didn’t want to live a down-low life.”

Darnell seemed about to say something, but didn’t.

“It’s difficult for a black guy from the projects to admit being gay. There’s a stigma even now. I thought it was better for Darnell to be like all the kids whose fathers had left, were locked up, or dead, than being the kid whose father was gay.”

“So why come back now?” Rebekah asked.

“His Moms writes to me two or three times a year. I knew what happened to him. She told me everything. I wanted to visit when he was inside, but that would have made things worse for him. She told me he’s turned his life around and thought he might be ready to listen to me.”

Rebekah glanced at Darnell. His eyes had softened. “He is.”

“I’ve been thinking, if I’d told him the truth, maybe he wouldn’t have been accepted into that world. Wouldn’t have become a part of the gangsta life, and ended up inside.”

Darnell spoke. “I don’t blame you for anything. I made my own choices, and they led me here.”

Maurice glanced around the diner. “I’m glad everything has worked out for you, son.”

“No thanks to you.”

“No, you’ve done it on your own.”

“I had help,” Darnell said, and looked at Rebekah.

Maurice said, “What I really want to say is, I’m sorry, Darnell.”

“For being gay?”

“I’m not sorry about that. I’m sorry I wasn’t a father to you.”

Darnell shrugged.

“What are you doing now?” Rebekah asked.

“Living in LA with my husband. We started a hairdressing salon together.” He shrugged. “Totally cliché.”

Rebekah smiled.

“Anyway Darnell, I know it’s too late now, but I want you to know I never stopped loving you, never stopped thinking about you. I just didn’t know how...”

Darnell shrugged again. “Easy to say.”

“No, son, it’s not. It’s not the hardest thing I’ve done in my life, but it’s not easy.”

Rebekah said, “Making amends for past mistakes isn’t easy, and not always possible.”

Maurice extracted a notebook from his bag. “I’ll leave now. I want you to have this.” He placed the old notebook on the table.

Rebekah focused on the notebook’s blue and white striped cover. Some writing was on it, but from where she sat, she couldn’t read it. The edge of the pages were creased and worn, as if read many times.

“What’s this?” Darnell asked.

“Every letter I wrote to you during the last twenty years. I lacked the courage to send them. Read them or not, it’s up to you. My contact details are on the front if you want to talk or something. If not, I understand.”

He took a hundred-dollar bill from his pocket and placed it on the table alongside the notebook.

“You sure can cook, son. It really was the best meal I’ve ever eaten. Makes me proud, even though I have no right to be.”

He stood, rose out of the booth, took a step towards the door, then turned back. “I hope you can find it in your heart to call me.”

He turned and left the diner.

First Date

Ali studied her reflection as she walked from the bedroom door to the full-length mirror. She focused on the flash of sea-foam colored, lace trimmed panties visible with each step. She liked the color because it matched her eyes. *My god, that split is revealing when I walk.*

She placed a chair in front of the mirror, sat, and crossed her legs. It was more revealing, but she wanted Monica's full attention. *Venus in sea-foam silk and lace.* Her lips curled up as she nodded her satisfaction.

Ali checked her make-up, rose pink lipstick and pale green eyeshadow with gold flecks which enhanced the flecks in her eyes. She glanced at her watch. *I'm wearing three items. How did it take me two hours to get ready?*

Time to go. She stood and looked at her reflection one last time. *I'd date me.* She collected her purse from the bed, her phone from the dining table, and called a taxi.

Monica glanced up when she heard the door open, as she had for the last two hours. She stared, open mouthed, at the woman who paused in the doorway.

Red headed, Juicy, her colleague who worked the evening shift, stared at the woman approaching the bar. "Wow," she said. "What I wouldn't give for a taste of that."

"My date," Monica informed her.

When Ali reached the bar, Monica said, "Wow! You're gorgeous."

She offered her hand, but Ali declined. "I don't want to begin my first date with a handshake."

Monica smiled, glanced at her watch, then at Juicy, who said, "Go. Don't keep the lady waiting."

"Thanks, Juice, I owe you one." Looking at Ali, she said, "I'll just get my bag. I was going to change, but looking at you, I think this suit is perfect."

Monica disappeared through a door behind the bar.

Juicy stepped to Ali and offered her hand. "I'm Juicy," she said. "Really."

"Ali."

"Moni's told me about you. I'm free most afternoons. Moni has my number if you want to try a redhead. Well, red everything."

Ali smiled. "I'll remember that."

Monica returned carrying a bright red handbag. "You hitting on my girl, Juice?"

"Only if I have your blessing, hon."

Monica raised the end of the counter, stepped out, and walked purposefully to Ali. She placed her handbag on the bar, her arm around Ali's waist, her other hand behind her head, pulled her in, and shared a passionate kiss, which took Ali's breath away.

Releasing Ali, she retrieved her handbag, took Ali's hand, and said, "Let's go."

Twenty minutes later, they arrived at a building downtown, and stood in front of a brick wall with a nondescript brown door.

Ali gave Monica a quizzical look.

“A restaurant,” Monica said.

“I wouldn’t have guessed it was here.”

“That’s the point.”

A plaque beside the door was barely lit by a weak spotlight. If you weren’t looking for it, you’d be unlikely to notice it. *Helen’s Hangout*. Below the name, another line: *NO MANGOES*.

Monica opened the door, and they walked into a narrow, dimly lit hallway. She turned to face Ali, and lips hungrily connected. Monica slipped her hand inside the slit in Ali’s dress and caressed her through her panties.

“You look and feel amazing.”

Ali smiled; she was tingling where Monica had caressed her. *She makes me feel special*.

Monica pushed the button on the intercom and announced her booking number. The inner door buzzed open. It had the feel of an old-fashioned speakeasy.

“They value privacy,” Monica explained.

They entered an upmarket restaurant and bar. Round tables with floor-length white tablecloths, set with polished silver cutlery and large white plates. Each table had two high-back chairs upholstered in deep purple velvet. A bar with leather covered stools was opposite the entrance. Mandy Moore’s, *I Wanna Be with You*, played in the background from speakers adjacent to a softly lit dancefloor.

This is nice. “I had no idea this place existed,” Ali said.

“If you don’t know, you’re not supposed to. It’s for ladies who value discretion.”

The hostess seated them. After glancing at the menu, Monica signaled the waitress, and they ordered their meals. Monica ordered a bottle of *Bollinger La Grande Annee*. “Only fitting for a special night, with a special lady,” she said.

Ali smiled, shyly. *She makes me feel special*.

The cork popped with an explosion of joy. The wine was poured, with a light fizzing as it began its journey into the glass. *Like a rustle of silk*. Ali could feel her eyes sparkling. *If she’s intending to sweep me off my feet, she’s succeeding*.

Monica offered a toast. “First dates.”

First glasses consumed, Monica stood and offered her hand. “Let’s dance while we’re waiting for dinner.”

Ali’s heart skipped a beat. “I’d like that.” She moistened her suddenly dry lips, “Very much.”

On the dance floor, Monica pulled her close. They danced slowly, Monica’s hand resting on Ali’s ass, pulling her in tighter. Ali could feel Monica’s breathing quicken. Monica engaged Ali with long, slow, moist kisses, as she preferred.

There were other couples on the dance floor, and the restaurant was almost full, but Monica made Ali feel they were alone, and she was the center of the universe.

Perfect. Ali's eyes closed. She almost purred. Pangs of guilt interrupted her contentment. Judy's choice. I'd rather be with her. Should tell Monica about Judy. I will, but not tonight.

The hostess discreetly appeared beside them. She rested her hand on Monica's arm and whispered into her ear.

Intimate. They've been together.

Monica ended their kiss, whispering, "Dinner's on the table."

They held hands as they returned to their seats. Ali wasn't sure she wanted to release Monica.

Monica said, "Life is different after we come out, isn't it?"

"Yes, very different. If it hadn't been for John and my boys, I would have come out years ago. I've never been ashamed of who I am, but I put my family first."

"Doubt you've had any trouble meeting women since you came out."

"No, but I go to places where women go looking for female company. Everybody is there with the same intention, not like trying to pick someone up in a bar."

Monica smiled. "That's partly it. I've spent many a night fishing in lesbian bars, without so much as a nibble."

"Hard to believe."

"It's about pheromones, more than location."

Ali frowned.

"You're putting out pheromones and they're increasing. They aroused me the first time you came into the bar, and the attraction is stronger now. Every time you come near me, I tingle, and tonight it was all I could do not to take you on the dance floor."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Just so you know," Ali said. "I'm ready to be taken."

"That's my point. I knew the moment you stepped near me, and so does everyone else."

"You make it sound like I'm a bitch in heat."

"You're in heat, but you're not a bitch. I have every intention of taking you tonight, but I don't want to rush. I'll let my desire build. The experience will be deeper."

Ali smiled. "We've got all night."

"And the morning."

The hostess came to ask if they wanted another bottle of champagne, again touching Monica's arm as she did.

Monica glanced at Ali, who nodded.

"I'm guessing you know her?" Ali said.

“In the biblical sense. Met her at work, she introduced me to this place.”

After they finished dinner, they returned to the dance floor and spent the night enjoying slow dancing, and long kisses interrupted by occasional champagne breaks.

As the restaurant was preparing to close, Monica said, “Are you ready to come home?”

“I’ve been ready since I stepped into Afternoon Delights.”

Ali stirred as Monica slid back into bed. “Needed the bathroom.”

“Me too,” said Ali as she slipped out of bed, her eyes adjusting to the morning light. She could feel Monica studying her naked form as she made her way to the bathroom.

When she returned, Monica was unashamedly staring at her. “Have I mentioned you’re fucking gorgeous?”

“You really think so?”

“You know I do.”

Ali lay against Monica, gently caressing her hardening nipples. “I’m still tingling.” They kissed, and Ali slid her hand over Monica’s stomach, toying with carefully manicured pubic hair.

“I thought you said you couldn’t take anymore?”

“That was last night. Besides, I’ve never had morning sex with a woman.”

“Another first.”

“Satisfy my thirst.”

“Last night, I was thinking your thirst was unquenchable.”

“You quenched it,” Ali said. “But, I’m thirsty again.”

Her thirst quenched, Ali lay on her side against Monica, who was on her back, a satisfied expression on her face. She was caressing her lover’s stomach.

“Is this a one-off or am I going to see you again?”

Ali grinned. “I don’t know where you went to school, but it was a lot more than one. I’d like to see you again.”

“But.”

“I sense you’re looking for more than I can give.”

“You’re just out of a marriage and not ready for a relationship.”

“That’s not it. Last night confirmed I’m more than ready for a relationship.”

Monica smiled. “So what is it?”

“I’m sorry, I should have told you sooner, but my heart is taken.”

“You’re in love with someone?”

“Yes, have been for years. Should’ve told you.”

“Why date me, not her?”

“She’s married,” Ali explained.

“You know what they say about unrequited love.”

“It’s requited, but not consummated.”

“Why not?”

“She promised her husband she wouldn’t have sex with me.”

Monica frowned. “If she’s not out...”

“She’s openly bisexual. Myron knows about us, but she made him a promise and won’t break it.”

“Speaking from experience, she’s crazy.”

Ali grinned. “When I was married, it didn’t matter because I promised myself I wouldn’t cheat on John again.”

“Now you’re single.”

“Yeah, it’s putting a strain on things. She knows I’m um... enjoying my freedom.”

“Will she divorce Myron?” Monica asked.

“No. He is a unique guy. There’s something about him. *He* told me he never asked for her promise. I think he’ll release her from it if she asks.”

“So you like him. Must make it difficult.”

“I love him a little too, to be honest.”

“Interesting.”

“Could be,” Ali suggested.

“What’re you going to do?”

“Nothing I can do. What I’m not going to do is sit home alone waiting for her to talk to Myron.”

“Can’t say I’m not disappointed. I like you *a lot*. I would like to see you again, while you’re not committed elsewhere. We can enjoy each other and let the future take care of itself.”

“I’d certainly like to enjoy you again. What are you suggesting? A regular sex date?”

Monica smiled. “No, I get plenty of them at work, and you’re not having any trouble finding ladies for sex, either. I mean, whenever you have a free night, we can have an actual date.”

“I’d like that, Monica. Last night, you made me feel special. I can’t remember such a perfect night.”

Monica pulled Ali tight against her and kissed her passionately.

“That’s because you *are* special. You’re not just another cute girl to fuck, and I don’t want to treat you like one. I want us to be different.”

Ali leaned down and brushed her lips against Monica’s nipple. “Whenever I have a free night, I’m your special lady. I have to meet my ex-husband’s new woman for lunch, but I have time.”

“God, woman, you’re insatiable.”

Ali pushed Judy back into her booth before she left it.

“Slide over.”

Judy did.

They kissed, and within seconds Judy’s hand was between Ali’s legs. Ali allowed herself to enjoy Judy’s touch for a few minutes before breaking off their kiss and attempting to brush Judy’s hand away. *Monica’s right, I’m insatiable.*

She extracted Judy’s hand and held it tight. *I don’t want her to stop.*

Judy was breathing heavily, staring wide-eyed at Ali. “It’s worse every day. I promised myself I wasn’t going to touch you today.”

“Monica says I’m in heat.”

“Like a dog?”

“Something like that.”

“Who’s Monica?” Judy asked.

“Lady, I dated last night.”

“Dated? Is that what you’re calling it now?”

“I mean an actual date. I’d never been on a date with a woman before. It was wonderful, champagne, and slow dancing.”

“So, you’re dating someone now?”

Here we go, again. “I want to date you, but you won’t see me outside the safety of the diner. My hands are tied.”

Judy glared at her. “Better your *legs* were tied.”

That could be interesting. “Open or closed?”

Judy’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t tell me you’re into *that* now?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” *I remember reading about a club...*

“Darling, I understand this is the first time you’ve been free since you discovered you prefer women...”

“How many times do I have to tell you? I don’t want to be free.”

“It’s not the right time,” Judy said.

Never is. “If I could have you, I wouldn’t look at anyone else. Until then, I have little choice but to...”

Judy glared at her. “Be a slut.”

Meeting the Ex

Lori was unsure what to expect. The idea of meeting John's ex-wife seemed strange. Concerned she'd be ambushed, she tried to calm the butterflies in her stomach.

During breakfast, John reassured her, "Ali's not like that. She's not a bitch, but if you don't want to meet her, I'll tell her you can't make it."

"All women can be bitches, especially when they feel threatened."

"Ali doesn't feel threatened, and Judy will be there."

"You said they were close."

"They are, but they don't have sex because Judy won't cheat on Myron."

"Or so they tell you."

John shrugged. "No reason for them to lie... now. Still, if you'd rather not meet her..."

I'm not taking any shit from her. Lori paused at the door of Frank's Diner and took a deep breath. A bell jangled as she pushed the door open and stepped inside. She was greeted by Hank Williams singing *Jambalaya*.

Corner booth by the window, John said. She saw two women seated side by side in the booth. The blonde woman, *must be Judy*, was glowering at the dark-haired woman. *So that's Ali.*

She took another deep breath, straightened herself, and walked to the booth with purpose. Ali and Judy apparently hadn't noticed her arrive. *Tense. Something's going on.*

"Hi, I'm Lori. If this is a bad time, we can do it another day."

Two heads turned in her direction. Ali stood, smiled, and offered her hand. "I'm Ali," she said, "and this is Judy. Don't mind us, we're having a moment."

Lori took Ali's hand, then reached across the table to take Judy's.

Ali indicated the vacant side of the booth. "Please, join us."

Lori sat. She felt their eyes appraising her. *I don't need their approval.*

Judy glared at Ali, but her expression softened when she turned her attention to Lori. "Welcome, Lori," she said.

Seem friendly enough, but the tension. "I don't mind coming back another day, if you two need to discuss something."

"It's fine," Ali said. "Our Judy's like a dog with a bone. Doesn't want it herself, but doesn't want anyone else to have it."

Judy glared at Ali again. "I just don't want *everyone* else to have it."

Ali glared back, but turned to Lori. "How was *Cirque du Soleil*?"

Okay, Judy's jealous of Ali's freedom. "It was wonderful. Charlie, in particular, seemed to enjoy it."

Ali smiled. "And Frankie looked mildly amused."

"Yes."

“You’ll get used to it. He doesn’t say much, but he doesn’t miss anything.”

“I was worried about how they would react to me, but they were polite and accepting.” Lori said, “I’m not trying to sound condescending, but you’ve raised them well.”

Ali grinned. “I didn’t do it on my own. John’s a good father. He was a good husband too, reliable and loyal.”

What does she mean, loyal? Is she having a dig because he cheated on her? Lori wasn’t sure what to say. “I um...”

Judy said, “She doesn’t mean anything.”

Must have seen it in my face.

“Ali’s happy John found you. Means she’s free to...”

“That’s your decision,” Ali interrupted. “Now behave yourself. You’re making Lori uncomfortable.”

This was a mistake. I shouldn’t have agreed. Lori glanced at Frank’s memorial plaque. “John says this diner is named in honor of his brother, Frank.”

“Yes, it is,” Judy confirmed. “He passed away outside this window.”

Katie arrived with their coffees.

“Ordered for you. I understand you like John’s coffee,” Ali said.

Before Lori could respond, Judy said, “Don’t be a bitch.”

“Sorry.”

Lori shrugged.

“Guessing this feels a little awkward for you,” Judy said. “I told Ali it was too soon, but she doesn’t listen to me these days.”

“It is a little strange,” Lori said.

“It’s my fault,” Ali said. “I wanted to meet you before you spend time with the kids. I’ve rushed into what I think would happen naturally.”

“It’s okay,” Lori said. “I mean... to be honest, I feel a little vulnerable, uncertain of what this is about, but I’m already starting to relax.”

Judy smiled and reached to squeeze Lori’s arm. “It’s fine,” she said, and turning to Ali, “Say what you want to say so the poor woman can relax.”

“I, um... I saw with Susie’s kids... They were put in a difficult position between Susie and the new woman... They couldn’t talk to their mother about the time they spent with their father in case something made Susie angry or upset. It closed them down. I don’t want that happening with my kids.”

“No, I don’t either,” Lori agreed. “I’ve seen it with my friends’ kids. Caught between mothers and stepmothers, who end up competing or something. It’s not good for anyone.”

“Cards on the table,” Ali said. “You don’t have to compete with me for John. I’m a lesbian. I love John and I’ll always be a part of his life. He’s the father of my children. But we’ve become more like siblings, my fault not his. If he’s happy with you, that’s great. I hope you give him what I couldn’t.”

“That’s pretty much what John said.”

“He’s a lucky guy, you’re kinda hot...”

Judy glared at her. “Behave yourself.” To Lori, she said, “I’m sorry. She’s a little out of control these days.”

“Now I’m free. I’m exploring my sexuality.”

“She’s certainly been doing a lot of exploring.” Lori struggled to read Judy’s expression, a blend of anger, concern, and hurt.

“Don’t mind her,” Ali said. “She’s just worried about me, but I’m okay.”

Judy gave Ali a look which Lori couldn’t interpret. *What’s that about?* She frowned.

“Judy doesn’t like it when I get inside her mind.” Ali explained, then returned her attention to Lori. “I think it’ll be better if we can be friends, or at least friendly.”

“It’s okay Ali,” Lori said. “I think we’ll be fine.”

“Thank you.”

There was something about the sincerity in Ali’s tone. Lori relaxed. She liked these women; they were being open and honest, not playing games.

Lori winked at Judy and said with a straight face. “Should I tell John you want to get into my pants?”

Judy burst out laughing. “You wouldn’t be wrong.”

Ali’s faced registered a horrified expression. Then she laughed too.

“Poor John, he must be beside himself, speculating on what we might talk about,” Ali suggested.

“Oh, he is,” Lori laughed. *And we’re bonding.* “He kept asking me if I thought it was a good idea to meet you.”

“Yes,” agreed Judy. “A man’s nightmare. His ex and his current woman talking. He’ll be convinced he’s the only topic of conversation.”

“He’s a good guy,” Ali said. “But he’s a man. In his mind, we would have nothing else to talk about.”

“What’ll we have for lunch?” Judy asked.

“John said we should share a *Frank and Susie*?” Lori said.

“Perfect,” agreed Judy, who signaled Katie.

Lori studied the women. *Not sure I should.*

Judy said, “You look like you want to say something.”

“It’s not my business,” Lori said.

“Aren’t we friends now?” Ali asked.

Nothing John doesn’t know. “When I first got divorced, I went to a different bar, and picked up a different guy every night. I was looking for validation, I guess. Looking back, I can’t believe I slept with half the guys I did. Eventually, one stuck until he started making noises about marriage. I didn’t want to get married again, so I dumped him.”

She drank some coffee and searched two pairs of eyes for judgement, but found none. “Then I started dating married guys because it was safe, couldn’t get too emotionally involved with them.”

“Until you met my John,” Ali said.

“Don’t be a bitch, you’re glad she did,” Judy said.

“True,” agreed Ali. “Sorry Lori, I didn’t mean anything.”

Lori shrugged. “Automatic reaction. My point is, I can’t imagine what it must have been like for you. Feelings and desires building up inside for years. When John left and the barrier preventing you from acting on them was removed, I suppose it was like the floodgates opened and your feelings and desires came pouring out, consuming everything in their path.”

“You’re right. It’s obvious why John is attracted to you,” Ali said.

Lori focused on Judy. “In time the flood will abate, and everything will be normal again,” and turning her attention back to Ali continued, “but the flood may leave damage in its wake which will need to be cleaned up first.”

As Lori finished her coffee, Judy and Ali looked at each other. “You’re right Ali, I *do* love this coffee, and the man who created it,” Lori said.

Judy said, “While we’re being open, I admit when I attempted to become straight, I did a lot of, er... experimenting trying to find my type. For a long time, I conducted a different experiment every day.”

“Oh, you’re straight? I thought...” Lori began.

“It didn’t stick,” Judy said.

“It partially stuck,” Ali suggested.

“I’m bisexual.”

The dynamic between the women fascinated Lori, as Ali gave Judy a long look.

“She means she’s an equal opportunity slut,” Ali said.

Wonder what that’s about.

“Used to be,” Judy responded.

“So you should understand,” Ali said. “There’s no reason to be jealous.”

“I told you I’m not jealous,” Judy responded.

She is, and it’s tearing her apart. That’s what’s causing the tension.

Rebekah arrived with their lunch. “Hello, Aunt Judy. Hi, Ali. Hello, Ma’am.”

Judy said, “Becky, this is John’s new partner, Lori.”

Rebekah offered her hand but glanced at Ali. “Pleased to meet you, Lori.”

“You too, Becky.”

“It’s all right, Becky,” Ali said. “We’re all friends here.”

Rebekah nodded, smiled at Lori, and returned to the kitchen.

Lori said, “It looks and smells amazing.”

“I haven’t tried Frank’s Poutine yet, but Susie’s mac and cheese is to die for,” Ali said.

Lori transferred a little of each to her plate and sampled both. “My God!” she said. “This food is amazing.”

“Oh yes,” Ali agreed.

They ate in silence, listening to Ronnie Hilton’s *Magic Moments*.

“Eating this food is certainly a magic moment,” Lori said.

After they finished lunch, Katie cleared away their plates and took their order for another round of coffees.

Ali studied Lori. *Attractive, intelligent. John’s done well for himself.* She forced herself to focus on what Lori was saying.

“John’s going to ask you if the boys can stay until Sunday,” she said.

Hope Monica is free on Saturday night. “I guess it would be okay. Any specific reason?”

“We’re planning to come here for brunch on Sunday with Susie and her kids.”

“You’re meeting our Susie? That’ll be interesting. She can be a little tough,” Ali said.

“John said Susie could be difficult.”

“I’ll call her and tell her we’re all friends,” Judy said, “Susie’s a loyal person, and any animosity will be out of loyalty to Ali. She’ll be fine.”

“Susie calls him Junior,” Ali explained. “He hates it. His dad was John, too. He always reacts, which is why she does it. I must’ve told him a thousand times if he stopped reacting, she’d stop doing it... but he never listened. I guess he secretly likes it, even if he doesn’t realize he does.”

“Oh Ali,” Judy said. “That’s insightful. There could be something in that.” She retrieved her iPad from her shoulder bag. Ali watched her add, *Secretly Liking What We Hate*, to her list of features.

Ali said, “You’ll get used to her doing that. Judy can find a feature in everything.”

“I’ve been reading her features for years. I love them,” Lori said.

Judy smiled. “Thank you.”

“Wasn’t Frank the oldest? Isn’t it usual to name the oldest after the father? Why was it John who was named after his father?”

“I don’t know,” said Ali. “Never thought to ask.”

“They named Frank after his grandfather, who passed shortly before Frank was born,” Judy explained.

Lori finished her coffee and said she needed to go. She stood and leaned across the table to hug Judy goodbye. “Glad we met. I’ve enjoyed this lunch. To be honest, I didn’t expect I would.”

“I’m sure we’ll be seeing a lot more of each other,” Judy said.

Ali stood, walked around the table and hugged Lori goodbye, kissing her lightly on the cheek and sliding her hand down Lori’s back, pausing on her ass. Lori returned her hug easily and naturally. *Interesting.*

“Alison Farrington!” Judy said.

“Just teasing,” Ali said, and laughed.

Lori smiled broadly, turned, and left the diner.

“What was that about?” Judy asked.

“Wanted to see if she was seducible.”

“Obviously not.”

“She is,” Ali observed.

“She ignored your nonsense.”

“That’s the point. If she wouldn’t even consider it, she would’ve pulled away. She didn’t. If a straight girl doesn’t react, she can be seduced.”

“You have experience?” Judy asked.

No, but I’d like to try. “Only from being seduced. Nancy explained it to me.”

“Well, you don’t want to go there.”

“Actually, I *want* to, but I won’t on account of John.”

Ali stood. “I need to go, too. Come, give me a hug.”

Judy stood to hug her goodbye.

“I’ll see you tonight,” Ali said while fondling Judy’s ass.

“Slut,” Judy whispered.

“Only until I get a better offer.”

Judy had much to think about. Her publisher wanted her to write another book. She wasn’t sure. She glanced at Frank’s plaque.

“I have nothing to write about, Frank. No mystery to be solved, no adversity to overcome, no conflict.” *Except maybe my feelings of jealousy as Ali explores her freedom.* “No inspiring redemption story to share.” *What will I write about?*

“My publisher suggested I write about my life and the city.” *I suppose I could, but the people in my life are just people, living their unremarkable lives.*

“It’s true, Frank, that many of them have faced periods of adversity in the past, but now they’re getting on with their unremarkable lives.” *For some, like George, this is remarkable.*

Perhaps I should change publisher? I do own a publishing company now.

She had asked Myron, “Why didn’t you suggest your publishing company for my book?”

He’d responded, “It was important for you to know a publisher picked up your book on its merits.”

Maybe a book about people and places I encounter in my life, nothing remarkable, no mystery to be solved, no adversity to be overcome, no dramatic conflict either internal or external, no fiction writing formula to follow. No antagonists or protagonists in some form of battle, no good versus evil. Ordinary people, encountered by chance, or by design.

Judy had bought a notepad, as she'd done when she began writing about Frank Farrington. She opened it, smoothed the page twice, and wrote.

Broken People

Judy looked at the title. *Well, that meets the brief.*

Ali pushed open the door of Afternoon Delights. Monica's face lit up. She had a drink ready for Ali by the time she reached the bar.

"Miss me already?" Monica asked.

"Yes," Ali smiled. "Actually, turns out I have a free night tomorrow, and I..."

"It's a date."

"Meet here at eight?"

"Yes, and wear *that* dress."

Ali smiled. "So you liked that dress?"

"I enjoy being able to see what's in it."

"Any preference for lingerie color?"

Monica smiled, "Pink."

"Pale or hot?"

"Hot with that dress."

"I'll have to buy some."

"You could've called."

"You don't want me turning up while you're working? I'm sorry..."

"Gorgeous, you can turn up at my work or my home any time, day or night. Open invitation."

"I'll remember that."

"Why did you call in, anyway?"

"Thought I might like to kiss you."

Monica came out from the bar and stopped in front of Ali. They embraced and moist, willing lips connected, mouths opened, and tongues tangoed. Monica handed her a slip of paper.

She looked at it. *A phone number.* She frowned.

"Juicy's number," Monica said. "I haven't told her I gave it to you in case you're not interested."

"Oh, are you sure..."

"I'm not the jealous type. You said you're looking for new experiences. Juicy is an experience. There's a reason they call her Juicy."

"Oh... so you're my pimp?"

Monica laughed. "More your guide to your new world."

Ali beamed. “You’re an amazing lady, and very understanding. I’m fortunate to have met a friend like you.”

“Girlfriend?” Monica winked.

Ali smiled. “Well, whenever I have a free night.”

“I’ll take it... for now.”

A woman was headed to the bar. Monica went to attend to her.

Ali heard the woman ask, “Who’s that?”

“My girlfriend,” Monica replied. “But don’t worry, we’re not exclusive.”

So what, I have two girlfriends now? Ali extracted her phone from her handbag and called Juicy.

Moonglow

Ali arrived at Ozzie's Burgers @ The Farmer's Market late. Judy, Susie, and Jenny were already there. Judy was enjoying her *Sunny Burger*. Ali rolled her eyes. *Over two years, and that's the only burger she's tried.*

Ali kissed Susie and Jenny hello, then hugged Judy, who stood to greet her. "Sorry, I'm late," she said. "Had something to do."

She felt Judy stiffen in her arms. *Here we go again.*

Judy pulled away and glared at her. "Someone to do, you mean. I smell her stench on you."

She was juicy. Should've washed my hair. Ali returned Judy's glare. "I'm going to order."

When Ali returned to the table, Judy ignored her. She asked Susie and Jenny, "Do you think we should invite Lori to join us at Moonglow? It'll give you a chance to meet her."

Their answer was to stare at Ali. Judy focused on her burger.

"I think that's a good idea," Ali said. "I want her to be part of the family for John and the kids' sake." *And I don't want to be excluded.* "I quite like her."

"I think she picked up on that when you grabbed her ass," Judy said.

"What!" Susie's eyes widened. "You grabbed Lori's ass?"

"I touched it. I was testing to see how she'd react and whether she'd tell John. We can trust her. Also, I was teasing our Judy, who's put out because I've been..."

"Acting like a slut," suggested Judy.

"Exploring my freedom," Ali corrected.

Jenny said to Susie, "Trouble in paradise?"

"Oh yes," Susie said. "I agree. We should include Lori. Besides, it'll be all junior thinks about.... Men think we have nothing to talk about except them."

Jenny said, "I don't know why you two don't fuck and get it over with. You've been teasing each other for years."

"Myron," Judy said.

"I'll call Lori and ask her to meet us at Moonglow," Ali said, extracting her phone from her handbag and selecting Lori's number.

"Ali?"

"Hi Lori. We're hoping you can join us at Moonglow tonight for our Farrington Girl's night out."

"Oh, I don't know. I..."

"Come on, you can meet Susie and Jenny, and it'll give the boys a chance to talk to John about you."

"Two good reasons. I'll have a word to John."

Ali heard muffled murmuring. "She's talking to John," Ali explained.

"Hello, Ali. John agrees it's a good idea."

“Really?”

“Yes, but from the look on his face, I think he’s concerned about what his sisters might tell me about him.”

Ali laughed. She gave Lori the address, rang off, then said to Susie and Jenny, “You’ll like her. I do.”

“She’s female,” Judy said.

Is she gonna be bitchy all night? “Jen, I wouldn’t *let* Judy cheat on Myron. I respect *him* too much for that.”

“Fair enough,” Jenny said.

“And,” Ali continued, looking at Judy. “I love *her* too much to put her in a position where a moment of weakness or insecurity could harm our relationship.”

“Insecurity?” Jenny asked.

“Yes,” Ali explained. “Our Judy thinks she’s spontaneous and laid back, but she likes things the way she likes them, and she doesn’t like change.” Ali’s eyes locked on Judy’s. “She’s already arguing with me in her head.”

Judy focused on her burger.

“When I was with John, nothing was going to change, but now I’m free. She’s worried everything will change, because I’m exploring my sexuality, which I’ve repressed far too long.”

“I’m just worried about you,” Judy said. “There’s a difference between exploring your sexuality and fucking everything with a pussy and a pulse.”

“I think Lori’s right,” Ali said. “The floodgates opened, but everything will settle down in time.”

Susie looked shocked. “You spoke with Lori about this?”

“I liked her.”

“And you grabbed her ass,” said Jenny. “Enjoy yourself, but be careful.”

Judy made a point of sniffing in Ali’s direction. “You can smell how much she’s enjoying herself.”

Bitch. “You don’t need to feel insecure. You won’t lose me.”

Judy glared at her.

Ali pulled Judy’s head towards hers and kissed her. “I love you, now behave yourself.”

They sat in their regular booth at Moonglow, waiting for Lori to arrive. A man asked Susie to dance. She finished her drink and followed him.

“Still playing, despite Jeremy,” Jenny observed.

“The jury’s out on Jeremy,” Judy said, and to Ali, “Dance with me.”

Ali kissed her, took her hand, and led her.

They really are like a couple. Jenny normally sat in their booth and observed what was happening. Recently, she’d been accepting more invitations to dance, often with Joshua,

who'd made it clear he was interested in more than dancing. Jenny was contemplating the prospect of a 'quick fuck out the back' as Susie described it.

A dimly lit lane behind Moonglow offered a series of alcoves, service entrances for adjacent businesses, convenient for a quick hookup if you couldn't take someone home. Club patrons knew it as 'going out the back'.

Jenny's husband, Dave, had enjoyed a succession of affairs, which didn't concern her. Dave's guilt made him agreeable.

Ali and Judy returned from the dance floor with another woman. Judy downed her drink and went to get another.

Ali said, "This is John's youngest sister, Jenny." Lori offered her hand. "Jen, this is Lori."

"Pleased to meet you," Lori said.

Jenny took her hand. "Likewise. I was going to order a drink. Would you like one?"

"Please, a White Russian. I'll get the next one."

"No need. Just tell them to put it on Judy's tab. She has an account."

Arriving at the bar, Jenny saw the barman hand Judy two pink gins. She assumed one was for Ali, but Judy skulled one and took the other to the table. *Interesting. Is she trying to get drunk?*

Suddenly, Joshua was beside her. "Hey beautiful, you gonna dance with me?"

She studied him. "Sure, gonna have a drink with my friends first. Come find me later."

Taking her and Lori's drinks back to their table, Jenny said, "Bumped into Joshua, he wants to dance again."

Ali asked, "Are you finally going to succumb to his advances?"

Jenny said, "Maybe."

Lori started laughing.

Judy asked, "What's funny?"

"Every time I hear that word, I think of a line in a Harlan Coben book. 'Succumb, is that one word or two?'"

The women laughed. "That's more appropriate than you realize," Ali said. "I'm going to get another drink."

Judy emptied her glass. "Yes, please, darling."

Jenny stared at Judy. *Definitely trying to get drunk.* She turned her attention to Lori. "So you met John over his coffee?"

"Yes, it's Judy's fault," Lori said with a mischievous twinkle in her eye. "I read her blog and went to try the coffee... ended up trying your brother."

Jenny laughed. *I like her.* "And you liked both?"

"Oh, yeah."

Ali and Judy downed their drinks and headed back to the dance floor.

Susie returned to their booth and sat down. "Hi, I'm Susie. You must be Lori?"

Lori offered her hand, which Susie took, and smiled.

“What were you two laughing at?” she asked.

“John,” Jenny clarified.

“You two want another drink?” They both nodded, and Susie headed to the bar.

“Welcome to my world,” said Jenny.

What does that mean? Lori gave her a puzzled look as she studied her. Her features, unmistakably Farrington, but softer than John’s. Light brown hair finished halfway down her back. Her eyes, almost the same shade as her hair, and curious.

“I’m usually left alone,” Jenny explained. “I enjoy watching, but I’ve been a little itchy recently. Our Susie doesn’t have it easy; she works full time and raises two kids, by herself, plus she has to do everything around her house. I worked it out. Twenty-five days a year is all Susie has to let her hair down and release the stress of her life. It stops her from being overwhelmed.”

“I know many people who are overwhelmed by life,” Lori said.

Jenny continued, “Susie comes here, lets her hair down, dances like crazy, and opens her legs for whoever she fancies, and all her stress and frustration is gone. Three hundred forty days a year, she’s a responsible person, and for twenty-five days, she’s a free spirit. Not that we judge. What happens at Moonglow stays at Moonglow. An opportunity for us to go out, be who we want to be, and do what we want to do. No husbands, no kids, no responsibilities.”

Is she testing me? Seeing how I’ll react.

“Susie and Judy came up with this idea, and it has been great for all of us. As for those two,” she said, indicating Judy and Ali, who were holding hands, making their way back to the table, giggling at something like a pair of excited schoolgirls. “This is their date night. Everyone thinks they’re a couple.”

“I can see why,” Lori commented.

“They dance together all night, flirt with each other, passionate kisses and touching, but our Judy has a line, and won’t let Ali cross it. Seems a little strange to me. They both seemed happy with the arrangement, but you’ve changed that.”

Jenny’s being very talkative. “You mentioned you’d been feeling a little itchy?”

“Who’s itchy?” Ali asked as she sat down, leaning over to give Lori a kiss while looking at Jenny.

“Would you behave yourself?” Judy said to Ali.

“Who’s itchy?” Ali repeated.

“What?” Susie asked as she returned to the table. Judy skolled the drink Susie had bought her.

Jenny explained, “I am, but you can’t give me the type of scratching I need, Ali.”

“Give her half a chance and she would,” said Judy.

Ali gently turned Judy’s face to hers and kissed her passionately. “I love it when my girlfriend is jealous,” she said.

Susie looked at Ali and then at Lori. "It's all right Suse, I filled her in on everything that happens on our girls' nights out," Jenny said.

"Everything?" asked Susie.

"She knows those two are a couple, and you're a free spirit," Jenny explained. "But only on our nights of freedom."

"Oh," said Susie, as Judy sipped Ali's drink.

Lori watched and listened carefully. She wanted to understand what was going on. She saw the way Judy looked at Jenny knowingly, who returned her look as if to confirm Judy's assessment. *Jenny is far more astute than anyone gives her credit for, except Judy. Testing me, assessing how I react, and whether I can be trusted.*

Lori smiled. *I like this family.* "So," she said to Jenny. "You've given me the rundown on everyone else, but I'm interested in your itch."

"Oh... so am I," said Ali, looking pointedly at Judy.

"Dave playing away again?" Susie asked.

"Playing away?" Lori asked.

"It is an English thing," Susie clarified. "Comes from soccer, meaning a team is playing at their opponent's ground, which is playing away. They also use it when someone is cheating on their partner. As our Jenny is being so forthcoming about everyone else, you might as well know her Dave likes to play away."

Jenny said, "I don't mind when he does... and I always know."

"And she milks it for all she can," added Susie, "and so she should... The bastard."

"Milks it?" asked Lori.

"Yes," said Ali. "When he's feeling guilty, he'll agree to anything Jen wants. What was it last time? A new sofa?"

"Yes. I know how to play his game to my advantage. He's not a bad husband, treats me okay and very well when he's feeling guilty. He's a good father, and a good provider. So, I can forgive him his indiscretions as long as they don't get serious. If they do, I have them all documented, so any settlement will be in my favor."

Jenny's smart.

"But none of this tells us about your itch," Susie said. "I'm sure Ali is gagging to hear about it."

"God, Susie," Ali said. "That's almost incestuous."

"Jen?" Susie wasn't letting it go.

"Nothing... I've been horny lately and I think I need to get laid."

"Speaking of which," Susie said to Ali. "I reckon you've been laid more in the last few weeks than I have in the last few years. No wonder our Judy is bent out of shape." She turned to Judy and said, "Be careful. You're drinking too much tonight, and Ali spent the whole time you were dancing, fending you off."

Judy nodded to Susie, reached for Ali's drink and downed it as if in defiance, took Ali's hand and said, "Come on, I want to dance."

Joshua arrived and offered his hand to Jenny, who took it. They followed Ali and Judy.

Lori said, "I might get a round of drinks in."

"Sure," said Susie. "Tell the barman you want another round for table six. He knows what we drink. He'll put it on Judy's tab. She always takes care of it."

"Really?"

"Her and Myron are loaded."

Lori took her lead from the others and asked a straightforward question. "Is that why she and Ali have never?"

Susie smiled at the honest question. "No, Judy was comfortable before she met Myron. They bought the diner and Frank's business together long before they were married. Myron is a great guy, not at all like people expect him to be. He has a genuineness about him."

"Life must've been confusing for Ali. I suspect her relationship with Judy helped her because it gave her an outlet without the conflict between her desires and keeping the promise to herself about John," Lori suggested.

"That's true," Susie said. "But Ali's change in circumstances has upset the balance and our Judy is having trouble coping with it. I'm sure it'll settle down."

Judy and Ali returned to the table. Judy downed her drink and signaled for another.

Ali asked, "Are you trying to get hammered tonight?"

"I'm trying to get something," Judy responded and kissed her.

Susie went off to dance with some guy, so Ali and Judy stayed and chatted with Lori for a while.

Judy unashamedly slid her hands up Ali's skirt, and Ali dragged them away, clasping them to control her. *Interesting dynamic between these two.*

When Jenny returned for a rest, Ali and Judy headed to the dance floor.

Lori said, "I'm curious why you were so open with me?"

"It appears you'll marry our John as soon as he's free, which will bring you into our family. It's important for you to understand what our family is, and these nights are an important part of our family culture. We weren't close for many years, but after Frank passed, Judy pulled us together. Judy never had family and wasn't looking for one. I don't know how, but I believe Frank orchestrated it," Jenny explained.

"Not some sort of test?" Lori asked.

"No. Frank taught me to accept people exactly as they are. That's why I can accept Dave. Frank said we can either accept people as they are, or not, but we shouldn't try to change them."

"Are you going to go out the back with Joshua?"

"Yeah. I haven't been interested in sex for years, which is one reason it suits me that Dave plays away. When I was young, I was insatiable, and had a lot of sex. I was sure if you looked up the word slut in the dictionary, there would've been a picture of me. Then it all stopped. Maybe we have a quota of how many fucks we can have in a lifetime, and I used my

quota up early? Frank was the only one who knew about me back then, and our Billy. John doesn't know."

"He won't hear it from me, Jen."

Jenny smiled. "Going to find Joshua and take him out the back before I change my mind."

I like this family. I'm going to fit in fine.

Jenny headed out the back with Joshua, looking for a vacant alcove. It could get busy out there. She glimpsed Susie against the wall of an alcove with a guy. The club had two bouncers who discretely patrol the alley to ensure there was no trouble or inappropriate behavior, like someone with an unwilling partner.

They found an alcove, and Jenny allowed him to take the lead. He kissed her softly and nuzzled her neck. His hand slipped up her dress and he began caressing her through her panties. Jenny inhaled deeply and held it, savoring the moment. This was unexpected. She'd anticipated he'd get straight into the action, without gentle foreplay.

She slid her hand down and began rubbing his hardness through his trousers. She twitched. *Can't believe how much I need this.* She opened his belt, and eased his fly open, slipped her hand inside his underwear, and grasped her desire.

"I want you inside of me," she whispered.

It didn't take long. They were both nearly there before they went out. Jenny buried her head into his shoulder, her heavy breathing echoing in his ear. Her orgasm had been intense, but it was Joshua's gentle touch that remained with her.

"Can you give me your number?" she asked.

Jenny was on her way back but was stopped short. Judy and Ali were hard against the wall in an alcove. Judy was the aggressor. Ali's panties were around her knees.

Jenny was shocked, but not surprised. Caught somewhere between, *it's about time, and I hope this doesn't fuck everything up.* She grabbed Joshua's hand tightly and returned to the club.

Judy had taken Ali by the hand. Instead of leading her to the dance floor as usual, she'd led her out the back and into the first vacant alcove.

What's going on? Being out the back with Judy was something she'd fantasized about often. *This is wrong.* Judy pushed her against the wall hard and forced her thigh between Ali's legs, rubbing it against her. Ali was too aroused to resist.

She felt Judy pull her panties down to her knees, and then Judy's fingers were where Ali had wanted them to be for years.

My God, she knows how to touch me. Judy's touch was everything Ali had imagined it would be. She brought Ali to orgasm, rested for a moment and did it again until Ali couldn't bear it, and forced Judy's hand away. Judy put her hand in her mouth, tasting her lover's juice.

Ali caught her breath, pulled her panties up, took Judy's hand and led her back inside, without returning the favor, despite her desire to do so.

When they reached the table, Ali grabbed their bags.

“Time to go,” Ali said. Taking a shell-shocked Judy by the hand, leading her outside. She pushed Judy into a taxi, gave the driver Judy’s address, and closed the door.

Susie asked, “What was that about?”

“You can guess,” Jenny said.

Susie looked at Lori. “You must think we’re all sluts.”

“No,” Lori said. “I think you’re all amazing women. I wish I’d met you when I was single.”

“We have a night out every two weeks,” Susie said.

“I’ll be here and thank you for welcoming me into your family.”

After 'glow

Judy didn't know what happened. She wanted Ali to touch her; she was incredibly horny, and now she was home alone.

Myron was staying at his parents, as he still did every Friday and Saturday night.

Judy threw her phone on the bed, stripped her clothes off, dropped them on the floor, and fell onto the mattress. She sobbed into her pillow. *What's wrong with me?*

Why will she touch every dyke in the city, but not me? Can't believe she rejected me. She rolled onto her back. *Why does she make me so fucking horny?*

My God! She touched herself. That bitch has me dripping. Can't believe she rejected me. What's wrong with me?

Why won't she touch me? I touched her! She raised her hand to her nose and inhaled. She could still smell Ali on her fingers, now covered in her own scent as well. Their scents blended. *I like that blend... Glad Myron's not home.*

Her phone rang. She didn't need caller ID to know who it was. It was all she could do not to throw it against the wall.

She needed to hold Ali, to cry on her shoulder, to be reassured of Ali's love for her. She wanted to make love to Ali all night. She didn't want to talk to her, not now, not ever. *Can't believe that fucking bitch rejected me.*

She answered the phone on speaker. "What?"

"I'm worried about you."

"Why? What do you care?"

"You weren't yourself tonight. I wanted to make sure you're okay."

"If you were so concerned, you would've come home with me."

"I-I-I'm sorry about tonight, Judy. I shouldn't have let you..."

"You didn't like it? You seemed to enjoy yourself. I've still got your fucking stench on my fingers."

"Oh, I did darling, you have an amazing touch... I didn't want you to stop... I should've stopped you, but I couldn't. I'm sorry."

"Why should you have stopped me? And why the fuck wouldn't you touch me? It's all you've fucking wanted to do for years. I don't understand. You've been trying to get into my fucking panties for fucking ever. I finally let you and you don't want to.... I wanted you to touch me tonight. I still do. Why won't you touch me?"

Ali swallowed the knot in her throat. The sound of the woman she loved emotional and hurt broke her resolve and she began crying too.

"Oh darling, I wanted to... I want to. All I want to do now is hop in a taxi and come to you. I want to hold you, and cry with you and make love to you, and I don't want to stop. But I can't, not like this. It'll change everything."

"I think you should. My eyes are wet, and so am I. It's your fucking fault. You broke me. Now get your cute ass over here and fucking fix me."

Ali wasn't sure what to say. *God. Don't let me lose Judy.* "Do you really think I've got a cute ass?"

Judy chuckled, which loosened a little of the tension in Ali's shoulders. "You know you have. Now get that cute ass and sexy body over here."

"Oh, so now I have a cute ass and a sexy body?"

"Yes, and I want it. I need you now. I need you to come and hold me, touch me."

If I go, everything will change. Better? Perhaps for worse. I won't risk losing Judy, to have Judy. Perhaps it didn't make sense, but it did to Ali. "Am I on speakerphone?"

"What if you are?"

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing, lying on the bed."

"What are you wearing?"

"Nothing!"

"Nothing? Lying there with nothing on and your phone on hands free?"

"There's nothing on me except pussy juice and tears. I want you to come and kiss both away. It's your responsibility... You put them there."

Aroused again, Ali put her own phone on speaker mode... and undressed. "If I was there," Ali asked. "What would you have me do?"

"I'd let you do whatever you want. No boundaries and no limits."

"No limits?"

"No... tell me what you'd do."

Ali told her. Judy's response, her quickened breathing, her soft moans, her long orgasm, left Ali no choice but to slip her fingers between her legs, telling Judy her fantasy as she lived it herself.

After Ali satisfied herself, she said, "I saw you licking your fingers after... Did I taste good?"

"You taste amazing."

It was dawn before they finished their phone call.

When she woke, Judy's eyes and mouth were gritty, her head was throbbing a little, and the light made her squint. She still stripped and remade the bed as she did every Saturday, putting the bedding and her clothes from the night before in the laundry hamper.

Judy showered and dressed, ensuring she was immaculate in a white and pale-lemon flowing summer dress and white shoes with a slight heel. She knew what Myron liked and wanted to make sure she looked attractive that day.

When Judy crossed the road to enter Frank's Diner, she greeted George, who was on his break, cigarette in hand. He seemed unable to take his eyes off her. She smiled. *That'll give you something to think about tonight, George.* She liked knowing men, well mostly men, women were not so obvious, found her attractive.

Why is George usually outside when I arrive in the morning? Being a creature of habit; she arrived at almost the same time each day. It was easy for George to time his cigarette breaks.

Judy ordered her usual breakfast from Suzy Q, who complimented her appearance.

Andy Williams' *Hawaiian Wedding Song* was playing in the diner, which made her smile. After the events of the previous evening, she was happy and confident in herself that morning, despite being more than a little seedy from the cocktail of alcohol, confusion, and emotion which had consumed her a few hours earlier.

During breakfast, Susie and Jenny both called to check on her, which didn't surprise her. Lori also called, which did. *I must've been some mess last night.* She answered her ringing phone a fourth time.

"Are you okay?" Ali asked.

"I'm happy."

"Are we okay?"

"Why wouldn't we be?"

"That was my first-time having phone sex," Ali said.

"Mine too. Hope it's not the last."

"It won't be if I have any say in it. Can't believe we never thought of it."

"As I recall, you had most of the say in it."

"Are you complaining?"

"No. That was exactly the way I like it. Remember that."

"I will. It'll be better next time. I'll have time to prepare."

"Now you're teasing me." Judy's voice became somber. "Ali, thank you for being strong last night. I love you."

"I love you too. That'll never change."

"I know, darling. I'll see you on Monday. Time for Sabbath."

Normally, Judy had a very light breakfast on Saturday, but that morning she had her usual scrambled eggs to—*take the edge off my seediness*—and she needed the coffee. She had a second cup before she left and headed to her parents-in-laws for Sabbath.

Ali sat at her dining table. *What is going on with me? I'm permanently horny. If I'm not having sex, I'm thinking about having sex.*

She picked up her cup with two hands, as she often did when thinking about life. *Three different women brought me to orgasm yesterday, and I still spent the night masturbating over the phone with Judy.*

Hungry. Ali went to the kitchen, cut two slices of sourdough bread from Alice's Bakery. Spread some Dijon mustard from Exquisite Jams on the bread. Grated cheese from two blocks, mozzarella for stretch and parmesan for bite, both from Lexington Deli. Judy had influenced many of her habits. She placed her cheese on toast in her toaster oven.

Waiting for her breakfast, she thought of Lori. *Didn't expect to like her as much. I can see why John loves her. She's right, the floodgates have opened, and my need is consuming everything in its path.*

She removed her breakfast from the toaster oven. The molten cheese was sizzling and popping, a strong aroma of mustard and cheese caused her to salivate. *Hungry, looking forward to this.*

She placed her plate beside her coffee and sat to wait for it to cool. She picked up her cup and sipped. *Monica's right, I'm like a kid in a candy store. I want to sample everything before it's taken away from me.*

She raised a slice of toast to her nose, inhaled, then took a bite. *Damn, that's good.* She enjoyed her breakfast and thoughts of her date with Monica. *Judy's right. I'm out of control. Judy. I hope we're gonna be okay. Better ring her.*

Ali selected the name at the top of her favorite contacts list on her phone.

"Are you okay?"

Finishing her call, Ali glanced at her watch. *Need to shower, have lingerie to buy today.*

Myron heard the door open and went to greet his wife. "Wow! You look amazing."

She held him tightly, and he reciprocated with his firm but gentle embrace.

"I love you, Myron," she said.

He embraced her tighter. *Something's happened.* "I love you too, Judy. Is everything alright?"

"Everything's perfect."

Myron suspected something had happened with Alison but saw no reason to speculate on what it might be. He dealt with facts, not speculation. That Judy loved him was a fact. He could feel it. *Feelings are real, so feelings are facts, but feelings can change, all facts can.*

He had no concern about Judy's feelings for Alison. It was obvious to all who saw them together they loved each other. Judy had told him directly. He knew they dated on Friday nights and was fine with it. He felt no threat from their relationship.

Maybe they got carried away. If they did, I'm okay with it.

He'd been waiting for her to raise the subject. Alison's situation had changed, which he sensed was placing pressure on Judy.

He was sure Alison would accept limiting their relationship to one night a week, which was fine when she and John were married. Now she was single, there'd be times when she needed the company of her partner. If Judy was the only partner she had, it would place pressure on everyone.

There's a solution to this, but I can't join the dots yet.

When the family was in the living room, after Sabbath Dinner, Art announced they'd acquired a small lot. Like most of their properties, the acquisition was unplanned. Mostly family-owned apartment buildings bordered the block.

It was in an older part of the city and had housed a small strip mall composed of a convenience store, a dry cleaner, and a restaurant. A fire had destroyed the complex, and the city had declared the remains unsafe ordering their demolition. Insurance and legal disputes had left the lot abandoned for several years, becoming a rubbish dump, making it less attractive.

Following the settlement of the disputes, the site was put up for auction. The planning office contacted Art and suggested the city would be grateful if he acquired the property. The auctioneer knew Art and had discreetly mentioned it had a low reserve.

There was little interest. Larger developers who may have been interested in acquiring the block knew Art wouldn't sell his buildings. Art joined the bidding, mainly to satisfy the city council, but stopped before the price reached the reserve. However, the lack of interest, and that there were no more bidders, meant Art had the winning bid because the reserve was discarded.

Not having planned the purchase, Art was unsure what to do with it. Myron suggested, "We could rebuild the strip mall and include two or three floors of small apartments above it."

Judy said, "Papa, I need an outdoor space for my architecture course project. Could I look at the site and design something for the community to use? It doesn't mean you have to build it."

Myron frowned, then smiled. "You're right, Judy," he said. "We have more than enough shops and apartments. Doing something for the community is a wonderful idea."

Art nodded. "Anything we do for the community is good for us, too. If people like their community, they have pride in where they live. They tend to look after their apartments. Myron's idea is good, but for us, I think something for the community would be better."

Ruth sipped her Manischewitz Concord Grape Wine, then said, "Anything Judy designs will be amazing."

"I don't know about that, Mama, but it might be fun to design something."

Second Dates

Ali grinned as she left Luscious Lingerie. She'd found what she needed. Hot pink lingerie in satin and lace. *That should wow Monica.*

She glanced at her watch. *Coffee. Not far from UniBook. Perhaps I'll bump into Brit.*

Settled in the café, with her purchases, and a coffee, Ali opened a copy of *Objects of Beauty*. Arms slid across her shoulders, hands stopping before reaching her breasts, and soft kisses warmed her cheeks.

Ali smiled as Brit whispered in her ear. "Knew you'd come back."

"Hello Brit," she said as she turned her head, allowing her lips to meet Brit's.

Brit sat beside her, extracting her phone from the pocket of her blue hippy pants. "Give me your phone." Brit picked up Ali's phone from the table and held it for Ali to unlock with her thumbprint.

She fiddled with the phones, then handed Ali's phone back. "Now you have my number."

"I have something to do tonight," Ali said. "But I'm free today, and no kids to disturb us."

"Got a seminar this afternoon."

"Coffee?"

"I was planning to go to the *Women in Art* exhibition at the culture center on campus. Although it's not clear if it's women artists, or women subjects or both. I don't usually like the way men portray women. Why not come with me?"

Might be fun. "I'd love to."

Brit beamed. "Oh, you bought our book."

"Makes me think of you."

Ali's words earned her a long, slow kiss.

"Starts in fifteen. I've just been killing time here. Finish your coffee and we'll head over."

They approached the ticket counter. "Two." Brit said, passing the attendant her campus card.

"For you and your mother?" the attendant said.

Ali stiffened.

"For Ali to be my mother, she would have given birth to me when she was about nine, biologically impossible, which you'd know if you weren't such a dumb bitch."

The girl glared at Brit, who continued. "She's my lover, the best I've ever had. Much better than some of the inept bitches I've been with."

Something's going on here, history perhaps?

Brit took the tickets and her campus card the girl had slammed on the counter, turned, hugged Ali, and kissed her passionately, slipping her hand up Ali's skirt.

"My ex," Brit explained as they entered the exhibition area.

Ali spent the next two hours inspecting the art, which was interesting, but from her suburban housewife perspective, not particularly thought provoking. Brit held her hand the entire time and provided a commentary of opinions. "I like the use of color, but the portrayal of women as tall and slender is unrealistic. Too Modigliani for me. The model looks like she's having an orgasm. That's subtle, sexy, but not overstated. What's with the massive lips? Don't like to see images of dead women. Don't you think this one is too violent?" *Brit has an opinion about every piece.*

After kissing Brit goodbye at the campus gate, Ali headed to a picture framer.

She handed the guy her still sealed book. "Could you extract the picture on page fifty-seven? I'd like it framed."

"We can do that for you, Ma'am. What's your preference for the frame and mounting?"

"You're the expert. I'll leave it to you, as long as it's subtle and tasteful. Oh, and not expensive. I'm a single mother."

He took her details and promised to call her when it was ready.

Ali checked the schedule at the bus stop adjacent to the framers. *I can take the bus home.* She didn't like to drive in the city center. Parking was too difficult. She usually walked everywhere when she was downtown, another habit she'd picked up from Judy. She found it incredulous that Judy didn't have a driver's licence. "Never needed one," Judy had explained. Neither she nor Myron owned a car.

There was a vacant seat halfway down the bus beside a young woman. She smiled at the woman as she sat. The woman returned her smile—her teeth seemed dazzlingly bright against her dark skin—and then turned her head to stare out the window.

Before the bus reached the next stop, the woman was looking straight ahead, tight curls glistening in the sunlight streaming in the window. She kept looking at Ali from the corner of her eye. She was fidgety in her seat, lacing and unlacing her fingers.

Ali turned to look at her. "Are you okay?" she asked. "You seem a little uncomfortable."

"I'm fine," the woman said, and looked at Ali directly. Her dark eyes were like deep black pools.

Ali moistened her lips, then smiled. "I'm Ali."

"Destiny."

Ali laughed. "I have a friend who'd probably want to write a feature about *Meeting Destiny on a Bus.*"

"Guys, use that line all the time when they're trying to hit on me," Destiny explained. She made eye contact with Ali. "Not that I'm into guys."

Ali's eyes began focused on Destiny's legs, and slowly made their way up her body, pausing at her cleavage before continuing to finally rest on her face. "Same."

Destiny smiled and offered her hand; she was becoming more fidgety.

Ali took her hand, maintaining eye contact and moistening her lips again.

“This is my stop,” Destiny said. “I, umm, don’t suppose you’d like to grab a coffee or something?”

Ali glanced at her watch. “I have plenty of time, and I’d certainly like to grab something.” Her eyes once more lingering on Destiny’s cleavage.

They alighted from the bus. Ali surveyed her surroundings. “I didn’t know there was a café around here.”

“There’s not. I have coffee at home.”

“Or something,” Ali nodded. “Sounds good.” *What’s wrong with me? If I’m not having sex, I’m thinking about having sex.*

When they arrived at her apartment, Destiny dropped her bag on the pastel pink two-seater sofa. Ali did likewise and glanced around the simply furnished room. White curtains, a white plant stand beside the sofa, with a leafy green plant, polished floorboards and a gray mat covering most of the floor. Pale pink walls almost matching the sofa, white coffee table and small bookcase with some framed photos on top. A few black on white silhouette paintings hung on two of the walls.

They stared at each other for a moment and then dropped any semblance of pretence. They stepped together. Lips hungrily found their counterparts. Their deep, heavy breathing echoed from one to the other. They immediately began undressing the other. This wasn’t a moment for slow, measured foreplay. Ali wanted Destiny’s hard, dark nipples in her mouth.

Monica glanced up when the door opened. Her eyes fixed on the pink flashes coming from the revealing split in Ali’s ice-green dress as she walked towards her.

She heard a sharp intake of breath from Juicy. “My God.”

Monica said, “Juice I...”

“Of course you do. If you don’t, I will.”

Ali reached the bar as Monica disappeared into the office to collect her bag. Juicy leaned across the counter to kiss Ali hello.

In no time, Monica had made her way around the bar and was hugging Ali. The passion of Monica’s kiss seemed to drain the strength from Ali’s legs.

Ali held Monica tighter, as if using her for support. “Wow, that’s a greeting.”

“Let’s go,” Monica said.

She took Ali’s hand and led her out of Afternoon Delights, and into a taxi. It didn’t take long to arrive at Helen’s Hangout.

Before Ali could catch her breath, she was seated at their table, being handed a menu. From the moment she’d hugged her, Monica had swept her away in a whirlwind of passionate kisses.

They ordered dinner, and a bottle of *Bollinger La Grande Annee* arrived. A glass of champagne later and Monica had her on the dance floor, slow dancing, lingering kisses and teasing caresses.

They returned to the table when their starters were served. Ali studied Monica. "I guess you like pink. You haven't given me a chance to catch my breath all night."

"I like your pink."

"You know how to make a girl feel special."

"Not any girl, just one girl."

Ali grinned. "I think the kids will spend more time at their father's."

Monica beamed. "Have you been doing anything interesting?"

"You mean have I been doing anyone interesting, I think?"

Monica shrugged.

"I picked up a girl on a bus. I only sat beside her. It didn't occur to me I could pick someone up on a bus, but before I knew what was happening, we were at her place."

"You're in heat, and it's getting worse. Your pheromones are out of control."

"I'm out of control. All I think about is getting laid. Had phone sex for the first time too. With my Judy."

"Oh, you two never did that before?"

"Never occurred to us."

"Do you think you two will make love soon?"

Ali shrugged.

"If we're being honest," Monica said. "I hope you don't. I'd miss you."

Ali frowned. *I'd have to give her up, but I don't want to.* "Me too."

A tall woman with shoulder length ginger-blond hair and amber eyes approached, kissed Monica hello, and said, "Hi Monica, who's your friend?"

Monica smiled. "My girlfriend, Ali, but we have an open relationship."

"Open and honest," Ali suggested.

"Ali, this is Julia, the owner."

Ali offered her hand, but Julia ignored it, and leaned down so Ali could see fine lines around her eyes and mouth. *Older than she looks.* She kissed her. "Hi Ali."

"Nice to meet you, Julia." *Hmm, I'd like those long legs wrapped around me, I think.* "Amazing place you have here."

Julia said, "You're very attractive. Monica's the envy of everyone in the room."

Ali beamed. "And you're absolutely stunning." Julia grinned and returned to whatever she was doing.

Monica asked, "Do you mind me introducing you as my girlfriend?"

“Not at all. If we’re going to be honest, I like it.” Ali pushed down pangs of guilt. *I shouldn’t like it, but I do. I’m not being fair to Judy or Monica. Selfish. Out of control. I want it all. What’s wrong with me?*

As if she’d read Ali’s mind, Monica said, “I don’t know how long this will last. I understand it could end at anytime. You were honest with me.”

“After our first date.”

“Don’t blame you for that. Point is, while this window of opportunity is open, I’m going to take full advantage of it.”

“Oh, you want to take advantage of me?” Ali winked.

“Later.” Monica grinned. “If you want honest. I’ve never met a woman who makes me feel like I should settle down. I’ll take whatever you can give for now. The future will take care of itself.”

Julia returned to the table, whispered something to Monica, slipped her a card, and left.

Ali frowned.

Monica passed the card to Ali. “Julia’s card. Says you should call her.”

“Still pimping me?”

“Guiding you.”

“What do you know about a club called Time and Tied?”

“Didn’t realize you were into bondage.”

“I’m not. Judy suggested I should have my legs tied. Not what she meant, but it got me thinking.”

“She’s not happy about you...”

“She understands, but she’s feeling insecure.”

“You don’t want to go there. I don’t think you’d like it. If you want to experience being tied and at the mercy of someone else, I can oblige you.”

“That might be fun.”

Monica grinned, “It will be if it’s me. Let’s dance.”

After arriving at Monica’s, they undressed each other. Standing together, sharing kisses and caresses, Monica said, “Do you really want me to tie you up?”

Ali nodded.

“On the bed, on your back,” Monica directed.

Ali watched Monica gather materials and place them beside the bed. Massage oil, a feather, a silver chain with what appeared to be pegs on each end, a candle, a massage wand, and lubricant. Ali’s pulse was racing by the time Monica lit the candle. *What’s she planning on doing to me?*

Monica brought a selection of silk scarves to the bed. She tied Ali’s legs open to either side of the bedposts. She then tied Ali’s hands together above her head, securing them to the bedhead.

Ali's breathing was becoming shallow. "I feel vulnerable."

Sitting beside Ali on the bed, Monica explained, "Feeling vulnerable is part of the experience. You need to trust me, because I'm in control of what happens."

"I trust you. What are you going to do?"

"Whatever *I* want."

"Whatever you want?"

"Yes. First, I'll blindfold you, so you won't know what's going to happen. You'll use your other senses. It'll enhance everything. You'll know as it happens. If you don't want this, I can untie you and we'll just make love."

"I want it, and so you know there is nothing *just* about making love with you."

Monica's smile was the last thing Ali saw that night, as Monica tied a scarf over her eyes.

Ali woke the next morning. She could see nothing. Her arms were sore from being tied above her head all night.

"Monica? Are you awake? I need the bathroom. Can you untie me?"

"I've been awake for an hour watching you sleep, all sexy and vulnerable."

Monica removed Ali's blindfold and untied her hands. Ali rubbed her arms to get the blood circulating while Monica untied her legs.

Returning from the bathroom, Ali sat on the bed, peeling wax drops from her stomach.

"You, okay?" Monica asked.

Ali grinned. "More than okay, that was amazing. Although my butt's a little sore. Never had fingers in there before."

"Oh. You seemed to enjoy it last night."

"I did, surprised how much I enjoyed it."

Monica grinned. "New experiences."

"So many new experiences, makes me wish John found someone else years ago."

"I'm glad he didn't. What do you want for breakfast?"

"You."

"Again?"

"I can't control myself. All I want to do is have sex."

Monica lay on her back and opened her legs. "Come and get your breakfast."

Forrest Gump

Judy, wearing jeans and a T-shirt with trainers, visited the site to get a feel for the community, and to observe what people did in or around the lot, hoping for inspiration.

She walked around the lot. Besides the scattered junk, an old washing machine, and an abandoned, partially stripped car occupied the space. Two people were jogging in a rough figure-eight pattern. One jogger stopped at the car and used it to stretch every two laps.

Judy wandered to the bus stop and sat on the bench as if waiting for a bus. A ruse she called the *Forrest Gump Technique*. While sitting at a bus stop, pretending to wait for a bus, people often sat beside her and talked. Not young people who stared at their smart phones, but middle-aged and older people, not all of them but some. A useful method to gather background for features she was writing, or to add a human dimension to them.

A dark woman wearing a light blue uniform sat beside Judy and looked over the lot. "I heard they sold this shithole," she said.

"I believe so," Judy replied.

"Hope they rebuild the strip mall. I miss that convenience store. Used to get my coffee there every day. I work the afternoon shift. They call it afternoon, but it's a late morning start. We're not supposed to have hot drinks on the bus, but Joey, the driver, doesn't mind. I miss my morning coffee, is all."

"I'm sure they'll create something good here."

"Hope I can get coffee, is all. Don't care what else they do, to be honest. Miss my morning coffee is all." The bus arrived. "That's Joey now."

"Goodbye," Judy said. "It was nice talking with you."

Ten minutes later, an old man stopped and stared at Judy, as if surprised to see her sitting there. Finally, he sat beside her. "Do you ever invent words?" he asked, à propos of nothing.

"As a matter of fact," she said. "I do sometimes."

"My shirt is too big," he said. "You see. I'm shrinking. I wonder why old people shrink?"

He was right. He wore loose navy-blue trousers; the belt pulled tight and a baggy gray shirt. His faded orange and once white, but now gray trainers were scuffed.

"I think it's normal," Judy explained weakly. "Biology."

"Smallened," he said. "That's my new word. A word invented by me. I need to get my shirt smallened. I couldn't think of the word," he explained. "So, I invented my own, smallened."

"Taken in?" suggested Judy.

"Smallened," he repeated. "I think I might be one of those wordsmiths or something."

"Maybe," agreed Judy.

"Oh... a nickel," the man said as he bent to pick it up. "A lost and lonely nickel beneath the bench in the park, but there's no park here, just that rubbish," he said, indicating

the vacant lot behind them. "Must have fallen from someone's pocket," he speculated. "So strange to find a nickel here."

He looked at the nickel fondly. "Five cents. Not worth much, but I remember it well. I longed for a nickel, and now decades later I've found one."

He put the nickel in his pocket, and wandered off happily, without bothering to say goodbye.

It wasn't long before another older man sat next to Judy and began talking to her. *Thank you, Forrest.*

"Good morning."

"Good morning," Judy replied.

"I'm not waiting for a bus," he explained. "Just having a little rest."

"Yes, me too."

"My name is Professor Tibbett," he introduced himself. "James Tibbett, Jimmy."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Professor," Judy said with a smile. "I'm Judy Vernon."

"Please," he said. "Jimmy."

"Okay, Jimmy."

"Every day I walk, usually following the same route, designed to meet my required number of steps. It's not a peaceful walk, but it's a pleasant walk in a friendly community. Well cared for, except for this lot. I think it's people from outside the community who dump rubbish here. The people here have pride in their community."

"Occasionally, while I'm walking, I stumble across forgotten memories of growing up in this neighborhood."

"I used to be a college professor, but they had a mandatory retirement age. I'm thinking about finding something else to do, perhaps at City College. Lived on campus all my life, so I never had a place of my own. When I was forced to retire, I came home. I grew up here and live in my parent's house. They're gone now, have been for years, so I guess it's my house now, but to me it's still my parents' house."

"I do ten thousand steps every day. Have done nearly all my life. I used to walk around my campus. Now, that was a peaceful walk. Was it ten steps or ten thousand steps? I guess that depends on how we measure a step... My ten steps were the ten phases of my daily walk, which was how I'd measure my walk."

Jimmy closed his eyes, reliving his campus walk.

"My walk begins in the laneways of my community, quiet narrow sealed lanes with vegetation either side, teeming with bird-life competing for their songs to be heard. The sun darts from between the tall trees, as do a variety of stray cats with every imaginable and some unimaginable color combinations."

"The scene has the feel of a quiet country lane, but on either side of each laneway, set behind the gardens, are apartment blocks, homes to hundreds, perhaps thousands of people, mostly unseen, both the apartment blocks and the residents, as I walk. It's easy to forget they exist."

"Crossing the road at the end of my lane, well, one of my lanes, as I have a lane on either side of my first-floor apartment, I enter the grounds of the second teaching building."

The tall trees and abundant undergrowth of the laneways, replaced by concrete and bicycles. Thousands of bicycles, in hundreds of colors, left by students attending class, waiting for onward journeys to other classes, to the library, or cafeteria, or the return to the dormitory whence they came. A virtual cavalcade of color resting in the sun.

“Rounding the second teaching building, I find myself at what is called *H2O Lake*, a small lake whose most noticeable feature is the lecture hall standing on stilts above the west half of the lake, the *Lecture Hall Over Water*. Unimaginative.

“A lake almost devoid of vegetation except a small patch of papyrus grass, and yet full of color, various shades of orange, black and white as the lake is teeming with fish. More fish here than bicycles outside the adjacent teaching building, which is separated from the lake by an avenue of trees, standing taller than the six floors of the building. I stop beside the lake for a few minutes, take a small bag of food from my pocket, and feed the fish.

“There’s something relaxing about feeding fish. Sometimes grandparents bring their grandchildren to feed the fish.

“A pathway leads from the fish to the *Pomegranate Garden*. A garden of pathways winding their way through a collection of old and gnarly pomegranate trees. Their straggly misshapen branches are unruly, like unkept hair in need of a trim, full of fruit in the summer, buds in the spring, color in the fall, but naked and forlorn in the winter.

“All year the birds happily dance from tree to tree and tree to ground, perhaps sighting appetizing insects in the grass. Following the pathways as they meander forwards and then wind back on each other allows me to traverse the garden, some parts more than once.

“Leaving the *Pomegranate Garden*, and its pathways, I find myself at the *White Lotus Lake*, on a new pathway that purposefully makes its way around and across the lake. Surrounded by vegetation, but the trees are not so tall.

“Halfway around the lake, which is almost unseen beneath the green of the lotus leaves with their stunning and solitary white blooms open to catch the sun, the path gives way to roughly cobbled stones, slippery when wet so one must take care in the rain. Across a bridge path near the north of the lake, I find myself in a pagoda, which is an island, in the middle of the lotus blanketed lake, before following the bridge path to the other side of the lake. I usually walk around the white lotus lake twice, but sometimes once and occasionally thrice.

“The sixth step on my journey is the shortest, but often the most welcome. Crossing *Sakura Avenue*, lined with Sakura or Japanese cherry trees, a stunning picture of pink blossoms in the spring, which separates two lakes. I enter the first teaching building and head to the second floor, where I take a quick bathroom break. Usually functional but sometimes a moment of almost ecstasy.” He opened his eyes. “Do you know what I mean?”

“I certainly do,” confirmed Judy, remembering the bookstore after being caught in the rain on the day Frank had died.

Jimmy closed his eyes and continued. “Feeling relaxed and comfortable, I recross the road to *Pink Lotus Lake*. Mostly, the water is hidden beneath a carpet of green lotus leaves. The flowers are pink. At one point the path diverges, one branch follows the lake, the other continues around some gardens and a grassy meadow, before they re-join again. I follow the grassland route on my first circuit, and the lake route which takes me through a grove of banana trees, on my second.

“On the southern side of the lake, the path diverges again. One follows the lake, the other becomes a bridge/pathway separating the lake from its southeast corner. No lotus here. Instead, a selection of water lilies, each a different color, white, bright yellow, and deep pink, and a selection of pastel shades of those colors.

“The first time around, I follow the lake path, and the second I take the bridge/path, which re-joins the lake path, before branching off to some steppingstones leading out of the garden.

“Time for a rest. I stop at the café in an adjoining park where I order a coffee, and sometimes treat myself to a slice of cheesecake. I sit outside and enjoy the peace of the garden, listening to the birds and sometimes watching them play in the trees, or watching the stray cats who have adopted the café and surroundings as their home. Sometimes I encounter a friend and we will chat for a while.”

He looked at Judy. “I miss that café a lot. I wish there was a nice café here, and a garden to sit in... but this is the city, no garden here.”

Then returning to his reminiscence. “After finishing my coffee, I walk through the park and the gardens down the hill through a grassy meadow with a stop at the reflecting pond, home to the resplendent colors of water lilies with the blooms open to worship the sun.

“I enter another area of tall trees, not as tall as those competing with the building for height, but leafier, creating a shady environment with dense undergrowth and sunlight appearing and disappearing as it dances on the pathways in time to the leaves moving in the breeze. Sometimes the cicadas are singing, creating an eerie, jungle-like atmosphere.

“I follow a path between the *Pomegranate Garden* and *H2O Lake*, which returns me to the laneways of my community, to the unseen birds competing with their tunes, to the darting cats, and darting sunlight and which eventually leads me home.”

Having finished reliving his walk, he opened his eyes. “A good life, but my age brought it to an end. Now it’s full circle for me, and I’m back where I started. Speaking of which, time for me to head home for a nap. Thank you, Judy Vernon, for allowing me to bore you with my reminiscences.”

“Oh, Jimmy, I wasn’t bored at all,” Judy said. “I loved listening and being transported to your campus. I understand why you miss it so much. Sounds like an ideal life.”

“Yes, it was.”

Myron had mentioned something about staff training, so Judy gave Jimmy her card and took his name and number.

“Goodbye Professor,” she said, as he left her to continue his walk.

Judy sat alone on the bench, watching the people going about their business, trying to get a feel for the community. It wasn’t an affluent part of the city, but Judy felt the people had a pride in themselves and in their community.

There was a universal look of disdain on their faces as they walked past the vacant lot, her lot. *The rubbish comes from outside the community.*

Thirty minutes passed. *Time to head home.* The thought had barely left her mind when another man sat on the bench beside her. He stared at her, glanced away, and then looked back.

“Do you like to travel?” he asked.

No shortage of retired men looking for somebody to talk with, or more accurately, talk at. “I do, but I don’t have time to travel these days. I did when I was younger. What about you?”

“Hello, I’m Adrian Sebastian Bach. No relation, but my mother named me after Johann. Never knew if she was being funny.”

“Hi, I’m Judy Vernon. Pleased to make your acquaintance.” *Why did he mention his middle name? Suppose he likes it. Sure is a conversation starter.*

“I used to travel a lot when I was younger, too old now. I was looking at some old photographs with my great-granddaughter. She shammed them or something.”

“Scanned?” suggested Judy.

“Yes, that’s it. She scanned them and sent them to my phone. I don’t know how they can do this stuff. When I was her age, I think I was scared to even talk on the phone. See?” he said, showing her a photograph on his smartphone.

“This photo was taken in Pomodoro Italian Restaurant, located beside the Catholic church in Tianjin, China. I’m wearing a pale green business shirt, open-necked. I purchased it a few months earlier from UNI QLO in Dalian. Another Chinese city far across the Bohai Bay from Tianjin. I cannot see any of my attire beyond the shirt and I have no recollection of what else I was wearing, but I was, I’m sure, wearing more than a shirt.”

“I imagine you were.”

“The painting, or mural on the wall behind me, is a cityscape. It covers the length of the wall. It’s a collection of blurred shapes in pastel colors. Up close, it’s an abstract. It’s only when viewed from the perspective of distance that the cityscape becomes apparent. The part of the painting behind me is blurred abstract shapes, but as it trails off along the wall in the distance, it becomes a cityscape. Can you see that?”

“I can. It’s an interesting picture.”

“An Italian restaurant adjacent to a Catholic Church is unremarkable and could be anywhere in the world.

“I recall I was looking forward to some decent Italian food and a cold beer after spending most of the evening walking. Happy to be off my feet and relaxing on the padded, high-backed bench fitted against the wall below the painting.”

He passed Judy his phone to show her another picture. “Italian beer,” Judy noted, “and that’s an interesting-looking dish. I’ve seen nothing like it.”

“Too much for one person. Ordered it every time I went to Tianjin, but never finished it. An enormous bowl. Spaghetti, Frutti De Mare. Al dente pasta, and fresh seafood. What made it different was the pizza crust stretched over the top of the bowl and then baked in the pizza oven. Never seen it anywhere else.”

“No,” said Judy. “I’ve not heard of it before.”

“Looking at these photos, I can hear the sounds from that dinner. Not soft Italian music playing in the background as you might expect, but the crackly tinny sounds of old Chinese pop songs being played loudly on an aging portable DVD player. Something like we called a *boombox*.

“It’s in the square in front of the church, where a group of Chinese ladies from eighteen to eighty are performing their nightly coordinated line dances. A part of a daily

fitness regime blended into a community social activity, something that couldn't be found anywhere else in the world, one suspects.

"I was marvelling at the unintended cultural fusion. The Italian restaurant and the Catholic Church disguised my location against a backdrop of the sights and sounds of the Chinese ladies' line dancing, which made my location unmistakable. Another surreal experience in China, not the most surreal by any means, but that's another story.

"The person closest to me was the waiter, unseen in the photographs. A young Chinese guy, dressed in a white shirt with black trousers, attempting to emulate the dress of an Italian waiter, leaning disinterestedly against the bar.

"He showed no interest in either the restaurant or the dancing ladies outside. Instead, his interest was only in the screen of his smartphone, oblivious to the unique and unintentional blend of cultures.

"When I was younger and travelled, I took photographs of everything, and lots of selfies. Not when I was very young, of course, but when I became middle-aged, and the technology existed.

"Funny, I now consider myself young when I was middle-aged. At the time, I thought I was old, or getting old. When people are in their forties, they look for signs they're getting old, wrinkles, grey hairs, that sort of thing, but in their fifties, it all changes. They look for signs they're still young."

Interesting, could be a feature in that.

A bus arrived. Adrian Sebastian Bach said, "Well, that's me. Perhaps we'll meet again."

"Goodbye," said Judy. "It was nice visiting with you."

He waved and disappeared onto the bus.

Judy retrieved her iPad from her shoulder bag and made a note about perspectives of age.

It's certainly been an interesting day. One more walk around the lot before heading home.

A man ducked into the lot to relieve himself behind some rubbish.

Judy took a bus home. Unusual for her, but she wanted the full experience.

City Oasis

As Judy was about to enter Frank's Diner, Burt Rogers drove past, looking for a parking spot. She recognized his Basque Red Pearl Honda Accord. She pushed the door open and smiled at the sound of the bell on the door, a relic from Kansas Café. *Love that sound.*

Usually Judy ate breakfast with Ali, but that day she was meeting Burt, who would take her to the site of her City Oasis and consult with her about her design. *Having an experienced person running one's property management company is useful.*

Suzy Q greeted her. "Good morning, Judy."

She was wearing a white T-shirt with a blue collar and cuffs, a very short matching blue skirt, and thigh high black stockings. Finished with a red cravat, red shoes, and long red hair. *Probably a good thing Ali's not here to see that skirt.*

"Hello Suzy Q. Burt will join me in a few minutes."

Burt entered the diner. Judy studied him as he headed to her booth. Mid-fifties, male pattern baldness, fine features with nothing prominent. He wore beige slacks, pressed with a sharp crease, and a short-sleeved blue and white check shirt. Polished black leather shoes. *Immaculate with his dress and his work.*

Judy stood to greet him with a hug and a kiss on the cheek. "Hi Burt, thanks for taking the time to help me with this."

"Good morning, Judy," Burt said. "It's my pleasure. I'm looking forward to seeing your ideas for the wasteland."

Suzy Q arrived to take their order. "Your usual?" she asked Judy.

"Please."

Burt said, "I want to try that Welsh Rarebit Judy mentioned in this month's newsletter, and my usual coffee, please."

"Okey Dokey," said Suzy Q as she skipped away.

"Sweet girl," Burt said.

At Burt's mention of the newsletter, Judy's mind drifted to how Myron brought her into his business.

Judy was Communications Director of the family group of companies she owned jointly with Myron, who hadn't asked for a prenuptial agreement.

Between receiving half Myron's business interests and being gifted a city building by Art and Ruth, Judy had been overwhelmed. She'd said to Myron, "I don't understand, I don't want any of this. I just want to spend my life with you."

Myron had replied, "That's the point."

One of Judy's initiatives as Communications Director was to produce a monthly newsletter for their employees, so everybody knew what was going on. A detailed newsletter that included new menu items from Frank's Diner.

Another of Judy's initiatives was to introduce a digital ID card, *DiD*, which gave staff a ten percent discount for all group businesses. The card was developed by their app company for in-house purposes, but had formed the foundation for a product they tailored to other organizations.

Glancing at the customers in the diner, Burt said, "I like the vibrancy of this place."

"I love the hum of so many conversations," Judy said. "I brought the graph paper you suggested."

"The first thing to do is draw a grid. Each square can represent a foot, makes it easy. It allows us to keep things in perspective while we're noting our ideas for the site. The second step. First, think, imagine what's possible."

Suzy Q delivered their breakfast.

Burt smiled. "She has such radiant energy."

"Sure does," Judy agreed, watching Suzy Q interact with the clientele. "She brightens people's day by being herself."

Burt studied his Welsh Rarebit, leaning forward and inhaling deeply. "Looks and smells amazing." He cut a small piece and ate slowly as he savored the taste. "That's excellent. The creamy cheese contrasts with the mild bite of the Worcestershire sauce."

After they finished their breakfast, Judy drew the grid as Burt had suggested and passed the pad to him. "Is this right?"

"Yes," he said. "Ready to go?"

"Sure."

They drained their coffees. Judy returned her graph pad and other belongings to her shoulder bag, and they headed to Burt's car for the journey to the City Oasis site.

When they arrived, the prospect of designing the space overawed Judy. "I don't know where to begin."

"We should go to the tall building on the right. We can look down over the site from the roof. It'll help get perspective," Burt explained.

"Okay."

Burt was right. It gave her a different perspective than she'd gotten from walking around the lot. Judy could take in the whole site. Studying the grid on her pad, she could envisage the space. Judy noted the four adjoining buildings on her grid.

Burt was right about labeling the adjoining buildings too; it made it easier to maintain perspective. Buildings A, B and C were owned by the family. Building D wasn't, but it was Building D that held Judy's attention.

"Oh Burt," she said. "What an amazing city scape above Building D. It would be wonderful if we could take advantage of the view."

"You're right," Burt agreed. "There are ways we could do that. Let's see what we come up with for a design."

That's it! Let's see.

They returned to the ground, but Judy didn't return to the lot she'd left. In her mind, she entered the site in the future, imagining what it could be like.

She strolled past the covered bus stop, where she noticed a boy. His face scrunched up in intense concentration as he focused on whatever battles he was fighting on his smart phone. A cord led from his phone to the charging socket in a panel adjacent to the seat.

A woman, ready for work, with coffee in hand, stood at the curbside. Her gaze alternated between her watch and the approaching traffic. The aroma of burnt caramel from freshly roasted coffee wafted out of the adjacent kiosk, tempting all who passed.

Judy stepped into City Oasis. Two teenage girls sat in front of the milk tea stand, excitedly debating the menu. She inhaled an aromatic kaleidoscope of spices carried on the smoke and steam from the food stalls, offering a selection of cuisine from the four corners of the world.

Aromas, carried on a light breeze, bombarded her senses, alternating with the unique sweet and spicy fragrance of food stalls from India, Asia, Africa, and South America, sometimes distinct and sometimes blended together.

Despite the exotic pot-pourri of smells competing for her attention, it was the immediately identifiable John Farrington Blend that haunted Judy. She retraced her steps and almost collided with a jogger. She had inadvertently stepped onto the jogging side of the path that made its way around City Oasis. Judy apologized to the startled man.

He lowered his hands and smiled forgiveness. A single bead of sweat hung precariously from the tip of his nose, waiting for the jolt that would cause it to lose its grip and plummet to earth. A formless splat of moisture waiting to be transformed and raised into the sky by the bright sun. Perhaps reincarnated as a raindrop landing on the nose of an unsuspecting distant stranger, only to fall to earth as the cycle of its existence continued.

Having purchased her coffee, Judy stepped into the structure opposite. The first floor was filled with tables occupied by visitors enjoying their beverages or cuisine from distant and romantic destinations.

The second floor duplicated the first and was likewise occupied. When she reached the third floor, she was in luck. A visitor vacated his table. From the table's vantage, she could see the vista of the cityscape, alive with contrast.

Bright sunlight reflected off the windows of some buildings, bringing them to life. Some stood tall and proud, glowing in the reflected glory of the sun. Others were in shadow, little more than a silhouette to the world.

As the sun traversed the sky, the cityscape changed. Some buildings sleeping in the shadows came to life. The brightness of the sunshine highlighted their unique features. Others paled as the sun withdrew its touch.

Judy finished her coffee, then walked to the other side of the platform. She gazed out at the world through a waterfall from the roof above her, which crashed onto the rocks below and filled a pond. She'd left the world governed by the fire element, and entered a world governed by the water element.

Back on the ground, a world governed by the earth element, she made her way past a selection of exercise equipment; watching people bending, stretching, rowing, and lifting themselves as she continued her journey along the path around City Oasis. To Judy, with a versatile sexual appetite, it was a smorgasbord of eye candy.

She headed to a nearby restroom to relieve herself of the coffee.

Departing the restroom, Judy's attention was captured by a row of vending machines which offered twenty-four-hour snacks, drinks, coffee, and condoms. Not her choice of coffee, but if there was nothing else available, it would be a godsend.

She stopped in front of a Freshly Squeezed Orange Juice vending machine and watched a metal claw take hold of an unsuspecting orange from the pile. It squeezed every drop of juice into Judy's cup before discarding the forlorn, empty skin into a black hole to be disposed of. The process was repeated thrice before the cup was full.

Judy headed for a bench near the pond while sipping her juice. She didn't notice a young man depositing his share bike into the rack at the end of the row of vending machines, and she nearly walked into a fleet of bicycles.

She sat on the bench beside the pond to enjoy her juice and relaxed at the sound of the waterfall. Judy felt a gentle breeze as the air element caressed her face.

She glimpsed some Koi, white and golden, their colors enhanced by the reflected sunlight that danced across the water, or perhaps it was the water, disturbed by the waterfall that danced in the sunlight. The fish followed a set path, neither seen nor understood by the human eye, as they endlessly repeated their circuit.

Judy surveyed the play area, where an old man was playing with his granddaughter, or maybe great-granddaughter. Seeing the way the little girl looked at him, Judy wondered what it felt like for the old man to be a little girl's superhero. Her private aging avenger.

She returned to the sidewalk, having finished her juice, and all but completed her circuit of City Oasis. Blades of a fan beneath a solar panel gathered the energy needed to bring City Oasis to life in the night.

She glanced at the enormous screen on the wall, as it showed a demonstration of synchronized swimming, and wondered if the fish would consider the attempt somewhat feeble.

She smiled, closed her eyes, and inhaled deeply, as if drinking in the atmosphere of an oasis of life, or perhaps from life in the city.

Judy looked at the neglected, rubbish-covered lot, sighed, and made her way back to Burt, handing him the notes she'd made during her visit to the future. "A food and beverage area, an exercise area, a convenience area and a relaxation area in the center."

Burt drove her home.

Judy went to work on a rough model. The prototype was not to scale. Instead, it was made from cardboard and toothpicks representing the structure. She used thin, rigid black plastic for the roof to represent solar tiles and bubble wrap for water, both in the pond and the waterfall.

She printed some images from the internet and pasted them onto the prototype to show the features, vending machines, and food stalls. Far from a professional model, but she was satisfied, along with her explanation, it would convey her ideas.

When Myron arrived home, he wanted to know everything in detail. A quick call to Franco's organized a dinner delivery, as they focused their attention on the model and plan.

Myron said, “I think the public exercise equipment will be okay if we can convince the council to include City Oasis in their public liability policies, because they have outdoor exercise equipment in other parks. They probably will as they’re getting a new public space. Good for votes, and they don’t have to fund it.”

“I didn’t think of that,” Judy said.

“We have excellent relations with the council and the planning department, who encouraged us to acquire this space. They wanted it cleaned up and put to use. A neglected space makes the city look bad and costs votes.”

Myron made notes as he studied the plans. “The wall where the vending machines are located needs to be a covered area to protect against the elements. An enclosed area, using tinted Plexiglass with a series of automatic sliding doors, would be best.”

Judy’s eyes lit up, encouraged by Myron’s support and constructive suggestions.

Dinner arrived; medium rare steaks with blue cheese sauce, complete with crockery and cutlery and a bottle of Antinori Tignanello.

After dinner, Myron considered the practical side of the project. “We’ll need custodial staff to attend to cleaning and maintenance. Three people, rotating shifts, so there’s always one on duty. I’d like us to take on franchises for the coffee and milk tea stands, as an experiment. We have several places where they could work, so this’ll be a test. If they’re successful, we’ll expand. The food stalls could provide opportunities for some young people from Frank Dunn’s culinary program?”

“That’s a wonderful idea. We can give them a three-month rent holiday, so they can find their feet. If it works out, they can start paying rent, and if not, they can walk away.”

“That’ll work. Why not give Frank Dunn a call? It’s your project.”

“I will. I guess you’ll look into the franchises. Sounds like you’ve been thinking about them.”

Myron smiled. “Yes, I’ve been looking for an opportunity to try them out. Send photos of your model to Burt to go with your explanation, and I’ll send him my notes. He’ll have one of his designers develop some drawings and sketches for you.”

Welcome to The Family

Susie held a family barbeque to welcome Lori to the family. Dave was out the back getting the barbeque warmed up. Susie was taking food and other stuff outside where they would eat in the screened entertainment area.

Ali caressed Judy from the small of her back to her upper thigh, gently massaging her ass on the way down when she hugged her.

Judy hugged her tighter and whispered, "Tease."

Smiling broadly when she turned from Judy, Ali realized John had witnessed the encounter. She walked to the table and sat. On the way, she kissed John on the cheek, winked at Lori, who stood beside John, and whispered into his ear loud enough for Lori to hear, "Secret women's business."

John, holding Lori's hand, followed her and sat, too.

He, Ali, and Lori sat at the dining table talking. Susie was making frequent visits to the kitchen. Ali said, "Susie's trying to catch what we're saying."

Susie took the mac and cheese from the oven and placed it on the island bench to cool. The molten cheese popped and sizzled, releasing the aromas of creamy cheese and herbs.

"Smells delicious, but I didn't think Susie made that anymore?" John said.

"She doesn't," Ali explained. "She orders it premade from Darnell and cooks it herself." Ali glanced at Judy, who was waiting for Myron to arrive while talking with Jenny in the living room.

"Have you and Judy?" John asked.

"No."

Myron arrived. He was wearing his usual casual attire: dark gray slacks, with handmade black leather shoes and a deep green polo shirt. *Immaculate even when dressed casually.* Ali stood to hug him. She felt him harden against her. *Interesting. I'm affecting him too. Surprised how much I want a piece of that. If I could get them alone...* Ali grinned and winked. Myron flushed.

He went to the living room to greet his wife, and then he, Judy, and Jenny headed out the back.

They're keeping their distance. Ali nodded towards Judy and Myron as they disappeared out the door. "Besides, those two have something unique. He's perfect for Judy."

Dave must have put the meat on the barbeque because the smells of the cooking meat wafted over them, carried through an open window on a warm breeze.

"Do you resent that?" John asked.

"No. I don't resent him or wish things were different. He's right for her and seeing them together makes me happy. Myron knows how close we are, and he doesn't have a problem with it."

"Perhaps..." John began, but never finished his thought. The look Lori gave him froze the words before they could leave his mouth.

Lori stood and walked past John to Ali, who stood to hug her. Surprise registered on John's face.

Lori whispered, "You have more than many people have. Focus on what you have with Judy. You can't get that from others. What you don't have with her, you can get elsewhere."

Ali frowned, then nodded. "I know you're right." To John she said, "I've never resented you either. I can't resent others for decisions I've made."

John nodded. "Let's join the others outside."

The sunlight made them squint, but the air was pleasantly warm, not uncomfortably hot.

Susie said, "Here's Junior with his two wives now."

John grimaced. Ali and Lori exchanged a look and laughed.

They sat together a little apart from everyone else, while John went to help Dave with the barbeque.

Ali said, "I must have told John a thousand times. If he didn't react, Susie would stop calling him Junior, but he never listens."

"You know better than me. John's a good man, but he's a man. For some reason, they don't like to listen to advice from their wives."

"Or girlfriends."

Lori grinned. "I couldn't help but notice Myron's reaction to you."

"It's my out-of-control pheromones. Although they don't appear to affect you or John."

"No, but they're certainly affecting Dave, based on the way he keeps looking at you."

"Being female is enough to affect Dave."

"Possibly because John and I are still new enough to be tuned into each other sexually."

She could be right. "I'll stick with you today to be safe. Besides, seeing us all getting on so well is messing with Susie."

"Can I tell you what I think?" Lori asked.

"Always."

"If anything is going to happen between you two, let it happen. Don't try to force the issue."

Ali nodded and glanced at Myron and Judy. *Or us three?*

Susie called to the children, who were shooting hoops in the basket attached to the back of the garage. "Kids, come and get your food."

Shortly after, Frankie and Charlie joined Ali and Lori. Charlie was saying to Frankie, "Aunt Susie always calls us kids. I'm not a kid. I'm nearly sixteen years old."

Ali assessed their plates, almost identical. Sausage, steak, sliced potatoes cooked on the barbeque, mac and cheese, and salad.

"Charlie," she said. "Where's your salad? You can't just have meat and carbs and no salad."

Lori winked at Ali and got up. Ali assumed she was going to get her food.

Charlie said, "But Mom. I don't want salad. I just want real food."

"Salad is probably the most real food on the plate," Ali suggested.

Frankie said, "Haven't you had the lecture from Aunt Judy about eating fresh, Charlie?"

Lori returned with a large plate of salad. "For the table," she announced. "Help yourself Charlie, your Mum's right."

Ali squeezed Lori's hand. This was exactly what she wanted.

Domestic

Ali sat at her dining table, enjoying a Caesar salad for lunch.

What should I do this afternoon? She picked up her phone and scrolled her contact list, which had almost doubled since she'd separated from John. *Spoiled for choice. Wonder if Judy's home.*

Startled, when the phone rang in her hand, Ali jumped in her seat. She glanced at caller ID. *Monica.*

"This is a surprise. What's up?"

"Nothing's up. Wanted to speak to my girlfriend," Monica said.

Ali grinned. *Like when she calls me that.* She felt a pang of guilt. *I shouldn't.* "What do you want to tell her?"

"It's my day off."

"And?"

"Wondering what you're up to."

"Trying to decide what to do this afternoon."

"Don't you mean *who* to do?" Monica suggested.

Ali shrugged, as if Monica could see her through the phone. "I'm usually free in the afternoon. If I don't spend it with someone, I disappoint myself for wasting an opportunity. Honestly, Mon, I thought I'd settle down by now, but it's getting worse."

"Well." Ali could almost hear Monica wink over the phone. "You could *do* me."

"I thought we agreed not to do sex dates, only actual dates."

"We did," Monica confirmed. "That's not gonna change, it's just..."

"Just what?"

"There's not enough of them, and I'm in withdrawal."

"Withdrawal?" Ali asked.

"I'm addicted to my girlfriend, and I need a fix."

Ali smiled. She liked the idea of Monica referring to her as her girlfriend, but felt guilty because, in her heart, Judy was her girlfriend. "Suppose you could come here, and I can fix you."

"Give me your address."

Ali did. Her pulse was racing. She twitched and fidgeted. *What's wrong with me?*

"What do you want me to wear?"

Monica's voice dropped to a husky whisper. "Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"It'll save time."

Ali laughed. "See you soon."

She finished her salad, rinsed the plate and placed it in the dishwasher. *Shower.*

Showered and dried, Ali stood in front of her wardrobe. *What to wear?*

She smiled. *She said to wear nothing.*

Ali drew the living room curtains closed, leaving a crack of about an inch so she could peer out.

A taxi arrived.

Monica slid out and sashayed up the drive. *Damn, that woman is sexy.* Her breathing quickened; she moistened her suddenly dry lips. *I'm always so fucking horny.*

She moved to the door and placed her eye against the peephole. When she saw Monica raise her hand to the doorbell, she opened the door. The sunlight on her naked body warmed her, increasing her level of arousal.

Monica froze. She'd opened her mouth to speak, but her mouth froze open too. The only sound was a sharp intake of breath. Her hand, poised to ring the doorbell, frozen in midair.

Ali reached out, placed her hand on Monica's and guided it to her side, releasing Monica's voice in the process.

"Fuck me."

"Isn't that why you're here?"

"You're gorgeous."

Ali held out her hand. "Are you gonna stand there staring all afternoon?"

Monica stepped forward; her fingers gently danced across Ali's skin. Ali closed her eyes and basked in the sunlight and in Monica's touch. Monica's hands made their way to Ali's back, her nails lightly carving a path down Ali's spine, then drew her in close.

Monica's breathing echoed in Ali's mind as her tongue explored her ear, making its way down the side of her face, and reaching and parting her lips. Ali's pelvis began moving of its own accord, seeking Monica's touch.

Monica's foot reached back and pushed the door closed. Ali took her hand and led her to the bedroom.

Ali lazily opened her eyes, caressed the still sleeping Monica lightly, and turned her head to glance at the clock on the bedside table.

Her eyes widened, and she jerked herself up. "Fuck! I've done it again."

A startled Monica sat up. "What is it?"

Must remember to set the alarm. "It's late. My kids'll be home. A couple of hours ago. Should have dinner on the table by now."

"Sorry Ali, didn't mean to create problems for you."

"Not your fault, Mon."

"It kinda is." Monica smiled.

"I need to organize dinner. You're welcome to stay and have dinner with us, but if you want to go, I won't be offended. Up to you."

"Will it cause you a problem if I stay?"

“No. They’ll be okay with it, I think.”

“If you’re sure, I’d like to stay. I really don’t like the idea of using you for a quick fuck.”

“You call that quick?” Ali asked.

“You know what I mean.”

“Want to help me prepare dinner?”

“Sounds fun.”

Ali pulled her dressing gown on, opened the wardrobe and removed her spare dressing gown, which she threw to Monica. “You can wear this.”

“Need to pee,” Monica said.

“Me too, c’mon, I’ll show you where it is.”

Ali led Monica to the bathroom, who immediately sat to relieve herself, and said, “Can’t believe how comfortable I am with you. I never pee in front of anybody.”

When she’d finished, it was Ali’s turn. Monica leaned down and kissed her lightly while she peed.

Ali stood, washed her hands, then kissed her lover again. “You ready for this?”

Monica nodded.

The women stepped into the dining room, where the boys were sitting, finishing their homework. Ali was a little nervous. The boys had sort of met Britt, so she hoped they would be accepting of Monica.

“Sorry guys,” Ali said. “We fell asleep. This is Monica. Mon, these are my sons, Frankie and Charlie.”

“Hello guys,” Monica said.

Frankie gave her a curious look. “Pleased to meet you, Monica.”

“You too, er...”

“Frankie, that’s Charlie.”

Charlie said, “Hi Monica. Are you Mum’s girlfriend?”

“Charlie!” Ali said.

Monica smiled. “Sometimes.”

“We’ll prepare dinner now. Sorry it’s a little late tonight,” Ali said. “Monica’s staying.”

Frankie smiled. “Obviously, Mum. She’s wearing a dressing gown.”

Ali shook her head, and Monica grinned.

“Fish and chips okay for everyone?”

“My favorite,” Charlie said.

“That’s why she’s making it, Charlie,” Frankie suggested.

The women worked together easily. Peeling potatoes, preparing batter. It didn't take long for dinner to be ready. Two glasses of wine, and two of orange juice and they sat to eat together.

"How did you meet?" Frankie asked.

"I work in a bar," Monica explained. "An angel came in for a drink, and my heart skipped a beat."

So now I'm an angel?

"Dad met Lori over coffee," Charlie said.

Ali smiled. *This is going well.*

After dinner, Ali and Monica cleared away the dishes, Ali rinsed them, and Monica placed them in the dishwasher. *I like this.* Normally, the boys would have attended to the dishes, but Ali enjoyed a taste of real-world domesticity with Monica.

Frankie returned from his bedroom with a board game. "Let's play Monopoly."

"Sounds fun. I haven't played it in years," Monica said.

"It's a kid's game," Charlie said.

"C'mon Charlie, it'll be fun," Frankie said.

"Okay, but you always win."

"Mom?" Frankie asked.

Ali looked at Monica, who said, "C'mon Ali, like Frankie says, it'll be fun."

"I guess we could, but Charlie's right. Frankie always wins."

Ali poured more wine for herself and Monica, and the four settled at the table to play.

It wasn't a quick game. Ali was the first one to go bankrupt, as usual, and dropped out a little over an hour later. *Never could get the hang of this game.* She took her phone to the dining room, made a quick call and was back minutes later, as a spectator. *Interesting, Monica and the boys seem natural together. I like this.*

Another thirty minutes passed. Monica was all but broke when the door chimed. Ali went to the door and returned with a takeout box. "I had Becky send some of Darnell's triple chocolate cheesecake," she explained.

"Wow Mom, my favorite," Charlie said.

Frankie gave her a knowing smile.

Shortly after they'd completed their supper break, Monica was out of the game. "That was damned good cheesecake," Monica said.

"It is," Charlie agreed.

"Not the best thing I've eaten today," she whispered to Ali, who grinned and squeezed her thigh.

As the game continued, Ali gave Frankie a knowing look, who shrugged and smiled.

Finally, the game was finished. Charlie was beaming. "First time I've beaten Frankie at Monopoly. I beat him last week too, when we played Game of Life with Dad and Lori."

"You're on a roll Charlie," Frankie said. "I'll pack it away. You can wash up first."

Still smiling, Charlie headed off to clean his teeth and wash his face.

Ali asked, "Did you let him win last week, too?"

Frankie shrugged. "It's important for Charlie to have fond memories of meeting Lori and Monica."

Ali's alarm woke them in the morning.

Monica reached for her and kissed her. "Good morning, gorgeous."

"Good morning, Mon. Sorry, no time for morning sex. Next time, I'll remember to set the alarm an hour earlier."

"So, there's going to be a next time?"

"If you want."

"I want."

Ali and Monica were in the kitchen making breakfast for the four of them when Frankie entered the dining room. "Good morning," he said.

The women returned his greeting, and Charlie entered shortly after.

"Oh, you're not meeting Aunt Judy for breakfast today, Mom?"

"Not today, Charlie. She has an early meeting."

The boys finished their breakfast and left for school.

Ali explained. "I meet Judy for breakfast most days. The diner is about the only place I see her now."

"Why?"

"Pheromones. She can't keep her hands off me, and the diner is safe. Nothing can happen there. I was thinking about it. We've always been umm... touchy, and it appears I'm affecting her more than I affect others."

"If you're affecting her more than you're affecting me, I'm not surprised. I can barely keep my hands off you."

"Not just her. I'm affecting Myron too."

"Really?"

"It's, um... obvious."

"I don't know how pheromones work. Perhaps love amplifies them or something?"

"That would explain it, but..."

"Do you think..."

Ali shrugged. "I don't know, Mon." *Don't want to give Mon up.* "As you said, let's focus on today, and the future will take care of itself."

Monica nodded. "That's all I ask. Speaking of which, I need to shower. Do you want to come and wash my back?"

"I want to wash something."

Making it Real

After standing and looking at her building, Judy crossed the road and greeted George, who was having a cigarette break as usual when she arrived.

Judy ordered coffee on her way in, explaining she had a breakfast meeting and would order later. The Everly Brothers', *This Little Girl of Mine*, was playing as she made her way to Frank's booth. Looking at his plaque, she said, "Good morning, Frank." *Wish he was still around.*

She watched Suzy Q making her way to the counter. *Ali's right about her.* Judy focused her energy on two projects, her new book, and City Oasis to distract herself from Ali. Today, she was meeting Max Skelton, a designer who worked for their property company. His job was to design store and building refurbishments. He'd designed Frank's Diner.

She opened an email from Max. Attached was a drawing of her design for City Oasis. Tears welled up in her eyes as she stared at the screen on her iPad. *The drawing brings my ideas to life. Can't believe I designed this. It's beautiful.*

What's going on with me? My disgraceful performance at Moonglow, my erratic behavior with Ali, and now crying over a design for a small disused and neglected space.

The jangle of the bell on the door caused Judy to glance up. *Max.* Slight build, thin blond hair, fine features, blue eyes framed by long eyelashes. His pink shirt and white trousers with matching shoes made him appear more effeminate than usual.

When Judy first met Max, she couldn't decide if he was gay or not. Paul, whom Judy had dated for a short time, would've described him as 'half a fag'. She didn't like the term, and liked Paul even less.

In Max's case, it was accurate.

Nineteen-year-old Max lay wrapped around Jonny. They'd been a couple for six months. He was looking into Jonny's eyes, his fingers lightly fondling his lover's chest hair. Love radiated from his chest and cocooned him in joy. "I love you, Jonny," he purred.

"Suck my cock and show me how much."

He never says it back. Max slid down the bed, opened his mouth and, as always, accommodated Jonny's desire.

Finishing, he slid up the bed to rest his head on his lover's shoulder. "Jonny, I know it's not legal yet, but it will be soon. Let's get married."

"Jesus, Maxy, why do you have to spoil everything?" He shoved Max off of him and sat on the side of the bed. "Why would I marry you? You've got a cute ass, but you're nothing special. Just another wannabe fag."

Max didn't reply. His tears said everything he needed to say. He dressed, left Jonny's apartment, and never returned.

After sulking in his dormitory for a few days, Max went to a bar with Joanne, an African American girl he'd met in his social psychology class. She was his best friend in college, but he'd never come out to her, or to anyone. His parents wouldn't have accepted a gay son, which he hadn't considered when a foolish gush of emotion led him to propose to Jonny.

Drunk, they'd slept together. He hadn't minded it, but she didn't have what he wanted. She'd assumed his preferred position—on her back being penetrated.

Despite not being his preferred gender, he enjoyed Joanne's company. They'd been seeing each other for a couple of months. He wasn't sure if they were dating or friends with benefits. Neither of them had labeled whatever they had, and they'd never had the 'where do we go from here' discussion.

Max was in the café when Joanne arrived. She ordered her coffee and sat beside him.

Max blew on his coffee to cool it, took a sip and grinned at his friend, who said, "Max, we need to talk."

Here it is. She's going to end it. Fair enough, it's not me. Might see if that cute Mexican guy in biology wants to hook up. Definitely a vibe there. He smiled at the idea of being ridden by the guy. "Sure, what about?"

"Us."

There is no us. "What is it?"

"Max... I'm pregnant."

What. Fuck! "What? Are you sure? How did it happen?"

"Pretty sure. Probably because you've been fucking me these past couple of months."

Fuck. Fuck! What the fuck. What do I do... Should I tell her I'm gay? Pay for an abortion? "Oh, I... um... What will you do?"

"Have our baby."

"Oh, I..."

"You don't seem happy."

How can I be happy? "I um... I'm surprised. It never occurred to me I'd be a father. Need time to process it."

"I want you to be part of your child's life. Children need a father."

Can I be a father? I'm gay. "What if I turn out like my father? Better no father than a bastard for a father."

Joanne's coffee arrived. She studied it. "If you were anything like your father," her face scrunched as if she'd smelled something vile, "I wouldn't be with you."

True. Am I with you? I was feeling rejected and drunk. It just happened. I didn't mean it. Don't you know I'm gay? "Well, I guess I could marry you."

Joanne sneered. "That's big of you."

Can't see it lasting long, but at least the kid'll have a name. Plenty of kids have divorced parents these days. "I didn't mean it to sound like that. I'm having trouble getting my head around it."

"Are you asking me to marry you?"

Don't have much choice. "Yes, I am. Will you marry me, Joanne?"

"Yes, Max I will. I've been thinking about it. No need to make a fuss. We can fly to Vegas and get married."

Max wouldn't have believed he'd still be married ten years later, with two children and mostly happy. He loved being a father, but he has needs. He slips into the gay scene occasionally, more as a regular tourist than as a resident.

Max joined Judy and opened his laptop as soon as he sat.

"Hello, Max," she said. "Thank you for coming."

"Hi Judy, my pleasure. Love the food here and I love your concept for this space. I've enjoyed bringing it to life."

"I like what you've done with my rough ideas. It's wonderful."

"All I did was sketch out your work."

"Thank you, Max," Judy said. "What would you like for breakfast?"

"Burt told me to try the Welsh Rarebit. He said it was delicious."

"It is. I think I'll join you." Judy signaled Suzy Q.

Today she was wearing a blue and white tartan skirt, a white blouse, with a blue blazer and a red cravat. Thigh high black stockings, black shoes and long blue hair. *She'd have Ali fidgeting today.*

Max said, "She makes me think of Japanese new half cosplay."

Judy smiled. *Interesting.*

He showed Judy his drawings on the laptop screen. She marveled at the level of detail and how well he'd interpreted her description and rough model.

After breakfast, they had coffee, and listened to Jerry Lee Lewis performing *Breathless*.

"Fifties music is interesting," Max suggested.

"That's one word for it," Judy said. *Still not a fan, but this song is interesting.*

After Max left, Judy called Myron and Art and arranged to meet at the diner for dinner. She wanted to return to the City Oasis site and visualize it from the context of her design one more time.

Judy walked around the site, iPad in hand, imagining it as Max had drawn it. *It's coming together.*

"Well, Forrest," she said. "I wonder who'll talk to us today."

It didn't take long. A man sat beside her minutes after she'd found her place at the bus stop.

"Hello," he said. "Again."

Judy smiled. "Hello, Adrian Sebastian Bach."

"You remember!"

"You have a memorable name."

"I should thank my mother for that. Without such a memorable name, I doubt people would remember me at all."

“I don’t think that’s true,” Judy argued. “You’re an interesting man. We talked about the perspectives of age, and you showed me some interesting photographs.”

Adrian was beaming. *She remembers our meeting and thinks I’m interesting.* It was a long time since a beautiful young woman had told him he was interesting. Aroused, he fidgeted. *That hasn’t happened for a long time.*

I like her. Too young for me. Of course, if I wasn’t old, she’d be too fine for me. Definitely out of my league. Still, an old man can dream... Beautiful and kind... Rare. Mostly women are one or the other, not both. If only I’d found a woman like that... Who am I kidding? I’d only find a way to fuck it up!

“Funny you should remember what I said. I was only thinking yesterday, or was it the day before? It doesn’t matter. I was thinking about photographs, well memories. That’s what photographs are. Memories. Anyway, I was thinking our memories change, depending on when we look at the photograph. I mean, our memories of the event change, with them our perspective, but the event itself remains the same, like a fixed point in time.

“Look at this picture,” he said, as he passed his smartphone to Judy. “What do you see?”

Judy said, “A young man. Well dressed, but covered in mud. It’s you, much younger.”

“Yes, that’s me,” he confirmed. “On my wedding day. It was pouring. I told my best man not to drive across the field outside the church, but as usual, he didn’t listen. We got stuck in the mud. I was furious. I’d told him not to. He never listens, always thinks he knows better, but never does.

“The car’s stuck in the mud, and I, not thinking of the consequences, get out in haste and anger to push it out... I push and he guns it. What happens?”

“Nothing,” Judy suggested.

“The car doesn’t move, but the mud sure does. Before I realize what’s happening, I’m covered in mud from head to toe. I was furious, wanted to hit him. He sheepishly got out of the car, holding my jacket, saying, ‘At least your jacket is clean.’

“I got married, frustrated, pissed off and covered in mud.

“I remember, a couple of years later, it may’ve been longer. Anyway, I sat down to look at my wedding video. I started laughing and couldn’t stop. It was almost like an episode of one of those slapstick comedies. I saw myself get out of the car, dressed in my best outfit to push the car out of the mud.

“As I’m watching, I’m thinking, ‘what did I think was going to happen?’ It was obvious what would happen, and so ridiculous that I wanted to scream at the TV about how stupid I was being.

“The expression on my face, standing there covered in mud, and so angry I could almost see the steam coming out of my ears, like one of those angry cartoon scenes, as I clearly shouted ‘fuck, fuck, fuck!’”

“I can imagine it,” Judy said. “It’s funny that something that can seem so dire and serious at the time can be hilarious in hindsight.”

“You’re right. I was mortified at the time, but watching that video... My best man, with a stupid look on his face, trying to hand me my clean jacket. That wasn’t the funniest

part. The look of horror on the face of my bride, when she walked down that aisle, and saw the condition I was in, was priceless.

“On the day I was divorced, I recalled my wedding day. All the signs were there. It was pouring rain, wet, and miserable. I should have known my marriage was going to be as miserable as the weather on my wedding day.

“The car getting stuck in the mud was prophetic, like our marriage stuck in one spot and going nowhere, and me covered in muck because I tried to rescue it. When I came home unexpectedly one day fifteen years later, I saw the same stupid grin on the face of my best man, and the same look of horror on the face of my wife at the sight of me... It had been foretold on the miserable day I got married, if only I could have read the signs.

“Our perspective changes when we’re older. We remember things differently as we age. As I remember my wedding day now, my first wedding day, I mean.

“My best man was trying to save me from getting wet. He told me to stay in the car, but I insisted on pushing him out of the mud, well intentioned perhaps, but foolish. I guess we were like that, both of us well-intentioned but foolish. I remember, too, my wife’s expression becoming a knowing smile, as if she expected nothing else from the foolish oaf she was about to marry.

“Perspective and age change memories, but they don’t change the events. How we recall and describe those events depends on our perspective at the time of remembering.”

“Yes,” Judy agreed.

“Oh. Here’s my bus. Goodbye Judy Vernon. Nice to meet you again.”

“Goodbye Adrian Sebastian Bach. I suspect I’ll be seeing you again.”

I like him. He’s an interesting guy. Never had time to ask him about his surreal experience.

Judy waited at the bus stop after he left, but she didn’t have any more company. She reflected on perspectives, and Frank Farrington, whose appearance changed as her perspective of him changed.

Could be a feature in there. *Change Our Perspective, Change Our World*, or something like that. She took the next bus back into the city for her family meeting.

Judy stood across from her building. George wasn’t outside having a cigarette. *Feels strange.* She enjoyed George’s admiring gaze upon her.

When she entered the diner, Art and Ruth were talking with Rebekah in Frank’s Booth. Judy greeted Johanna and requested a coffee. *I’m drinking too much coffee these days.* She didn’t resolve to do anything about it.

She hugged Mama, Papa and Rebekah, and sat beside Rebekah.

“We’ve been telling Rebekah how proud we are of her and Darnell. They’ve done such a wonderful job with this diner; they should be proud of themselves.”

“Yes Mama, they should,” Judy agreed. “They make Myron and me proud. The food is amazing, and so is the atmosphere.”

Rebekah was beaming and blushing. She squeezed Judy’s hand.

Ruth said, “You know Art, we should come here more often. I love it here. It’s family.”

Art nodded agreement and turned to Rebekah. “I know it’s not the same, but I’m as proud of you as any Zayde could be proud of his Aynikl.”

He took all three women by surprise. Ruth cocked her head, and smiled approvingly, in the way only a wife can look at her husband, on those rare occasions, when they have done or said exactly the right thing.

Rebekah said, “Uncle Art, it’s exactly the same, and it means the world to me.” She wiped her eyes. “I’m going to go ask Darnell to make something extra special for our family tonight.”

Rebekah walked into the kitchen, and inhaled a pleasant, almost woody aroma that reminded her of a pine forest after rain. Darnell was leaning over the pass, fussing over the plating of a rosemary lamb shank, his face deep in concentration as if he hadn’t plated a thousand lamb shanks in the past, and this was the most important dish he’d ever plated.

He straightened up, looked at the plate, smiled, nodded with apparent satisfaction, and hit the bell for Johanna to collect the meal.

Standing behind him, Rebekah rested her head on his shoulder and wrapped her arms around his body. She sobbed.

Darnell spun around in her arms. “What?” he asked.

“Happy,” she said, and buried her head back into his shoulder.

The bell sounded as the door opened. Judy smiled, looked up, and beamed.

Ruth, whose back was to the door, said, “Myron’s arrived.”

“Yes,” Judy confirmed, “How...”

“The way your face lit up.”

Myron leaned in and hugged Art and Ruth hello. Judy stood to savor his embrace. Their lips connected, and then they disengaged and sat in their booth.

Judy opened her iPad and showed them Max’s drawings for the site. Like a proud parent, showing off her children’s work.

Art said, “That’s wonderful Judy. It reminds me of when Mama designed our Secret Garden.”

“Yes,” Ruth agreed. “Me too, and Mama designing the space where they married made me feel Mama was a part of the wedding. I’m so proud of you, Judy.”

Judy smiled. *There’s something special, a feeling that’s hard to describe about being part of this family.*

Myron, being practical, said, “I think we can convince the council to waive the land taxes and include the site as a park on their insurance for liability. I’ve talked to our Insurance Broker, and we can add a clause that will cover any shortfall in the council’s policies if we’re sued. I’d like a signed agreement with the council, which I don’t think will be an issue, because this City Oasis of Judy’s will be a benefit to the community.”

“It’ll be an enormous benefit,” Art agreed. “A place to exercise or relax, coffee and tea, international street food, and even a covered bus stop.”

“We can rent out the food stall space. I’m thinking we could use it to give young people who want to have something of their own, a start. Judy suggested a three-month rent holiday to give them an even chance of getting it off the ground.”

“Yes, good idea,” Art said. “I like that.”

“Judy and I will rent the coffee and milk tea kiosks. We want to experiment with being franchisees. The vending machine company will rent the space in the convenience area here.” Myron pointed at the drawings on Judy’s iPad.

“We’re going to need custodial staff, and even with the rent from the various venders, I don’t think it’ll make money. Break even if we’re lucky.”

Art nodded. “We owe that community a lot. Papa always said, ‘Remember Art, we didn’t pay for the buildings we own, our tenants did. We owe them a debt. When it comes time to pay the debt, remember it’s owed, and pay it with a smile and a grateful heart.’ As well as the three adjoining buildings, we have those other two nearby. We have a responsibility to that community, and City Oasis will be our way of saying thank you.”

Myron smiled. He’d heard that speech many times.

Judy beamed. Her concept was going to become a reality. She’d experienced this with her writing, but this was different.

Ruth squeezed her hand.

Rebekah and Darnell brought their meals, a mild version of the crispy fried chicken, with rose potatoes, honied bitter melon, and pureed pumpkin. Accompanied by chicken and mushroom gravy.

While they ate, they listened to Red Foley singing, *Chattanooga Shoeshine Boy*.

“Ooh,” Ruth exclaimed. “I remember this. We really should come here more often, Art.”

“Yes,” said Art. “This food is excellent.”

Helen's Hangout

Friday night. Myron was at his parents' for Sabbath. Judy was getting ready for a date with Ali and trying to decide what to wear. She felt the texture of everything she considered between her fingers; she held each item to her nose and inhaled; she pressed the fabric against her cheek. *Why is this so important? Why are the butterflies humming like a swarm of disturbed bees?*

She chose a knee-length pale yellow silk dress, which hugged and highlighted her figure. Cream colored Aphrodisiac lingerie. Not that Ali would see it, but she'd be feeling it. A little makeup enhanced her natural appearance, and high-heeled white shoes accentuated the shape of her legs.

Appraising her reflection, Judy was more than satisfied. *Glad I never let myself go.* She and Ali had been spending time together for years, but this was their first actual date.

Judy was married to a man she loved, and there was no chance she and Ali would end up in bed together. This in no way diminished the excitement of being taken on a romantic date.

A knock on the door. *Perfect.*

She opened the door, and Ali stepped in. She was wearing a suit. Navy blue slacks, in Italian cotton, tightly hugged her legs and everything in between. Judy forced herself to direct her gaze upwards. An open matching jacket and a pale blue shirt, with the three top buttons undone, revealing a hint of blue lace from her bra. Black heels finished her outfit. *That's new.* Ali's hair, pulled back tight, into a ponytail, and no makeup. One hand in her pocket, with her arm holding the jacket open. Judy smiled. *My God. I think her male persona is even sexier.*

Ali was staring at her. "Wow! Abso-fucking-lutely amazing."

Judy grinned. *Exactly the response I wanted.* "You're very handsome yourself," she said. "In your stunning new suit."

"I want to kiss you, but I don't want to stop looking at you."

"Silly woman. You better come kiss me. You can ogle me all night."

"I wish."

Ali stepped forward. They embraced, lips hungrily sought their counterparts, teeth glanced, as tongues forced their way into the dance. Their feelings weren't ambiguous, even if their relationship was. Judy's hands were all over Ali, sliding over her ass and between her legs.

Judy's breathing quickened. She stepped back half a pace and opened more of the buttons of Ali's shirt, kissing her neck as she did. Ali pulled her in tight.

"This is why I wore a suit," Ali said. "I knew you'd be all over me. Now let's get out of here while we still can."

The hostess seated them. "Good to see you again, Ali."

Judy felt a pang of jealousy. Monica had brought Ali here.

"Your table is over here." She led them to a table.

Judy could feel eyes upon her. She knew this feeling. She smiled. Judy enjoyed knowing she was desired, whether it was businessmen in Franco's, lesbians in an exclusive lesbian bar and restaurant, or an old ex-con like George.

They ordered Pink Gins.

"Interesting place," Judy observed.

Ali explained, "Married women, celebrities, women who, for various reasons, are not out, romantic and discreet."

A tall, slender woman approached them. Ali introduced Judy to Julia, who welcomed them to Helen's Hangout.

"Oh, you're not Helen?" Judy asked.

"No, Helen was my girlfriend," Julia explained. "Someone outed us after we had dinner together and got a little too amorous on the dance floor. She lost her job as a counselor at an all-girls school. Her family was ashamed of her, which is what she'd been afraid of. Helen took her own life, with no consideration of what it would do to me." Julia's voice betrayed more than a hint of bitterness.

"I'm sorry for your loss," Judy said.

"It was twenty years ago. Took me ten years to recover. I opened this place in her memory a few years ago. Somewhere discreet for ladies who want their lifestyle to remain private. They can be themselves without judgement or fear." She paused and looked pointedly at Judy. "I love your work, Judy Vernon, been reading it for years, so I'm not surprised to see you here, looking, dare I say, absolutely stunning."

Judy smiled.

"Please don't write about us. Anonymity is the purpose of our existence."

"Don't worry, I'm on a date. I won't be writing about tonight or your wonderful place," Judy assured her.

"Thank you, Judy. If you ever want some, err... company. You know where to find me. You're gorgeous."

Julia turned her attention from Judy to Ali. When Judy saw their eyes connect, she stiffened. *They've been together.* Jealousy rising, she downed her drink and excused herself.

Judy sat in a restroom stall, much larger than usual, with a padded orange bench along one wall.

Head bowed, tears fell freely, forming wet patches on her dress. Hands clenched tightly, nails painfully digging into her palms. She wanted Ali to hold her, to comfort her, but she also wanted to hit Ali, hard. To pound her fists into Ali's cheating face. *What's wrong with me?*

Ali watched Judy return to the table. *She's been crying. Quite like her jealous and possessive.*

Ali had ordered a bottle of Frescobaldi Toscana Gorgona Bianco. Without looking at the bottle or studying the label, Judy emptied her glass and poured herself another. She drank that too and poured a third.

Ali said, "You're drinking the wine like it's going to run out."

Judy glared at Ali. "Do you always wear a suit when you're trawling dyke bars?" Judy asked.

Jealous I like, bitch I won't tolerate. "Yes. I like women pretty and feminine, like you, and since I can't have you, I have to make do with others. Lots of others."

"It's one thing knowing about it, but having your conquests shoved in my face is something else entirely." Judy glared at Julia.

"I hardly shoved her in your face, but I could if you want. I'm sure she'd be up for it."

Judy turned away, but Ali noticed the tick of a smile on the edge of her mouth.

"You're both sluts," Judy said.

"Not by choice, for me. Julia, I think, quite likes variety. I only *want* your sweet offering, and since I can't have it, I have to dine elsewhere."

"You don't have to dine everywhere!" Judy finished the wine and ordered another bottle.

"I need sex, and lots of it. Whatever happened when I got my freedom has awakened desires in me that need satisfying. You aren't willing to satisfy them, and I don't want to pressure you."

"So you don't want *me* satisfying your desires? You'd rather be a slut."

She's a pain in the ass in this mood. "I want you to satisfy my desires, but you refuse to talk to Myron. If you did, I wouldn't *need* to slut around."

"So it's my fault, you're a slut?"

"As a matter of fact, it is. If I didn't love you, I could have a relationship with Monica. I can't because you have my heart."

Judy looked away. When she focused on Ali again, she'd softened. "I'm sorry Ali, I..."

"Nothing to be sorry for. Except being a bitch."

"I'm sorry I turned you into a slut."

For fuck's sake! "Don't be so fucking stupid. You didn't turn me into anything. I made the only choice I could, given my circumstances. It's more good than bad."

"So, you're not a passive dyke exploring her sexuality anymore?" Judy asked.

"No, I know what I want and go after it." Ali stood and walked around to Judy; she needed to curb Judy's drinking. She pulled Judy to her feet without asking. "Right now, I want to dance with my woman, even though she's being a bitch."

Ali led Judy to the dance floor, unashamedly lifted Judy's skirt at the back and grabbed her ass, then kissed her long, hard and with desire and passion.

"People can see," Judy protested.

"I don't care."

They danced. Judy rested her head on Ali's shoulder.

Judy whispered, "I need the restroom."

She'd almost closed the door when Ali pushed it open and followed her into the stall.

"Do you mind?"

“It’s not like I haven’t seen you pee before.”

“What do you want?” Judy asked.

“I don’t like this.”

“You don’t have to watch me pee if you don’t like it.”

“You know what I mean. I don’t like you being a bitch one minute, and all over me the next.”

“You were the one who dragged me onto the dancefloor and grabbed my ass.”

“To stop you drinking,” Ali said.

“So, now I’m not allowed to drink?”

Ali sat on the bench. “I worry about you when you’re like this.”

Judy removed her panties, passed them to Ali, and said, “Here, take care of these while I go.”

Ali held them to her nose, inhaling Judy’s scent.

When Judy finished, she wiped herself and stood.

Ali passed Judy’s panties to her. “I need to go.”

She lowered her trousers and panties to her knees and sat.

Judy stepped to Ali, placing her foot on the crotch of Ali’s trousers, and forced them down. She leaned into her. “You like my scent? Have a good whiff.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Taste it. I’m not stopping you.”

“This is what I’m talking about. Your erratic behavior is driving me crazy.”

“It’s your slutty behavior that’s making *me* crazy.”

“I’m done,” Ali said. “I need to stand up.”

“I’m not stopping you.”

Ali shrugged, stood, and reached back to flush. Inches away from Judy, she stared into her eyes.

Judy’s hand moved first, finding its way between Ali’s legs. Ali reciprocated this time. Overcome by passion and desire, she moved Judy back to the bench, stepping out of her trousers as she did so.

On the bench, in that stall in the restroom of Helen’s Hangout, they made love for the first time.

Fuck! I shouldn’t have let it happen, not like this. She’s drunk on wine and pheromones. “I’m sorry,” Ali said, “I couldn’t stop myself, I...”

“I needed it. Not your fault.”

“We’d better... Julia will wonder what...”

“I think she’ll know. She put the benches in the stalls for a reason.”

Judy grabbed her panties from the bench, passing them to Ali. She then bent and retrieved Ali's panties from the floor, putting them on.

I don't know if this is sick or romantic. Ali pulled Judy's panties on, then bent down to grab her trousers.

"I love you, Ali."

"I can feel it whenever you look at me. That's why I can't have a normal relationship with anyone else. My heart isn't mine, it's yours."

"I'm sorry."

Ali smiled, "I'm not. Come on," she said. "I guess they've been holding our dinner. I'm still tingling, by the way."

"Me too. I don't think it will ever stop."

"It doesn't have to."

When they returned to their table, there was a bottle of *Bollinger La Grande Annee* waiting for them, with Julia's compliments.

Judy went to thank Julia. She kissed her on the lips. Noticing Ali's frown, she made it a long, passionate kiss. *Like seeing her jealous.*

Ali asked, "What was that about?"

"I enjoyed seeing my girlfriend jealous. Feels good, doesn't it?"

"Sometimes."

Judy said, "I'm sorry our situation is so complicated."

"It is what it is."

Judy picked up her glass and offered a toast. "Losing our cherries."

Ali responded, "It's about time."

"This is superb wine," Judy said. "But not the sweetest thing I've tasted tonight."

Ali beamed.

After they'd eaten and finished the champagne, Ali said, "So what now? Are you gonna take me home?"

"I want to. Was going to. I can justify to myself getting carried away in the moment, but planned is different. I can't do that yet. First, I need to talk to Myron. Now I've had a taste, I want more. Can you give me a little longer? Not too long, I promise."

"I'm over the moon that we did. I've wanted to taste you since the day we met."

"You made that clear."

"So happy I'd agree to anything now," Ali said. "Still, I'm disappointed. I was hoping..."

"I need you to understand that if we do this, I'll want your commitment," Judy said. "I'm not as tolerant as your Monica. You'll have to give her up." She looked around the room. "Give them all up."

“If I had you, I wouldn’t want anyone else. I made that clear from the start, and Mon knows it’s a temporary thing.”

“I’m not sure when, but it’ll happen. Tonight confirmed it must. You have until then to get this nonsense out of your system.”

“I can do that.”

“If you can’t, you won’t have me again.”

“I will. It’s all I’ve been waiting for.”

“Let’s go home,” Judy said.

Their taxis arrived. They kissed goodbye. Judy whispered, “I’ll be waiting for your call, and I won’t be taking your panties off.”

City Council

Judy fidgeted, frowned, and wiped her palms on her skirt. Art, Myron, and Judy were in a taxi on the way to their meeting with the mayor, the director of city planning, and the chief executive about the City Oasis project. Max would meet them with a scale model and drawings.

“Don’t worry Judy, this’ll be a formality,” Art said. “These guys asked me to acquire the property, so they owe us. A community project like this is good for votes and looks good on resumes. Each of them will find a way to take credit for it. We only care about getting our design approved.”

Myron added, “That’s why they’ll agree to our tax and insurance proposals. Simon Sharpe added an indemnity clause saying if they don’t purchase adequate insurance, and we get sued, the council has to indemnify us. They’ll agree because currently their insurance will cover everything. Simon’s protecting us in case things change in the future.”

Judy wouldn’t have thought of any of this. It drove home the value of Myron hiring Simon as the family’s private lawyer.

Max was waiting in the lobby of the council offices when they arrived.

“Wow!” *The model is amazing, nothing like my amateur attempt.* It was like comparing a model car crafted from a matchbox with a model car professionally made to scale, complete with all authentic features, and painted to match the real thing.

Although Max had explained the features of the project using the model as a prop, the council guys—who all wore navy blue suits as if it was a uniform—were almost clamoring over each other to point out the features of the project. To Judy, they were like schoolboys trying to outdo each other with their knowledge of the features of a new toy. She could almost hear their cogs turning as they calculated how much credit they could claim for the project.

Judy’s heart swelled like she imagined a proud parent would hearing strangers heap praise on their child.

The council guys needed to have the legal department look over the agreement Simon had prepared, but they spoke as though the project had already been approved.

They were as good as their word, and within a week; the agreement was signed.

The mayor held a press conference on site to announce City Oasis. He didn’t mention Judy or the Myerson family. He didn’t say it was a council initiative, but he emphasised the council’s involvement in approving the project promptly.

“He didn’t mention us,” Judy complained.

“The result will be here long after the credit has been forgotten,” Art said.

Myron said, “A dedication plaque will give both you and Papa credit for your roles in bringing City Oasis to life, and the mayor credit for presiding at the dedication.”

Judy knew Burt Rogers anticipated a quick approval and had a work crew on standby. Still, her head was spinning.

They fenced the site that afternoon, and work began. Everything had happened quickly. She hadn’t had time to think about anything else. The project consumed her time, and she had given little thought to having the Ali talk with Myron.

Three weeks later, City Oasis was completed. Judy had visited the site daily from foundation to completion. That day, the fence would come down and it would be open to the public.

Frank Dunn had given applications to several former parolees who'd completed the culinary reform program. Judy and Myron, with the help of Darnell, had chosen applicants to be shortlisted. Darnell asked them to prepare a tasting plate at Frank's Diner one Sunday afternoon. The creators of the best dishes were given the opportunity to open their own food stall at City Oasis.

Myron completed negotiations with coffee and milk tea chains and signed franchise agreements for the coffee and milk tea stalls. It would be Coffee Roasters first franchised outlet, and the first in the city for TeaMe. Staff were recruited and trained.

Burt hired custodial staff. The vending machines were installed and operational.

The waterfall was tested and had been running for several days with no noise complaints from those living in the adjoining buildings. Everything was ready for the opening.

The mayor opened City Oasis with a press conference and the unveiling of a commemorative plaque. Judy didn't listen to the mayor's speech. Her mind was full of Frank Farrington. *Frank would have been a great mayor.*

The plaque contained some technical information about City Oasis, but the two items which were a source of pride to her were:

Benefactor: Art Meyerson

Designer: Judy Vernon

The official party, which included city officials and Judy, Myron, Art, Ruth, Ali, and Burt, were in a closed-off area on the third floor of the structure. They chatted over coffees, teas, and a selection of plates from the food stalls, which filled the air with a kaleidoscope of aromas. Judy could identify some of the more distinctive ones: star anise, ginger, curry, chilli, onion, soy sauce, cinnamon, cloves, coriander, turmeric, and asafoetida.

In the activity area, the locals and their children enjoyed face-painting, clown shows, free balloons, cotton candy, and popcorn. Myron had the vending machines set to 'free'.

Judy stood looking down on her creation like a proud parent. Ali, wearing a forest green suit, brought over some coffees for them.

Judy said, "I made this happen."

"Yes, you did," Ali said. "I'm proud of you."

Myron joined them as Ali spoke, placing an arm around each of their waists. "Alison's right, we're all proud of you. Mama and Papa are singing the praises of their talented daughter to anyone who'll listen."

Judy noticed Ali looking down and followed her gaze to the bulge in Myron's trousers.

His face reddened. "Pheromones," he said.

He kissed Judy, then Ali. Instead of releasing their waists, he slid his hands across each of their butts, then turned and walked away.

“I’m sorry, Ali,” Judy said. “I’ve been so busy with this place, I haven’t had time for the talk.”

“I understand,” she said, eyes fixed on Myron as he walked away. He stopped for a moment, glanced back over his shoulder, as if he knew she was watching him. Their eyes connected for a moment, then he turned away. “Maybe you won’t have to.”

Judy and Ali sat in their booth at Frank’s Diner.

Suzy Q, who delivered their breakfast, wore a white frilly blouse with a bow tie shaped like angel’s wings. Her skirt was dark red, almost black, with three matching petticoats protruding from underneath, and bright red shoes. Her wig, almost the same color as her shoes, but a little brighter, reached her shoulders.

“She’s wearing silky pink panties under that skirt,” Ali said as Suzy Q skipped back to the counter.

“How do you know?”

“She was crouched, looking at her phone behind the counter when I arrived. Not the first time she’s flashed me.”

“You’re incorrigible.”

“And you wouldn’t have looked?”

“Beside the point. I never get to see your panties these days. You’re always wearing slacks.”

“A chastity belt, to stop you from getting carried away.”

Judy smiled. “You love me getting carried away.”

“I do, and I love that you haven’t been bitchy since we had sex.”

“I’ll talk to Myron soon. I want more of that,” Judy said, sliding her hand between Ali’s legs.

“Interesting reaction from Myron.”

“It’s your pheromones.”

“They made him hard, but he caressed my butt. In public too.”

“You complaining?”

“I liked it. Besides, I’m constantly horny,” Ali said. “It’s not going away, so I think I’m going to need both of you.”

“I’d like it if we could,” Judy said.

“You’re not jealous?”

“Of you and Myron. No, I want to share,” Judy said. “Of Monica and the others, yes, but it’s not driving me crazy now.”

“I told Monica we had sex.”

“Was she jealous?” Judy asked.

“Disappointed. She knows when we commit, it’ll be over between us.”

“How’s she reacting?”

“She says she’s spending time with me while she can.”

“Are you okay with that?”

“If I had a heart to give her, we could have something. I don’t and I won’t. I worry I’m not being fair to her, but she says it’s fine because I told her the situation from the start. At least she’s keeping me out of the bars.”

“I must thank her.”

“Silly woman.”

They finished their breakfast and prepared to leave, each with their own agenda. Ali leaned in and they kissed goodbye.

“I love you, Ali,” Judy said.

“I know, and I’m glad we’re us again.”

“Me too.”

They left the diner. Ali was going home to change into a skirt, hoping Su-Lin would be available that afternoon. A glimpse up Suzy Q’s skirt always made her want Asian.

Judy returned to City Oasis. She liked to walk around and feel the energy. She enjoyed watching the locals make use of her creation.

Some people were running, so she made sure not to step in their way as she had in her vision. Others were exercising, but the reality of people exercising didn’t match the level of eye candy she’d imagined. Others were sitting by the pond or in the structure, either alone or with friends.

The Coffee Roasters and TeaMe franchises were serving customers. It was too early for lunch, but the food stalls were preparing their fare, releasing a pot-pourri of aromas to whet the appetite. City Oasis had a happy buzz to it. Judy went to get a coffee and noticed a familiar man sitting on a bench, so she ordered two.

She sat next to the man. “Got time for a coffee?” she asked.

“Hello Judy Vernon. For you, dear lady, I always have time.”

Judy smiled. “So, Adrian Sebastian Bach, what’s been happening?”

“This and that, nothing exciting. Not like you. I read the plaque. It made me proud to know the designer of this wonderful place.”

Judy flushed. “You were going to tell me about a surreal experience you had in China.”

“Was I? Oh yes, we’d been talking about Chinese women dancing outside the Catholic Church in Tianjin. Lots of surreal and surprising experiences in China. Often, I would be totally surprised at the sight of something not only unexpected, but incapable of being expected.”

He removed the lid from his coffee, and blew on it to cool it, inhaling the aroma as he did.

“My most surreal experience was in summer. It was in Qinhuangdao, a small coastal city in northern China. Penis Man.

Judy raised an eyebrow.

“Pardon my French,” Adrian said. “He was a young, mentally impaired guy who walked around the city with his penis hanging out. He was well endowed, which is probably why it was always hanging out. Perhaps his way of advertising to desperate middle-aged women who’d take advantage of a mentally impaired young man with a very large penis? Who knows?”

“There weren’t so many public toilets back then. Sometimes, you might walk down an alley and it would be literally full of shit. They taught children to go to the toilet in the street, so it was not unusual to see a boy standing on the sidewalk peeing, or a girl squatting down. If they were very young, their parents would hold them while they did. If you saw them, you would avert your eyes. Different now.”

He took a sip of his coffee. “That *is* wonderful.”

“Best in the city.” Judy smiled.

Adrian continued, “One stinking hot summer’s day. I saw one of those McDonald’s holes in the wall where they sell ice cream. They were playing a tinny piano version of *In an English Country Garden* on repeat. I bought my ice-cream and turned to walk away licking it, thinking how absurd the music was. In front of me was a girl, not so young, as she’d apparently reached puberty, squatted down, panties half off, peeing in the street.

“No problem. I averted my eyes. Sitting on the end of a bench, much like this one, was a middle-aged, overweight woman, feeling the heat. Her panties and pantyhose—why she’d be wearing pantyhose in that heat is beyond me—rolled down around her ankles, legs and everything in between open to the world, fanning herself by lifting her dress up and down, trying to cool her overheated vagina.

“No problem. I averted my eyes. Still licking my ice-cream lest it melt and run down my hands, and there was ‘Penis Man’ walking towards me, jewels as usual, swaying in the breeze. McDonald’s playing *In an English Country Garden*, and I’m licking an ice-cream amid the peeing, fanning, and swaying. The entire scene was surreal.”

Judy was smiling. *The music playing in the background brings his story to life.*

“You have some interesting stories, Adrian. Is there a Mrs Sebastian Bach?”

“Not currently. You interested?”

Judy held up her left hand. “I’m married,” she was tempted to add, ‘and I have a girlfriend.’

“Can’t blame a guy for trying. There have been several Mrs Bach’s in the past. I told you about the first one... but currently I’m free.”

“Marriage doesn’t always stick.”

“Sometimes,” he winked, “you can get stuck if you are not careful.”

Judy remained silent, which was usually more productive than asking questions. Adrian drank a little more coffee. He said without explanation, “I think we’re all of us broken people, but we don’t have to live broken lives.”

“Yes, I know many people who would agree with that.”

He smiled. “Well, thank you for the coffee, Judy Vernon, and for listening to me again. I enjoy talking with you because you let me do the talking. I have a bus to catch, but I’m sure I’ll see you again. You’ve really done something special here.”

“Thank you for entertaining me with your stories. ‘til next time, Adrian Sebastian Bach.”

“I read somewhere ‘the mind filters input from the world to produce its own unique reality,’ or something like that,” he said. “I have my own reality.”

He walked away with a smile on his face. *He’s happy to have someone to talk to.*

Judy looked up the quote before heading home herself. It was by D.H. Jonassen, from an educational paper apparently, something she might have expected from Professor Tibbets.

She took one more walk around City Oasis before heading home.

Better focus on my book now.

Graeme Otford

Judy stood opposite Frank's Diner, looking up at the building as she did every time she approached. George came out for a cigarette. She stopped beside him to say hello and rested her hand on his arm. He caught his breath and moistened his lips.

She was meeting Myron, Frank Dunn and a man called Graeme Otford for lunch. Myron wanted a full-time training manager. They were going to talk to Graeme, who'd gained his certification as a corporate trainer while in prison. He was on parole, but the position he'd lined up hadn't worked out.

People fighting their way back from adversity and trying to establish a life for themselves were the kind of people Myron liked to hire. "They're dedicated and loyal," he'd told Judy many times. *He's right, plus they have interesting stories.*

Judy sat in her booth and studied George through the window. She'd thought about him fantasizing about her, since Ali had overheard him talking about it. A part of her wanted to know the details of what they did. She became a little aroused. *God, what's happening to me? I blame Ali.* She took a long, hard look at him as he finished his smoke. *Yeah, I could. There'd be something sweet, kind, and tender about him in bed. He'd savor every moment, not rush.*

Katie brought her coffee, interrupting her thoughts. *A good thing too.* She was listening to Michael Holliday's *The Story of My Life*.

Can't believe I'm aroused thinking about George, thinking about me, while he masturbates. What's wrong with me?

She picked up her phone and selected the contact at the top of the list. "I think you broke me," she said, before Ali spoke.

"What're you talking about?"

"I'm horny."

"And this is my fault, how?"

"Not because of you this time, but since you've been making me so horny these last few weeks, I can't turn it off."

"Are you saying I've turned you on so much, you can't turn off?"

"No... Yes.... I don't know what I'm saying."

"Neither do I, but I have a free afternoon. Why not come over and we'll see..."

"I have a meeting."

"You're going to your meeting wet?"

"Yes."

"Delicious."

"Please Ali, I'm serious. I'm broken."

"So am I, you're delicious!"

"Impossible woman."

"What got *you* wet? I'm wet, because you're on the phone telling me you're wet."

"George!"

“George made you wet?”

“I was talking to him, and I got to thinking about him, umm...”

“Jerking off over you.”

“Yeah. I wondered what he fantasized about while he did it... I was curious.”

“God... You didn’t ask him, did you?”

“Of course not. I started thinking about what he might think about. Then I started thinking about how he would, err...”

“Jerk off.”

“Yeah, and I became aroused.”

“Would you?”

“I could, but I won’t.”

“Interesting. I think I might like to watch.”

“You really are impossible. Oh, here’s Myron now.”

“Lucky Myron, I know what he’s getting when you get home.”

“You jealous?”

“Not of Myron.”

“Bye darling, love you.”

“Love you too, Judy.”

Except for Myron, Ali hadn’t been attracted to men since learning she was a lesbian. She hadn’t hated having sex with John, but it wasn’t for her, it was for him.

She’d been infatuated with Judy since their eyes first connected. Many of the habits Ali had adopted she’d learned from Judy. She identified as a lesbian, who was okay with having sex with men, but didn’t consider herself bisexual.

Judy’s call had planted an idea. *Maybe I could become bisexual too?*

Myron kissed Judy when he arrived. Judy snuggled into him like she did in a taxi. He smiled. *He knows when I’m horny.*

Frank Dunn arrived with Graeme Otford and made the introductions.

“Sandwiches okay for everyone?” he asked.

He headed to the kitchen to order the sandwiches and check in with his charges; he ordered coffee for himself and Graeme from Katie on his way.

Judy studied Graeme. Short brown hair, recently cut but not quite stylish. *Probably the work of the prison barber.* A pale blue long sleeve shirt, navy blue slacks, and black shoes. *A little out of date.* She guessed he wore his old pre-incarceration clothes.

“Would you like to tell us your story Graeme?” Judy asked.

“If I’m going to work for you, I’m obliged to tell you I’m on parole, so I may as well tell you the complete story,” he said.

“I was the worst kind of defense attorney, represented drug dealers and organized crime figures. Most of whom were guilty, but I usually found a technicality, or used a dirty trick to get them off. I was smart, but I was also unscrupulous and arrogant. I took great delight in embarrassing cops and ADAs in court. They hated me.

“I started sampling my client’s products and got hooked. On the drugs and the lifestyle. They were some wild days. Drugs, parties, money, women, and power. Addicted to it all and ended up moving product myself. I thought I was a player. In the end, it was a woman who did me in.”

Graeme could vaguely make out a voice talking to him, but he was struggling to work out what it was saying.

“Gray, you need to wake up and get dressed now.”

He looked at Mia through one half-opened eye. “Why?”

“Because you’re about to be arrested.”

“What?” Her words were only half registering. “How?”

“Come on, they’ll be here soon, and I don’t want you arrested naked.”

“Why? How do you know?”

“Because you’ve got three kilos of coke in your briefcase, and I’m an undercover cop.”

“No, you’re not.”

She pressed something hard against his forehead. “This is my shield Gray, now get up and dressed. My backup will be here at any moment.”

Graeme shook his head to focus himself and studied the shield before his eyes. “Looks real, but it can’t be. You do more coke than I do.”

Mia glanced at her smartphone in response to a ding. “They’re here. You have two minutes to get dressed.”

Graeme sat in the interview room at the local precinct. He leaned down to scratch his itchy nose. *I didn’t realize how awkward it is to have one’s hands cuffed to the table.*

Two detectives, both wearing smug expressions, entered the room.

One said, “I knew we’d get you eventually, you slimy bastard.”

Graeme smiled. “You have nothing. Where’s the DA?”

“We’ll call the DA when we’re ready to charge you.”

Graeme gave the detectives a look of disdain. “I’m not wasting my time talking to the monkeys. I’ll exercise my right to remain silent until the DA gets here.” He lowered his head to the desk and closed his eyes. *An informant must have told them what I was up to, so they targeted me. Can’t be a coincidence.*

He could sense the detectives were angry. He counted on it. *Pissed-off cops make mistakes.* He’d built a career pissing off cops on the stand and watching them squirm. They stormed from the room. *Disappointed cameras and viewing windows mean they can’t give me the beating I deserve.*

Mia had allowed him to use the bathroom before she'd arrested him. *Maybe she'd forgotten about the small bowl of coke on the vanity, maybe not.* A few lines had helped get him balanced and would keep him on an even keel for another few hours.

He smiled. When she'd given him his Miranda rights, she'd messed up, and he'd corrected her. *Maybe I shouldn't have, might have been able to use it.*

The District Attorney entered the interview room, followed by a detective. He sat opposite Graeme.

Graeme raised his hands, pulling them tight against the handcuffs. "Is this really necessary?"

The DA nodded towards the detective who glared at Graeme, but detached a key from his belt, and released the cuffs. Graeme made a show of rubbing his wrists.

"Do you need anything?"

Graeme shrugged. "Perhaps a coffee."

The DA nodded at the detective, who again glared at Graeme but left the room to comply. Graeme grinned at the observation window. *If I piss the cops off enough, they might give me a beating anyway, and I can use that.*

"The weight you were holding carries a mandatory twenty-five to life," The DA said. "Nothing I can do about that, so I don't know why I'm here."

Graeme glanced at the observation window again, smiled, then focused on his adversary. "The cocaine was in my possession. I won't deny that, but it wasn't my cocaine. I was holding it for a friend, and I had no intention of being involved in its distribution."

"Even if you're prepared to name your friend, there isn't much I can do with the mandatory sentence. Are you prepared to name the owner of the drugs?"

"Yes, the cocaine belongs to the woman I know as Mia, but having been informed she's an undercover police officer, I doubt that's her real name."

"Are you saying the drugs found in your possession belong to a police officer? Can you prove that?"

"Yes."

The detective returned with coffee in a paper cup, which he placed in front of Graeme. He glared at Graeme again, then stood against a wall, arms folded, and still glaring. Graeme picked up the cup, offered a mock toast to the detective, smiled and took a sip. Replacing his cup on the table, he refocused on the DA.

"Let me tell you what I can prove," Graeme began. "Three months ago, I was introduced to a woman who told me her name was Mia. She seduced me. She was very good at it, and I became besotted with her to the extent that I invited her to cohabit after just two weeks. It can be easy for a woman who possesses sexual prowess to control a man, and in court, I'll be, er... entertaining the jury with very detailed accounts of Mia's sexual abilities." Graeme paused, grinned at the observation window, then at the detective in the room, who appeared to be in danger of bursting a blood vessel.

He continued, "I also admit to occasionally using cocaine for recreational purposes, prior to meeting this 'Mia'. However, Mia encouraged and coerced me to use every day, and I believe she's turned me into an addict. In fact, Mia consumes more cocaine daily than I do,

so there's no doubt she's also an addict. I, of course, will insist the results of her drug test are produced in court, and the records of her rehabilitation, which the department will be arranging as we speak."

"None of this alters the fact you were in possession of a large quantity of cocaine."

Graeme picked up his coffee, made a show of blowing on it to cool it, sipped a little, then resumed. "I admit it was in my possession, hard to deny when my prints are on the packages, but as you know by now, Mia's prints are also on the packages. On Friday afternoon, Mia arrived in my office, handed me three packages of what she identified as cocaine, and asked me to put them in my briefcase, which I did. We spent Friday night, all day Saturday and Saturday night, partying with a cocktail of cocaine and sex. On Sunday morning, Mia informed me she was a police officer and arrested me for possession, which she could have done on Friday night."

"Being in possession of a large quantity of a controlled substance carries a mandatory sentence."

"That may be true, but you need to get a conviction, and there is no guarantee a jury will find me guilty. They may well find me not guilty, a victim of an elaborate police conspiracy to frame me."

Katie delivered their coffees. Graeme raised his cup and inhaled. "Better than I'm used to." He stared out the window for a moment.

"In the end, I accepted a deal. I didn't want to risk getting a judge who hated me or what I stood for. Bringing the legal profession into disrepute. They didn't want to risk their case on a cop who'd crossed the line, and a lawyer with a reputation for dirty tricks.

"I took ten years, with a non-parole period of five. Disbarred. I got clean, made rehab part of the deal. I was fine inside, and I was safe. Had past clients inside to protect me, and cons who wanted my legal advice."

Graeme noticed George bussing tables. They nodded to each other. "I wondered what became of George. Heard he got out." He sipped some coffee.

Judy smiled. "Oh, you knew our George inside?"

"A little. Shared a cell with him for a couple of months. He's righteous. Being inside gave me a lot of time to think. Needed to work out what I'd do when I got out. I couldn't practice law and I wasn't going to become involved in the narcotics trade. If I got caught again, it would've been life. I took advantage of the online training programs they had available and got certified as a vocational and corporate trainer.

"Kept my nose clean inside, easy because nobody screwed with me. I'm done with that life. I was arrogant, and the drugs impaired my judgement. Thought I was bulletproof." He picked his cup up with two hands and took another sip. "Damn, that's good." He stared out the window again.

"Textbook cautionary tale for young lawyers, I'm afraid." He shook his head. "I have four years of probation, and I've no intention of going back inside. I got off easy. Many believe I should've got more time. If I'm being honest, and Frank Dunn advised me to be honest with you guys, I know there are some police and those in the DA's office who are looking for an excuse to send me down again.

“I’m living in a halfway house, which isn’t ideal. I had a job lined up, but there were too many directors who didn’t want a convicted felon training their staff. Fair enough. I didn’t think it would be easy. I got lucky when my file landed on Frank Dunn’s desk. A parole officer who actually gives a shit and helps people fit back into society.”

Frank Dunn returned to the booth. He said, “I thought you guys may have use for Graeme’s talents. I think he could have something to offer, and he needs someplace to live.”

Myron nodded. “Graeme, could you outline how a training program across several companies, around two hundred employees, might look?”

Two hundred? We have so many employees depending on us?

“An integrated approach is best.” He paused and drew a deep breath. “We’d need technology to make it work, along with face-to-face mentorship. A hybrid of corporate training, formal and informal, online courses probably using one of the MOOC providers, some of which would be mandatory, and some elective. All linked to the employee’s performance reviews.”

Graeme sipped his coffee, glanced out the window, studied the faces opposite him and resumed.

He’s nervous about the future. He really wants this.

“We wouldn’t need to reinvent the wheel. Continue to implement the on-the-job training that’s currently in place, document it, and utilize the online training that’s available. This will allow us to tailor the training to individual needs. Later, we could supplement their training if any gaps present themselves.”

Katie delivered two platters of assorted sandwiches. They each took one.

Judy glanced at Myron, who nodded.

“How would it work for, say, someone like George?” Judy asked, indicating George, who was taking dishes to the kitchen.

“We’d set up a personal development program for him and document any mandatory training he’s done, such as food handling. Most of his training would be on the job, I imagine. Employees would be given free access to courses they may be interested in. Maybe to enhance their skills or support a hobby or special interest. It’s a good way to promote work life balance, because MOOCs provide access to a wide range of courses within the package cost.”

Myron asked, “Do you have any concerns about putting such a program together?”

“Other than running some training courses for other prisoners, to comply with the practical teaching requirements, for my certification, I don’t have experience at putting it together, but it *will* work.”

Judy asked, “How’d you feel about working with a professional educator to help you put it together?”

“I’d welcome the help and guidance. I’m determined to make it work. I’d need help on the IT side too. An App would allow staff to access their records and the courses, assuming we can find one. If we can link it to their HR records automatically, it would help too.”

Graeme stared out the window. When he looked back across the table, his eyes were almost pleading. He took another sandwich. “These are great.”

“Everything is great here,” Frank suggested.

“I know what needs to be done, and I’m sure it’ll work,” Graeme said.

Myron nodded. “We can provide you with the support you need. We have companies to do IT and Apps, and a publishing house. It wouldn’t be difficult to put together a project team. I’m guessing Judy knows an educator who may be interested?”

Judy smiled. “Yes, I met a retired professor who’s looking for an outlet to use his experience.” Having already entered the information in her phone contacts, she passed Graeme the slip of paper with James Tibbetts’ number.

Myron asked Graeme, “And you need somewhere to live?”

“I’m in a halfway house. I need to find work and become stable before I can find anywhere decent to live.”

While they finished lunch, they discussed details of how it would work. Myron had some ideas, having been thinking about the need for corporate training for the last three months.

Myron said, “In business, I’ve found kismet often plays a part.”

He offered Graeme a contract to establish a corporate training division. The package included a furnished apartment, close to where Myron would locate his training division.

Fathers' Love

Rebekah sat at the kitchen table with a coffee, staring at the old notebook Maurice had given Darnell. He'd thrown it on the table, and as far as she was aware, hadn't touched it since.

Darnell came out of the bathroom, naked, after his morning shower. He stepped over to where she was sitting and kissed her. *Wish he didn't have to open the diner. I could use that eggplant right about now.* She ran her fingers through the tight, curly hair on his chest as he leaned down to kiss her.

"What?" he asked.

"Wishing it was Sunday and Leon was opening up."

"Didn't you get enough last night?"

"I'll never get enough of you," Rebekah said.

His smile lit up the room.

"Better get dressed."

Without the distraction, Rebekah's attention returned to the notebook. *Why won't he read it?*

Darnell returned to the kitchen, dressed. "Time to head down."

Rebekah remained focused on the old blue and white striped book in front of her. "Darnell, are you going to read your father's letters?"

He sat and picked up the book. He studied it, but didn't open it. Darnell put it down on the table. "I don't know Bec. I want to know what's in them, but I'm not sure I want to know. Doesn't make sense to me."

"It does to me. What if I read them first? Would you mind?"

Darnell focused on her eyes. "I have no secrets from you, and I'm not about to start now."

She nodded.

He stood, placed his hand behind her neck, leaned down, and his lips gently caressed hers as he kissed her goodbye.

"I love you, Darnell," she said.

Darnell winked. "I saw what you love when I came out of the shower."

"That too."

Darnell glanced at the clock. *Bec should be here by now.*

"Leon, keep an eye on things. I'm going upstairs to see what's keeping Bec."

"Sure," responded Leon. "I can cover lunch if she needs me to."

Darnell nodded, then left.

He entered their apartment. "Bec, you here?"

He went into the kitchen. She was sitting at the table where he'd left her. She still wore her pink nightshirt. Her coffee, mostly untouched. His father's book, open in front of her. Tears, flowing down her cheeks. "Bec! What is it?" Two steps, and he was beside her, arm around her shoulders.

"It's all true, Darnell. What he told us is true."

"What?"

"He never stopped loving you, and it tore him up."

"Why are you crying?"

"There's so much love in these pages. He loves you. I was thinking about Papa. All he did my whole life was lecture me about everything I did wrong. He never told me he loved me and never gave me a sense that he loved me. I guess he must've because he's my Papa, but I never felt it. Not once. Your father loves you."

"I never felt it either..." Darnell said. "Well, maybe when I was very young, before he left."

"I think that's why it hurt so much. You didn't only lose him. You lost his love, too. But you didn't Darnell. You *have to* read these."

"Okay Bec, I will."

"When?"

"Maybe tomorrow."

"Why'd you come back?" she asked, wiping her eyes against his shirt.

"You're late. I was wondering..."

"Shit. I didn't notice the time. Haven't even showered yet."

"It's okay. Me and Leon got it covered. Take your time. Just wanted to make sure you were okay."

"Sorry, I won't be long."

Darnell placed his arms around her and kissed her forehead. "I love you, Bec."

As he was leaving the kitchen, he stopped at the door, turning to face Rebekah.

"Uncle Myron," he said. "Uncle Myron loves you like a Papa. I can feel it when he looks at you."

She reached for a tissue and blew her nose, then looked up and smiled. "Yes Darnell, you're right. I can feel he loves me, like a Papa should."

Darnell looked at the floor, nodded, looked up at Rebekah, swallowed hard, and said, "Focus on the Papa you have."

Goodbye Billy.

Judy entered The Shipyard. Dancer was relaxing behind the bar. There were a few patrons, but the bar wasn't busy. Dancer noticed Judy looking around, and said, "It's early yet."

He took a bottle of oaked Chardonnay from the fridge and poured her a glass. "Look at you sizing-up the business, like an owner. Checking up on me?" He winked.

She smiled. "Hello Dancer, I've missed you."

"Me too, Judy. You notice the souvenir shop next door?"

"It's gone."

"Yep, closed a week ago. Most of the offices above it are empty too, I hear."

"Really? Interesting."

"I can see your brain ticking. Been spending too much time with your husband, I reckon."

Judy smiled. "Just wondering what they'll do with the space."

"That's what I mean. The area is changing, becoming fagified."

"Fagified? Is that a word?"

"If it isn't, it ought to be." Dancer put on his version of an upper-class accent. "It is being gentrified by gentlemen of a homosexual persuasion."

"Yes, it's becoming a gay area."

"Like I said, fagified."

"Is that a problem?"

"Not to me. Their money spends just fine, and they got lots of it. My regulars have been dwindling and the new clientele has been more frequent."

"Suppose you don't have to mop the floors so often."

"True, but the restroom sometimes needs attention. You wouldn't believe where they get that stuff. Might put a condom machine in there."

"Our vending company has them if you're serious," Judy half joked.

"Anyway, been thinking I need a holiday, so perhaps you should tell Myron I'm ready to have the place refurbished. Make it more suitable for my new customers. Guessing I'll be able to afford the higher rent."

"I'll call him, and I'd better call Art too, about next door."

After speaking with her husband and father-in-law, Judy said, "They're both on their way. Art said the owner has left him a few messages, but he hadn't returned the calls because he thought it was about something else."

"About my drunks pissing outside the souvenir shop."

"Yeah, apparently it happens a lot."

"They don't know they need to go, and they go outside, and the cool sea breeze hits them. Not as bad since Billy passed."

Billy, William Johnston, Frank Farrington's former business partner and onetime lover of Susie, Jenny, and Frank's ex-wife, Myriam, had passed away a year earlier. Given his lifestyle being diagnosed with AIDS having been HIV positive and not seeking treatment, surprised nobody, nor did his rapid demise.

'Suicide by felatio.' Dancer had called it.

Her thoughts drifted to the last time she'd seen Billy.

Judy leaned over Billy's bed and hugged him hello.

"Thank you for coming, Judy," he said.

"Nonsense. Always happy to spend time with my friend."

In hindsight, Judy could see Billy knew it was the last time he'd see her, but she didn't pick up on it.

"Been thinking about my mother," Billy said. "Don't know if she's dead or alive."

"I can try to find out for you."

"Too late now, and it doesn't matter, anyway. Been remembering my childhood. Spent my early years in a playpen, in my room with the door closed, while she worked."

"I'm sorry, Billy."

"As I grew up, the only thing that changed was the playpen was removed. Been trying to remember the last time she hugged me. Don't think she ever did."

"Oh, Billy." Judy leaned across the bed and hugged him again.

"Most of my meals were sandwiches. Don't think she ever cooked me a meal. The only thing she ever thought about was making money, but I think it was the sex more than the money. Guess it's in the genes."

He became silent, then indicated he'd like some water. Judy held the glass to his lips while he sipped a little.

"And look where that's gotten me."

There was a sadness about him, which should have given her a clue she was listening to his deathbed confession.

"Not her fault. She didn't want me and didn't know what to do with me. I sometimes wonder what happened to her growing up to make her like she was. She never told me, and I never asked."

"My guess would be she was abused from an early age," Judy speculated.

"I think so. Not her fault."

Judy squeezed his hand while he sightlessly stared at a memory.

"When I left for college, she said 'Goodbye Billy.' There was a finality to her words I only half registered at the time. As if she knew she'd never see me again. She never did."

Judy said, "I didn't realize..."

"Frank's family adopted me. Instead of going home at the end of semesters, I would go with Frank."

He grew silent, and Judy gave him some more water. She dampened a cloth, and pretended to clean his face, and then used it to wipe away his tears.

“The Farrington family was the only family I ever knew. I loved them all, especially Susie. Love of my life, Susie. She came to see me a few weeks ago. I couldn’t look at her. Ashamed of what I’ve become. No one to blame but myself.”

“You didn’t have a good start to life.”

“True, but Frank fixed that. Even when he died, he kept looking after me. He gave me you. I can see that now.”

Judy smiled; she knew Billy was right.

“I want to thank you, Judy Vernon, for looking out for me. Without you paying for this place, I would have died in the park alone.”

“I don’t think that’s true.”

“It is. I never had the opportunity to thank Frank for all he did for me. I guess I did, but I never thanked him. I’ve finally acquired the ability to learn from my mistakes. The point is, thank you for all you’ve done for me.”

“I haven’t done much...”

“You have. You’ve done more than you know.”

Billy yawned. He was struggling to keep his eyes open.

“I’ll let you get some rest now. Goodbye Billy.”

“Goodbye, Judy Vernon.”

After she finished her visit, Judy stopped at the reception to pay another month’s fees. She needn’t have bothered. Billy didn’t need the room for one more night.

Dancer

Judy took a sip of her wine and asked, "Have you lived here for a long time, Dancer?"

"Born and bred. My family's worked on these docks for generations, back when they were working docks. When I was fifteen, I left school and joined my father and grandfather, who worked there back then. Hard men, both of them. No nonsense. Didn't see the point in wasting words when a back hander got the message across."

He picked up a glass and began polishing it. The full-sized beer glass, tiny in his massive hands.

"When I was twenty, I left the docks and took up professional boxing. I did all right. One time I was number four in the world, but not really a contender for the title. Never got a shot. I hit hard, but my hands were slow, and didn't hit often enough. Could take a punch too. I was a hard man, but I couldn't move fast enough to evade them, so I took too many."

"You don't seem bitter about not getting a shot at the title," Judy observed.

"Never won a points decision. If I won, it was a knockout, or I lost on points. Got out of the game when I was thirty. I wasn't going any further. Had no illusions about a title shot. Got out before I took one too many to the head. Seen it happen many times. Guys keep at it when they should've gotten out and end up punchy. Didn't want that."

Dancer placed the glass he'd been polishing on the bar counter with the others, picked up another from the basket beside the dishwasher and began polishing it.

"If I got a shot, who knows? One punch is all it takes. I wasn't good enough. That's the truth of it. That's why I love the nickname, Dancer. I couldn't dance in the ring. If I could, I might've been good enough."

"You said a loan shark gave you that name?" Judy recalled.

"Went to work for the local Shylock, Mikey, as a collector. He was small time, but thought he was better than he was. He'd loan money to working people down on their luck and make them pay interest every week. Never wanted them to pay him back. If they did, he couldn't milk them. They were his cash cows, one drop at a time. He'd tell them I'd be around to collect and if they didn't pay, I'd dance on their head. Took to calling me, 'The Dancer.' It stuck, and I liked it, because I couldn't.

"Never danced on anyone's head. Didn't have to. Everyone knew me, and everyone knew I was a hard man. Hardest man on the docks, some said. Maybe I was, I don't know, but I wasn't mean. Plenty of mean guys around back then."

"How'd you come to own this place?" she asked.

"Mikey would buy gambling debts from the local bookmakers. They used to work out of here. Twenty or thirty cents on the dollar was all he paid. They'd given up on collecting, but Mikey collected. Well, I collected for him. Bit off more than he could chew. A big gambling debt from a wise guy, who was a degenerate gambler. Twenty K it was, and out of Mikey's league, but he thought he was a player.

"The wise guy figured it was easier and more cost effective to off Mikey and that's what he did. Right in front of me. One bullet to the chest. The wise guy looked at me, and I nodded. He knew who I was, and I knew who he was. I'd never snitch. People were different then. Trusted each other, not like these days."

"Honor among thieves," Judy suggested.

“Used to be. He turned and walked away with a smile on his face, as if it was no big deal. I guess it wasn’t. I took Mikey’s account book and told the police I found him like that. My guess is they knew what happened but didn’t care enough to do any more than write it off as a couple of gangsters falling out.

“I called to see everyone on Mikey’s list and gave them a chance to clear the slate for forty percent of their original debt. They were grateful, paid with a smile. I used the money to buy the license for this place. Been here ever since.”

Judy sipped some more wine and glanced around the bar. She didn’t recognize any of the regulars she’d encountered previously. “Is there a Mrs. Dancer?”

“There’s been a couple, but they didn’t take. Doesn’t matter, I’m happy enough with my lot. I like this place, and being my own boss. Never bought a house, I didn’t see the point. I rent a place from your father-in-law. Art’s always done the right thing by me. Young Myron too. Don’t suppose he’s so young anymore, but he’s definitely inherited his father’s character. Good people, you all are. Seems to me you fit into that family well, if you don’t mind me saying.”

“Not at all. I do.”

“As for company, one perk of having a bar is that there’s no shortage of strays looking for a bit of rough at the end of the night. I do all right.”

A man entering the bar distracted Dancer. “Hello. The Professor will keep you entertained for a while,” he said, as he topped up her glass. “He reminds me of Billy sitting here for hours talking nonsense to nobody. I let him sit at the bar for a while because he entertains me with his ramblings. Eventually he’ll wander off to a table in the corner, still muttering away to himself. Definitely losing it.”

Judy watched the man shuffle into the bar. His appearance was disheveled, and his suit had seen better days, many of them.

“Hello Professor,” Dancer said. “How much have you got?”

The Professor handed Dancer his money, which Dancer counted and wrote the total on a slip of paper, before ringing it up on his cash register.

Dancer said to Judy, “He’ll spend it all.”

The Professor sat, opened his old scratched brown leather messenger style bag and extracted a glass shaped like a naked woman, which he placed on the counter.

Dancer filled it with beer and gave him a shot, which he downed immediately. He took a sip of beer and gazed at his shot glass longingly.

Looking straight ahead, staring at nothing. The Professor began talking. “Kids ask the best questions. Simple to ask, but seldom simple to answer. I regarded the kid in front of me. ‘Interesting question’ I thought... It wasn’t, of course, it was a simple question and not so interesting. A child’s question. ‘Why are you here?’

“A question which could be answered in many ways, depending on the context applied to the answer. Equally, it could be avoided. It could open a plethora of philosophical questions from many perspectives such as free-will versus determinism... I’m here because I got off the bus... I’m here because I chose to be here... Perhaps I’m not here, perhaps I’m a brain in a vat and only think I’m here.”

The professor picked up his glass and studied it. He drank some beer, returned his glass to the bar, and continued. “Perhaps I’m here because I made certain choices in my life

and those choices culminated in my being here. I chose to quit my job when I was fifteen and return to high school so I could graduate. If I hadn't, I wouldn't be here.

"Having graduated, I decided to go to college and studied to become a teacher because I believed it would be an easy, well-paid job. I was wrong, of course, on both accounts. If I'd studied law, or accounting or science, I wouldn't be here.

"Maybe I'm here because I married a woman after I graduated, but she divorced me a few years later and ran off with my brother. If I hadn't married her, she wouldn't have divorced me. Maybe she wouldn't have met my brother. Maybe I wouldn't have been disillusioned with life and gone off to third world countries to teach English. If not, I wouldn't have experience teaching Asian children English and then it's unlikely that I'd be here.

"If I'd not gotten myself into trouble with that young girl in Saigon, I wouldn't have been forced on pain of a severe beating or worse to give all my money to her family, and I wouldn't have had to leave Vietnam in fear of what might happen to me. I wouldn't have come back to America unscathed but unemployable... Then I most certainly wouldn't be here... I'd be there."

He stopped talking, silently staring at his beer, perhaps reflecting on his life choices. He moistened his lips, drank a little more beer, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and resumed.

"If my mother hadn't gotten drunk that night over fifty years ago, and if my mother had not opened her legs to my father, who dutifully and unintentionally knocked her up. If my mother had gotten the abortion that my father wanted her to, I wouldn't be here... Perhaps it's as simple as religion. If my mother hadn't been a Catholic, I might not be here. But my mother did get drunk, she did open her legs, my father did knock her up and my mother is a Catholic... So here I am. Why am I here? I'm here, young man, to teach you English."

The Professor finished his beer. Dancer poured him another and a shot. He downed his shot, and stared longingly at his shot glass again, before sipping his beer. Judy wondered if he'd continue, but he didn't.

Dancer said, "Professor, tell us about your glass," and to Judy, "you'll love this."

"Souls. Cups for drinking souls. Our bodies are cups for drinking souls. The Gods drink our souls. When they deposit us here, we're an essence in a small cup. As we add to that essence, with experience, the cup grows. The essence is diluted with experience and increases. Like adding water to cordial. The problem is, from the Gods' perspective, the essence is tasteless. Mostly, they just leave us here to acquire taste.

"Our emotions give our essence flavor. Good experiences add sugar, bad experiences add salt. The nature of those experiences adds seasoning, various herbs and spices, depending on the experience. The more experiences we have, the more flavor we acquire. Some Gods prefer sweet and look for vessels filled with love. Some prefer salty and look for vessels filled with fear and hate. Others prefer spicey and want the thieves, murderers, rapists, sluts, and whores. So spicey some of them. The smart ones choose those whose taste is balanced, a bit of everything with nothing dominant."

"Which flavor are you, Professor?" Dancer asked.

"Me? I'm a strange taste, but that's okay. Some Gods like souls, or essence, as they call it, that's strange, weird, or unusual. When they're thirsty, the Gods choose a vessel and

drink the essence. That's what they call us 'essence', and the earth they call 'The Blue Essence Bar'. They drink the essence and discard the vessel, which, without essence, is useless. They discard our empty bodies like smashing glasses after a toast.

"Of course, it's not really a bar, the earth, it's a distillery. An essence distillery to sustain the Gods. Sometimes the Gods are very thirsty, some like to binge drink. Now and again, they stir things up in the distillery, creating experience to add flavor if they think we're becoming too bland.

"Weird, that's me," he concluded. He stood, took his beer and wandered off to the corner of the bar singing 'I'm a freak, I'm a weirdo....'

"Well," Judy said. "He certainly is different."

"He'll sit there now talking to nobody until his money runs out and then wander off. When he leaves, he always says, 'Home, James.' I don't know if that's his name, or where his home is, but he's not homeless, too clean."

The door opened and Judy glanced up to see a young man, probably in his late twenties, with stunning blue eyes. The kind of eyes that one notices at first glance, and blond curly hair. *He's pretty.*

He sat near Judy at the bar; and smiled at her. *Beautiful smile.* He introduced himself as Jason.

Dancer muttered, "Fagified."

Jason scrutinized Dancer and smiled. "Hello handsome," he said. "You look like a big, powerful man."

"Sorry sweetheart," Dancer replied. "You're not my type."

"That's a pity, because you're exactly my type. What is your type? Umm..."

"Dancer," he said, looking at Judy. "She's my type."

Dancer's eyes fixed on Judy. He had a pained expression, as if he'd realised what he'd said, and was mortified. He flushed and seemed to struggle to think of what to say.

Jason apparently read the situation and came to Dancer's rescue. "Well, of course she is. She's everybody's type. Damn, even I'd go there."

Judy smiled, and Dancer laughed. At that moment, Judy felt Dancer and Jason become friends. *A friendship can be born from the connection of a single shared moment. Could be a feature in that.*

Judy, trying to diffuse Dancer's embarrassment, said, "I think Jason might be right. Everybody seems to stare at my ass."

"And so they should," Jason said.

Dancer asked Jason, "What can I get you, sweetheart?"

"Breakfast in bed!"

"I'm guessing that cheeky mouth of yours gets you into some trouble."

"Yeah, it does. My mouth also gets me out of trouble. You choose a drink for me."

Dancer shook his head and smiled. "I'm sure you'd be a *cocktail* sort of guy."

To Judy, Jason said, "He is, you know. My type."

“Really?” Judy asked.

“Yeah, I like straight guys. Can’t stand fags like me.”

“Straight guys?”

“Not all straight guys are straight, but they can be trouble sometimes. I had a boyfriend for a long time who was straight. The problem was, he couldn’t accept himself. Sometimes he was gentle and tender with me, other times he’d go into a rage because I made him gay. He’d beat me, but then he’d be sorry and cry. I’d forgive him, because I loved him.

“I was in the ER and got talking to a woman who was exactly in my situation. She loved a man who’d fly into rages about something and beat the shit out of her. It got me thinking, trips to the ER. Cops interviewing me. I used to tell them it was a random gay bashing.

“I heard a cop and a nurse talking about a victim of spousal abuse who’d died from one beating too many, and I thought ‘he’s gonna kill me one day.’ After I got fixed up, I went home, packed my stuff while he was at work and never went back again. If only he could have accepted his nature.”

Dancer brought over his drink. “There you go, a Shirley Temple for Shirley Temple.”

“Perfect,” Jason said. “You know your stuff, Dancer. I’m impressed.”

“Glad to hear it,” Dancer said as he topped up Judy’s wine.

Jason continued talking to Judy. “Since then, I mostly date married men. Lots of married men are gay, not the obvious faggy ones. I like the straight ones.”

“How do you know which straight guys are interested?”

“I can usually pick them. Sometimes, I get it wrong and get smacked around for my trouble.”

“And you thought Dancer would be...?”

“Not for a minute! But, for all the hard man exterior, there’s a kindness in his eyes, so I knew he’d be good-natured. My first time here and I wanted to break the ice. They usually go to gay bars, so that’s a clue. I pick them up and they’ll buy me drinks, maybe take me to dinner, and then we’ll get a hotel room for a few hours. When they’re done, they go home to their wives. A lot less complicated that way. Sometimes, they’ll be from out of town, so I’ll spend the night in their hotel room. I’m a Barista working the breakfast shift, so I’m always up early, anyway.

“This place is getting known as a bit of a gay bar, and there’s a hotel, The Seaman’s Lodge or something, just around the corner, so I thought I’d try it out.”

“You see, fagified,” Dancer said to Judy. “You guys will need to change the spelling of your hotel name by the sounds of things.”

“Thought I’d come in early and get a feel for the place.”

A man entered and sat at the end of the bar, ordering a beer. He glanced around, his eyes settling on Jason for a moment.

“He’s checking you out,” Judy said.

“One way to find out,” Jason said. “Dancer, maybe mention to him I drink Shirley Temples and see what happens.” To Judy, he said, “It’s important to be on good terms with the barman.”

Dancer delivered another Shirley Temple to Jason. “From the gentleman at the end of the bar. I told him the table in the back corner over there might be more discreet, if he preferred.”

Jason watched the man as he moved to the table Dancer had indicated. “Looks like I’m in tonight,” he said. “Well, more accurately, he’s the one who’ll be in...” He finished his first drink and picked up his second to join his new friend in the corner.

“Fagified,” Dancer said.

The Shipyard

Judy's face lit up when Myron arrived. "Hello, Dancer."

"Hello, young Myron," Dancer replied, as he reached for the bottle to make him a whisky sour.

Judy stood to hug and kiss him hello.

"Papa will be here soon," he said, and to Judy. "He needed to collect some keys on the way. He has some news."

"So does Dancer."

"I think it's time to accept your offer to refurbish," Dancer said, indicating Jason and his friend in the corner. "It's becoming fagified. The whole area is."

"Papa says the council is transforming this area into something more upscale," Myron explained.

"Yeah, it's becoming fagified."

Judy clarified, "Gentrified by men of a homosexual persuasion."

The Professor came to the bar for another round.

"Not totally," Myron observed.

"Not yet," said Dancer. "But I need a holiday."

Art arrived and greeted Dancer, who handed him a whiskey sour as soon as he walked in.

"I called Joe," Art said. "He didn't want to complain about your drunks."

"Good to hear," Dancer said.

"He wants to sell the building, because he doesn't know what to do with it." Art sipped his whisky. "I swung by his office to sound him out and collected the keys. I told him I wasn't sure what to do with it, either. An empty shop and mostly empty offices wasn't appealing. I think he'll be happy to recoup what he paid for it, which would make it a good deal for us. Whatever we decide needs to be quick because if he does some digging, he'll learn that the council is pushing to transform the area and he'll want more for it."

"Yeah, becoming fagified and those guys have money."

Two more customers, thirty-something men holding hands, entered.

"Right on cue," Judy said.

Dancer shrugged. "I don't have a prejudice against anyone. Take people as I find 'em. I've lived around here all my life. It's all I know, and it's changing. I don't like things changing." He went to attend to the customers.

Art continued, "The building shares a wall with The Shipyard," He pointed to the wall behind the bar area. "It backs onto the wall of The Old Seamen's Lodge. It's narrow, but it's a long space. The corner building is occupied, so I doubt it would be for sale at a reasonable price. Let's go look around."

They went into the souvenir shop first. It was dirty, full of empty shelves, off-white, with the powder coating chipped in places. Abandoned stray souvenirs littered the floor. A

reasonable-sized space. Myron was pacing out the dimensions, making notes in a small notebook and murmuring to himself. Art and Judy exchanged a look.

Leaving the empty shop, they entered an unlocked doorway to a passage between the shop and the corner building. As they were about to head up the stairs to the offices, Myron stopped, paced out the passageway and smiled as he added notes.

Art said, "He's thought of something."

"Or realized something," Judy suggested.

They inspected the offices, entering the unoccupied ones. Myron continued pacing and taking notes. Art inspected the structure of the building. Judy felt like a passenger.

Judy smiled; she recalled nearly three years earlier, when she'd felt like a passenger.

Judy, Myron, and Burt Rogers entered the abandoned convenience store at the front of their recently acquired warehouse complex.

Judy screwed up her nose at the musty smell of a thick layer of dust and stale air. The windows were nearly black with accumulated dirt and fly specks. She didn't want to touch anything, but the men seemed oblivious to the condition of the premises.

"Bigger than the other Automats and Laundromats," Burt observed.

"Yes," Myron agreed. "We should put the laundry at the far end there. This area inside the door can be for the tables and chairs. A kitchenette along that wall opposite the door with a microwave and small toaster oven for the taxi drivers. An urn for free hot water, and a sink.

"I think the orange juice and coffee machines can be housed there," Myron indicated a space beside the area for the kitchenette. "The snack and soda vending machines can go along the back wall there. In this front area here, we'll have two rows of vending machines, like a shopping aisle. We'll stock them with supermarket type convenience items. Since this shop closed, there hasn't been a convenience store in this part of the city, too industrial. This is an experiment. If it's viable here, it'll be viable elsewhere. We've already registered the name *Conveniencemat*."

Burt, who'd taken notes, said, "I'll keep half an eye out for suitable properties."

Judy felt like a passenger, seeing the space for what it was, while Myron and Burt were seeing what it could be.

They now operate three *Conveniencemats* in the city.

In an office on the third floor, Myron sat at a board table, Judy and Art joined him.

"Joe said there's a lot of abandoned furniture and the shop fittings downstairs we'll need to dispose of."

"We can use the furniture to outfit the new training division, and we can use the shelving in the *Conveniencemats*, after it's been cleaned up and re-sprayed. What we don't use, we'll store until we need it. Most is in serviceable condition."

Art said, "No point in throwing usable furniture out."

"Papa, do we have any office space available?" Myron asked.

“We have a little in a couple or three buildings.”

“Burt may have some in one or two of our managed buildings. I think we can offer the remaining tenants here an attractive deal to move, better than having to buy them out of their lease.”

“Yes,” Art agreed. “What’ve you got in mind?”

“Restaurant on the ground which can be connected to both The Shipyard and The Old Seaman’s Lodge. Twelve upscale rooms on the upper floors, four rooms per floor. Each floor connected to Seamans for access to the fire escapes, which will ensure we’re compliant.”

“What I was thinking,” Art said. “Although, I’m not sure if Dancer could run a restaurant.”

“Won’t have to. Judy and I will rent the space, and have Darnell and Rebekah run it, using Dancer’s liquor license.”

Judy said, “Darnell needs somewhere to expand his talents. He’s wasted at Frank’s. It would give Darnell an opportunity to be creative without the limitations of a themed restaurant.”

“Yes. Rebekah would run Frank’s, and Darnell will run the new place. Darnell can oversee the menu for both, and Rebekah can take care of the business side, with Dancer looking after the bar. By removing the wall, we’d only need to have one bar for the restaurant and The Shipyard,” Myron explained.

“We should call it Dancer’s Bistro,” Judy suggested. “Take advantage of Dancer being a legend of sorts around here, plus it fits with the new character of the area.”

“An appropriate name,” Myron agreed. “We’ll need to find someone to oversee the front of house.”

“Ali,” Judy proposed. “She was a hostess before she married, and it will have a predominantly gay clientele...”

“Perfect,” Myron agreed. “I’ll have Graeme Otford find her a course or two which will help her transition from hostess to restaurant manager. It’ll be an opportunity for us to see what Graeme can do as well.”

Art said nothing. He appeared to enjoy watching Myron and Judy work together.

Myron said, “We’ll fund it and give Dancer, Alison, Darnell and Rebekah ten percent each. Later, Darnell and Rebekah will get another ten percent, leaving us with sixty percent. I still think it’s important to give them a goal to work towards. Let them know they’ve earned what they have.”

“Thank you for Ali, Myron,” Judy said.

“She needs something positive to focus her energy on. Currently, all her energy is focused on one thing.”

This is how the family did business. Took advantage of the opportunity to acquire the building at a reasonable price and put it to use by looking for synergy with their existing interests.

At no time during the discussion had they considered profits or return on investment or costs associated with refurbishment. They were not looking for short-term gains. Instead, they focused on the opportunities they would create for people.

“Irving tells me The Shipyard’s new customer base is generating business for The Old Seaman’s Lodge, and they often ask for recommendations for local restaurants.”

Art arranged to meet Joe the next day to formalize the deal by exchanging contracts, reluctantly agreeing to Joe’s asking price. Myron arranged with Simon Sharpe to have a contract drawn up for the next day. Art called his financiers to request a check for the deposit to be prepared. He had a revolving line of credit secured by the properties he owned.

Myron called Burt Rogers to arrange a meeting on site the next day. They had established the family businesses to move quickly when they needed to. The experience of generations.

They returned to The Shipyard, which was busy. “Well, Dancer, being fagified is good for business,” Judy observed.

“Yeah. They spend well.”

“I can see why you want to refurbish,” Myron said.

“It’s more a case of having to. They’re chasing my regulars away, not literally, but with the council gentrifying the area, it’s happening. If I don’t refurbish, someone will open a bar for them, and I’ll be left with no business. Even I have to move with the times.”

Myron explained, “We’ll buy next door and turn it into a restaurant. Knock a hole in this wall here and link the bar and the restaurant. Darnell will run the kitchen, Alison will run the restaurant, and you’ll have the bar. We’ll give you each a ten percent share and you’ll still have The Shipyard to yourself.

“Put in a system to split the restaurant and bar liquor sales. Also, we can open the restaurant at the back into The Old Seaman’s Lodge, to give you some more trade. We’re going to convert the offices to upmarket hotel rooms. Judy wants to name the restaurant Dancer’s Bistro. What do you think?”

“My name on the restaurant.” Dancer put his hands on his hips, pumped his chest out, and nodded. “I’m quite chuffed about that, to be honest. Yeah, we’ll work out the details later. Whatever you think, Myron, I know you guys will be straight with me. Always have been. When’re you thinking of doing it? I need to book a holiday. If I’m here while it’s happening, it’ll drive me crazy. I like things as they are, but it’s time to change.”

Art explained, “It’s not a done deal yet. I’ll meet with Joe tomorrow and hopefully we’ll have an agreement signed then. Once that’s done, we’ll have to wait for the process of ownership to be transferred, which has a well-defined timeline. Burt will put together a project plan and then we’ll be able to give you exact timing, or near estimates.”

“Understood,” confirmed Dancer. “I’m out of my depth with this, so tell me what you need. Thank you, Art. I appreciate what you guys are doing for me.”

“Nonsense,” Art said. “Everybody wins.”

“Dancer’s Bistro! I really like that.”

“You know Dancer,” Judy began, looking at Jason, who was on his way back from the restroom. “We’ll need to put a coffee machine in the new bar. It’s what they do these days.”

Dancer grinned. “I know just the Barista to run it. Shirley Temple will be perfect for the refurbished bar. I’ll grab his number.”

“He’ll think it’s Christmas,” Judy suggested. “You gonna give him breakfast in bed?”

Dancer shook his head as he went to obtain Jason's number. "Fagified," he said.

Opportunities

George watched Judy arrive and stop opposite Frank's Diner. She stared at the building, then crossed to where he was standing.

She lightly rested her hand on his arm as they talked. "Good morning, George."

Her touch generated feelings of closeness and intimacy he'd not experienced with anyone else, a special connection. He knew nothing would ever come of it, but his heart was racing, his breath shallow and his penis hard, as she headed into the diner.

Already feeling a stirring from George, Judy's pulse raced, and her heartbeat echoed in her ear when Ali rose to greet her with a hug and a kiss. The stirring between her legs became a throbbing. *I'm an arousal slut. Is there such a thing? Could be a feature in that.*

Judy shook her head and focused on what Ali was saying. "I saw you teasing poor George," she said. "I think you get off giving him something to masturbate over."

"I don't know what you're talking about, and don't know what's wrong with me, but I'm sure it's your fault."

"I slept with two men."

"Isn't that Susie's thing?" Judy said, buying time to process Ali's revelation.

"Not together."

"I think I'm happy about that," Judy said.

"Why?"

"That's my question. Why?"

"Wanted to know if I could be bisexual."

What's going on with her now? "For me, it doesn't work like that. What was that line in that stupid movie? I don't decide if I feel like sausage or taco. If I'm attracted to someone, their gender is irrelevant. I'm attracted to people, not genders."

"Better than sleeping with guys to see if I liked it. It was okay, but they didn't have what I wanted. I decided I'm not bisexual, despite all those years with John. Truth is, there's only one man I'm attracted to that way."

Judy winked. "My husband."

"That's a good thing, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes."

"Then do something about it," Ali said.

"The way he's been with you, I have a feeling he'll do something about it."

"And you're waiting for him."

"Yes, I think that's best."

"Are you sure?"

"He'll be working out how it'll happen. Connecting the dots," Judy suggested.

Ali glanced out the window, then leaned into her. "Kiss me."

Their lips connected, then parted as tongues found each other. Ali's hand slid between Judy's legs. "My God, you're super wet."

"I blame you."

They kissed again. The position of the booth in the back corner, and with the table hiding their legs from view, ensured it wasn't possible for anyone to see what was happening beyond the kiss, unless they were standing beside the booth.

"My two favorite ladies," Myron said.

Judy broke the kiss and snapped her head up, startled to see Myron standing beside the booth. *Fuck!* "Myron, I umm..."

Myron smiled. *Seems okay with it.* She extracted Ali's hand from between her legs and glanced at Ali, who winked. *She knew he'd arrived.*

Ali stood to let Myron in. She hugged and kissed him longer than usual and pushed herself against the bulge in his trousers when she kissed him. *She's making her intention clear.*

Myron slid into the booth and kissed Judy. He squeezed her hand. *He's okay with it.*

Ali motioned him to move over a little more and sat beside him, instead of sitting opposite them as she normally would.

"You can be between us," she said.

God! She's not being subtle.

Judy, flustered, more aroused, and fidgety, struggled to compose herself and find suitable words. *Can't believe how horny I am.*

"Alison, we need to get your pheromones under control," Myron suggested. "They're driving us both crazy."

"I don't know why they're out of control," Ali said.

"Sex," Myron said. "From what I gather, the more sex we have, the more pheromones we produce. It would explain why when we're getting a lot of sex, it's easy to find partners, and when we're not, we can't find anyone who's interested no matter how hard we try."

"That's my experience," Judy agreed.

"I read somewhere," he continued. "Gay pheromones have a distinct scent from heterosexual pheromones, so I don't understand why you're affecting me."

"Could explain Gaydar," Ali suggested.

"My first roommate at college, Damian, was incredible," Myron said. "It didn't matter where we were, a bar, restaurant or library women would give him their number. Walk up and hand him a slip of paper. Sometimes he'd put it in his left pocket and sometimes his right. I asked him about it."

"What is with you, Damian?" Myron asked.

"Honestly, I don't know. Women are always giving me their number."

"I noticed. Curious why?"

Damian shrugged. "No idea. I'm not rich, I'm not particularly good looking, and I don't have an enormous cock. I'm average. I stopped trying to figure it out a long time ago. Don't know how long it will last, so I'll enjoy making hay while the sun shines."

"Do you call them?"

He tapped his right pocket. "These I call," and then his left. "These I toss."

"You date them all?"

"No," Damian explained. "I don't date any of them. We meet up, fuck, and that's it." He shrugged again. "Don't want to get involved, too complicated."

"He dropped out in his second year. Went to Canada to be a ski instructor. Guess he naturally produced excess pheromones."

"He's not the only one," Judy suggested.

Myron fidgeted. *Ali's pheromones are making him uncomfortable.*

"Point is, Alison, we need to get your pheromones under control, because it's difficult to separate their chemical effect from genuine feelings. It's important to know what we're dealing with before we act. If we know what's going on here, we can make informed choices. If something happens for the wrong reasons, it could give us problems in the future."

"I understand, Myron," Ali said, her eyes focused on the tent between his legs. "But how we gonna do that?"

"Judy and I have a plan," Myron said.

Judy frowned. *We do?*

Ali looked at Judy. "I have an idea."

Myron continued, "You need to focus your energy. We're opening a new restaurant, beside The Shipyard, and are wondering if you could help us out as restaurant manager? We'll give you ten percent of Dancer's Bistro."

Oh, that plan. Judy glanced at Ali, who appeared stunned.

"Are you serious?" Ali asked. "I'd love to, and wow, ten percent! But I don't know how..."

"You used to be a hostess," Judy said.

"That's different."

"It'll be a transition. Our training manager, Graeme Otford, has lined up some courses for you, mostly online, so you can start anytime. My accounts people will walk you through the accounting side, and you can get advice from Rebekah whenever you need," Myron explained.

"It's a lot to learn in a short time. When will you, um, we open?"

"You have a little time. The Shipyard needs to be refurbished, and Dancers fitted out, but you're going to be busy. Darnell will run the kitchen, and Dancer the bar. They'll be partners the same as you."

"I'll call Graeme later," said Ali. "What's the next step?"

"I'll organize a meeting when the plans are ready," Myron said.

“Okay. I’ll get going. I want to call Graeme and get everything set up. Better begin right away.”

Ali stood to leave, and Myron and Judy both stood to hug her goodbye.

“Unless you two want to make me a better offer,” Ali suggested.

“Behave yourself,” Judy responded.

Myron didn’t take much convincing to clear his afternoon schedule.

As soon as they arrived home, Judy undressed to her bra and panties, and enjoyed his admiring gaze as he carefully undressed, too.

“I don’t know what’s happening to me, Myron,” she said. “I’m aroused all the time.”

“I’ve noticed,” he said, “and I’m not complaining.”

“No, you’re obviously enjoying it,” she said, looking at him nearly naked in front of her. “I can’t control it.”

“Something to do with sitting between your husband and your girlfriend, I’d guess.” Judy flushed, but Myron wasn’t making anything of it. “Alison’s new lifestyle is generating an excess of pheromones.”

“It’s more than that,” Judy said. “She’s fallen in love with you, too.”

“If you’d suggested she join us, I might have agreed, but it’s better you didn’t. We need to separate chemicals from emotion and see what’s left.”

“Take me to bed,” she said.

When Ali arrived home, she turned on her computer, then called Graeme Otford. Her head was spinning.

“Hello Graeme, this is Alison Farrington.”

“I’ve been expecting your call. Check your email. I sent you a link. Open it, and I’ll walk you through how to get started. User ID and password are in the email.”

Ali clicked on the link. “Okay,” she said. “The page is open.”

Graeme explained, “You’re registered, log in. You’ll see the details there. You can work at your own pace and call me if you have any difficulties, or if there’s anything you don’t understand.”

They rang off.

Ali reviewed the list of courses Graeme had enrolled her in. *So much to do. I’ll start with the first one and work my way down the list.*

Two hours later, Ali glanced at the time. *Coffee and a sandwich. I’m enjoying this.*

She finished her lunch, picked up her phone, and called Monica.

“Hello gorgeous.”

“Hi Mon. Do you have plans after work tonight?”

“Nothing I can’t postpone.”

“Maybe you can come over and help me celebrate.”

“What are we celebrating?”

“My new job. Well, it’s more than a job. Judy and Myron are giving me a piece of their new restaurant.”

“That’s good of them. I think you need an interest, other than...”

“So you don’t want to come over and stimulate my interest?”

“I always want to spend time with my girlfriend. We can make this a regular thing if you want.”

“What did you tell me? Worry about today and let the future take care of itself.”

“That’s what I said,” Monica confirmed. “See you tonight.”

Ali returned to her studies.

Plans

Ali kissed Monica goodbye and walked to the window, pulling the curtain open enough to watch her lover walk down the drive. She smiled. *I'm going to miss her when Judy and Myron get their act together.*

She retreated to what had been John's study and turned on her computer. *Another coffee, and I better put in a couple of hours before my meeting.*

Ali would see Judy at the Dancer's Bistro planning meeting later. Knowing she'd have breakfast at home, she'd invited Monica over the previous night. She liked Monica referring to her as her girlfriend. It made her life real, but she'd give Monica up as soon as Judy uttered the magic words.

I should feel guilty, but I don't. Monica knew the score. So busy these days; without her I'd be celibate.

Judy was waiting for Simon Sharpe, who would join her for breakfast. At the ding of the bell on the door, she glanced up as Simon entered.

She stood to greet him with a hug and kiss on the cheek. "Thank you for coming, Simon. I would've been happy to come to your office."

"Much rather meet in yours," Simon grinned, as he sat opposite her.

Suzy Q—wearing a white blouse with red collar, cuffs and tie completed with a short red pleated skirt, long white socks and red shoes. On top of her bright red hair sat a red bow, trimmed with white lace—came to take their order.

Judy ordered her usual scrambled eggs and Simon a single egg omelet.

"She's different," Simon observed, once Suzy Q had taken their orders.

"Quirky, the customers love her."

"So, Judy, what do you need?"

"I want to talk to you about my new book, *Broken People*. A collection of stories about people broken by life and picked themselves up again. Inspirational stories of real people and authentic lives. In my experience, most people want to tell their story, but are concerned about their privacy. How can I assure people they won't be adversely affected by telling their story?"

"I can prepare a confidentiality agreement that legally prevents you from revealing their identity. You must use names and places that have no connection to their real identities and couldn't be traced to them. Using myself as an example, you could change my name to John O'Grady or perhaps Nino Culotta. If there's no connection to the person, there's no risk to privacy," Simon explained.

"Would you prepare the agreement for me?" Judy asked. "And allow me to include your story in my book?"

"Yes," Simon said. "To both."

Judy nodded. "Thank you. I'll need to interview you formally."

Simon, Graeme, and George. That's a start. Perhaps Darnell and Rebekah.

Ali sat in Judy's booth, between Myron and Judy. She rested a hand on each of their thighs. She fought the urge to fidget, forcing herself to remain still. *Perfect*. The bell caused her to look up when the door opened.

Myron said, "Here's Dancer, I'll show him the kitchen and let Rebekah and Darnell know we're ready to start."

Ali felt disappointed, as though something was missing when Myron went to greet Dancer.

Judy snuggled into her while he was gone. "You seemed so content, sitting between us."

"I am, feels like I'm where I belong."

Judy rested her hand on Ali's thigh. "I know it's for your protection, but I'm disappointed you're wearing slacks."

"No," Ali said, raising an eyebrow. "It's for *your* protection."

Myron returned with Dancer, followed by Darnell and Rebekah, who was carrying a tray of coffees and white chocolate, mandarin, and macadamia cookies.

He took his seat beside Ali, who replaced her hand on his thigh.

Myron nodded, his smile directed toward Judy, and then he focused his attention across the table. "You all know what's happening, but to be clear, Judy and I are opening another restaurant. Dancer's Bistro will be attached to The Shipyard down by the docks. Rebekah and Darnell will run the kitchen, Alison will manage the restaurant, and Dancer the bar."

"My... Our thinking is that you can run the kitchen here, Rebekah, and Darnell can run it at Dancer's. Darnell would be responsible for the menu at both restaurants, and you'll be responsible for the business aspects of both."

"That would work," Rebekah said, looking at Darnell for confirmation.

Darnell said, "Many chefs have more than one restaurant these days. Looking forward to the opportunity to create a whole new menu. We have a good team here. Both Sarge and Leon can take on more responsibility. We'll leave Sarge here to support Rebekah because this style of restaurant suits him. Leon will come with me to Dancer's."

Myron continued, "Dancer will run the bar, and as it will essentially be the same premises, his liquor license will cover the bistro as well. The area is being redeveloped by the council and is becoming a gay district, so that'll be the clientele."

"Fagified," said Dancer.

Myron extracted the plans from his briefcase and spread them across the table, smoothing the creases in the unfolded sheet the best he could, and pointed. "The wall between Dancer's Bistro and The Shipyard will be removed and the bar will become oval shaped with access to both sides. We can use the restroom in The Shipyard for both. The existing restroom/kitchenette in the back of the old souvenir shop will be the ideal location for the new kitchen because it already has plumbing. The link to The Old Seaman's Lodge will be through the back of the restaurant beside the kitchen."

Rebekah said, "With the attachment to the hotel, we'll need to do breakfast. We could use the bar counter to present a breakfast buffet. We'll hire a chef with experience in buffet breakfast, someone from a hotel or resort."

“Yes,” agreed Ali. “I think we should open breakfast to the public too, not just hotel guests. I’m sure many would be happy to have a decent, fixed price buffet breakfast on their way to work.”

“Sure,” said Dancer. “The bar won’t be open in the morning. Our license won’t allow it. We can put tablecloths over the bar to protect the surface from being scratched.”

“And it will look better,” said Rebekah.

Looking at Judy, Dancer said, “I’ve talked to Shirley Temple. I like the boy. Great personality.”

Judy gave him an amused smile. “Not that I’ll be making him breakfast in bed,” he said. “He’s agreed to become our Barista, and he prefers to work mornings. He can work the breakfast shift when people want coffee, through to the end of the lunch shift. Do you think we could offer these amazing cookies and some pastries? We can open for morning tea between breakfast and lunch. I think there’s a market for that sort of thing now. It’ll give Shirley Temple something to do in the dead time.”

“Perfect,” agreed Rebekah. “We can offer our Kansas style cheesecake, and Darnell’s triple chocolate cheesecake, both are popular.”

Ali suggested, “We could do afternoon tea. We’ll only need a limited selection of cakes and pastries, because it’s not our main business, just a dead time killer. Perhaps the kitchen guys could offer a small range of toasted sandwiches. I shouldn’t think it would interfere with their prep.”

“Yeah,” agreed Dancer. “Toasted sandwiches make good bar snacks, too.”

Darnell confirmed, “A buffet breakfast. A set menu businessmen’s lunch, something fast because of their limited time, a full À la carte menu at night, and all-day snacks in between. I’ll design some interesting sandwiches. That’ll keep us working all day and utilize our dead time. If it gets too busy, we’ll hire a sandwich chef, but I think our chefs will be able to handle it during prep.”

Leon brought Dancer’s Welsh Rarebit. Dancer lowered his crooked nose and used his hand to waft the aroma. “Smells amazing,” he said.

“Wait until you taste it,” Judy said.

“Fuck!” Dancer exclaimed. “Fucking delicious. I reckon this’d sell as a bar snack, a sort of toasted sandwich.”

“Done,” agreed Darnell.

Myron said, “Simon Sharpe is preparing the paperwork. Rebekah and Darnell together, Dancer, and Alison, you’ll each get ten percent of the new restaurant. Judy and I will retain seventy percent.”

“Sounds good,” said Dancer.

“Never thought we’d have a second restaurant,” Rebekah said. “Thank you, Uncle Myron.”

Darnell shook his head. He appeared lost for words. Ali could understand why. He’d gone from a drug slinger to a prison sissy, to a chef and restaurateur.

Ali gazed at Myron, who squeezed her hand. “I appreciate this Myron, I don’t know...”

“Nonsense,” said Myron. “You’ll be fine. I know this is going to work from watching you guys interact.”

“Agreed,” said Dancer.

Rebekah and Darnell returned to work. Dancer said his goodbyes and left.

Ali remained between Myron and Judy, resting her head on Myron’s shoulder and holding Judy’s hand. She closed her eyes to savor the moment. Ali didn’t realize tears were spilling from her eyes until Judy brushed them away.

“Ali?” Judy asked. “What is it?”

“Happy.”

Myron kissed Ali’s forehead. “Once we’ve got the new restaurant open, I think everything will be settled enough to provide clarity. In the meantime, I need to join the dots to see how everything fits together.”

“Do you think you will?” Judy asked.

“If there’s a way, I’ll find it.” He stood, embraced and kissed first Ali and then Judy, and left for his next meeting.

The women held hands as they watched Myron leave.

“He seems to have everything under control,” Ali said.

“Not yet,” said Judy. “But it sounds like he soon will.”

“Guess we need to be a little patient,” Ali said as she kissed Judy goodbye and headed home to study.

Myron was thoughtful as he sat in the back of the taxi. Of course, he wanted Alison; he had strong feelings for her, and she was attractive. *If it was about sex, it’d be easy.*

However, it wasn’t about sex for Myron. *It’s not about sex for them either, even though they think it is.*

For Myron, it was about merging two families, and he still couldn’t work out how to do it.

Tim Clean

Judy entered The Secret Garden. *I don't come here enough.*

She sat in the gazebo and marveled at the cascade of red, pink and white, and the heavy scent of roses. *This place is intoxicating.* She was trying not to think about Myron or Ali. *Don't understand how I can love two people so deeply without it ripping me in two.* Passionately attracted to both physically, with a strong spiritual connection as well. She could wordlessly communicate with either.

A man said, "Hello Judy."

She looked around but couldn't see anyone.

"Behind you," the brittle voice said.

Am I in an old-fashioned pantomime? Judy turned to see a man sitting on his balcony. A picture of the Eiffel Tower covered the side wall, behind a European café style table and two chairs. *Why didn't I notice it before?* The man's balcony was maybe ten feet from the gazebo, and directly behind it.

"Oh, hello er..." responded Judy. "I'm sorry I don't..."

"Tim Clean. At least that's what everyone calls me. We haven't met, but I work for Myron."

"Hello, Tim Clean."

"I was at your wedding, sort of."

"I'm sorry, I don't recall meeting..."

"I watched from inside my apartment."

"Not from your amazing balcony?" Judy asked.

"My pathetic attempt to replicate a Paris café based on images from the internet. It's the closest I'll ever come to Paris or anywhere else. Too many people."

"Too many people?"

"At your wedding, and certainly in Paris!"

"Oh." Judy frowned.

"I have some conditions. Germaphobia and agoraphobia. I never leave my apartment, and no one ever enters. Well, practically no one. The only person who's been in my apartment is your Myron. He's meticulous in everything; it's what makes us good at what we do, being meticulous. He's always so clean and impeccably dressed, and when he comes in, he wears a mask and gloves and bags his shoes. He's a considerate man, your husband."

"Yes," agreed Judy. "He is."

"The difference between me and Myron is I take being meticulous to the extreme, and he's a balanced person."

Judy asked, "Tim, won't you join me in the gazebo here?"

Tim shook his head. "Thank you, but I can't. The closest I can come to being outside is this balcony."

"I'm curious about how you developed your conditions. If you don't want to talk about it, that's okay. I'm writing a book about people who have been able to build a life for

themselves, despite adversity. I'll email you a signed guarantee of anonymity to protect your privacy."

Tim liked the way Judy said his name. "I'm happy to talk about it. Does one good to talk about stuff."

"So, they say," Judy said. "I'll switch on my digital recorder. It's covered by my confidentiality agreement."

"I trust Myron, so I can trust you." Tim stared into the past. "It began when I was fourteen..."

Tim had visited Donna in hospital every day for seventeen days and watched her eaten alive by a germ. When he arrived that day, a nurse had stopped him. They wouldn't permit him to visit her, which he took as a bad sign.

"I'm sorry, you can't visit her now. If you'd like to wait, you should be able to see her later."

Now he'd been in the waiting room for hours. He could hear a distant and incessant beeping from medical equipment somewhere. *I feel useless. I wish there was something I could do.*

He stood when Donna's father entered the room. The look on Trevor Tate's face told Tim something was very wrong.

"She's gone, Tim."

"What?" Tim's legs turned to jelly, and he sank into the chair.

"Donna's gone. She passed away."

"Donna's dead?" Tim was shaking. "How?"

"That staph infection. *Staphylococcus aureus*."

"But it was just a scratch she got when we were weeding your garden."

"I know, but it got infected by a germ. The doctor said it became *necrotizing fasciitis*."

"What's that?"

"Flesh-eating bacteria."

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I, son." Trevor collapsed into the chair beside Tim.

"I began worrying about germs. Sealed my room and refused to allow my mother in because she wouldn't wear gloves. She thought I must have been doing drugs or something."

He sighed heavily, then continued, "I wish that's all it was. I started washing my own clothes when my mother wouldn't use disinfectant in the washing machine. The food in the refrigerator wasn't stored hygienically, so I bought a lockbox for the refrigerator.

"Disinfectant became important to me. My mother didn't use it on the dishes, so I locked one of the kitchen cupboards and started preparing my own food with my own utensils.

“I saw germs crawling over everything, like little worms. I began wearing gloves and a mask whenever I left my room, even at home. Within two years of Donna’s death, I was a full-blown germophobe. The kids at school used to laugh at me, but I didn’t care.

“I went to university, but only lasted a day. I couldn’t bear sharing a dorm room with another person, so I dropped out and lived at home. Went to the city college, complete with gloves and a mask. Everyone laughed at me and called me ‘Tim Clean’ when they were being kind, or ‘that weird germ guy.’”

“To complete my degree, they assigned me an internship with Brody & Braithwaite, Auditors. The senior partner, Joe Brody, was the first one to see beyond my phobias...”

Tim stared at the pack of ten auditing exercises on the desk in front of him. Joe gave the pack to all interns at the end of their internship. They had one hour to complete all ten exercises. Some of the accounts were correct, and some contained errors. Tim’s task was to review them and either sign off or correct them.

He took his completed pack to Joe’s office as he’d been instructed.

Joe said. “This will only take a minute.”

He handed Joe the pack and waited. If Joe had an issue with Tim wearing gloves and a mask, he gave no indication.

Joe flipped through the exercises, stopping at item nine.

“Take a seat, Tim.”

Tim sat in the chair in front of a solid maple desk.

“This one tells me everything I need to know.”

“Ninth one?” Tim said. “Four minor errors.” He wasn’t concerned, his answers were correct.

Joe smiled. “Minor errors that have no impact on the end result, because they balance each other out. Most people take it as another sign off exercise, because that’s what it appears to be and they’re running out of time. This is why the previous sign off exercises are included, so no one will suspect anything.”

“Four errors,” Tim repeated.

“Yes.” Joe stood, walked to his filing cabinet, and removed a document from the drawer. He passed it to Tim. “Sign this, and we’ll go have lunch and a talk about your future.”

Tim studied the document. It was an agreement not to disclose the solution to item nine. He signed the agreement and passed it back. He saw no reason not to, but he didn’t understand why it was necessary. Tim withdrew fresh gloves from his pocket and replaced the ones he wore.

Tim collected his bag from his desk and met Joe on the first floor. They left the building together, crossed the road, and entered Lily’s American Diner. They were seated, and Joe picked up the menu. He nodded toward the other menu on the table. “Have a look and see what you want.”

“It’s okay,” Tim said. “I have my lunch in my bag.”

Joe frowned. “The point of coming to a restaurant is to eat the food.”

“I understand the concept, but I can’t eat anything I haven’t prepared myself.”

Joe raised an eyebrow, then nodded. “It seems to me your condition is becoming worse.”

“My germaphobia is degenerating into agoraphobia.”

“I can’t imagine how that must be for you. What do you think you’ll do now you’ve completed your internship?”

Tim shrugged. “Not a lot of options. I’ll do online tax returns from home.”

Joe signaled to the waitress. “I’ll have my usual steak,” he said. “My associate has a medical condition which requires a special diet, so he has brought his own food. I’m sure you understand.”

“Yes sir,” she said, as she glanced at Tim with pity.

“Doing tax returns would be a waste of a rare talent,” Joe suggested. “You say item nine has a few minor errors, like it’s nothing, but those errors are extremely difficult to identify. Most interns get nine out of ten correct, which tells me they are employable. Nobody gets item nine correct, but you did. Normally I would have offered you a position, but...”

“My condition makes that impossible. I understand.”

“As auditors, we are often required to spend periods of time at our client’s premises. I don’t think you’d be able to do that.”

“No, I wouldn’t, I only accepted this internship because I need it to graduate.”

The waitress delivered Joe’s meal. “Enjoy, sir.”

“I will,” Joe replied and leaned over his steak to inhale the aroma. “There will be many pleasures you will never have the opportunity to experience, I suspect, Tim.”

Tim removed his lunch box from his bag and opened it. “On the positive side, I know what I eat is clean.”

Joe nodded, cut a piece of steak, and placed it in his mouth. “Perfect. I developed my intern assessment pack sixteen years ago. Since then, every intern who’s passed through my doors has attempted it. I never tell them the result.”

Tim was enjoying his sandwiches, lowering his mask enough to take a bite, and replacing it while he ate. He watched Joe cut another piece of steak and eat some vegetables. His feeling was neutral. If he allowed himself to think the steak looked good, before long, he’d see germs crawling all over it.

“In all these years, you are the second intern who possessed enough skill to solve item nine.” He took a sip of water from the glass on the table. Tim extracted a bottle from his bag and did likewise.

Joe continued, “Myron’s now a forensic accountant, where it’s important to identify what’s not immediately apparent. Much of that work is behind the scenes, back-room stuff, so I think you may be a good match. I’ll put in a call to Myron after lunch, and set up a meeting for you.”

Tim gave Judy a broad smile beneath a clear, full-face mask. “Myron offered me a job, and a life beyond my bedroom at my mother’s house. Myron set me up here where I could

enjoy the garden despite my condition. It was Myron who suggested I set the balcony up so I could get fresh air in a controlled way.

"I never leave. My work and my groceries are delivered. I like it here. I'm happy despite my condition. I've been able to build a life for myself, such as it is. Your husband is a remarkable man. He made my life possible, when I didn't think it'd be possible to have a life."

Judy straightened, beamed, and asked, "What do you do when you need to see a doctor or visit the dentist?"

"I take exceptional care of my teeth, so I've had no reason to need a dentist. An older doctor, a friend of Myron's from his community, who still makes house calls, came once. When he left, I used eight gallons of hospital grade disinfectant. Couldn't imagine how many germs he'd be carrying."

"Do you get lonely?" Judy asked.

"No. I have a girlfriend in England, and a boyfriend in Denmark. Better to have them in other countries, less chance of them being cured and wanting to visit. They're both shut ins too. My best friend, Barry, lives across the road. He usually has lunch with me, must have a late customer today. He's a gay prostitute. Can't even imagine how many germs he's got, but I like him.

"We met because he has lunch in the gazebo, unless he's working. I have lunch on my balcony. A safe distance. I like having a real friend. I have sex with my boyfriend or girlfriend online, live streaming each other. Sometimes I'll have them both at once, but they don't know about each other. Shut-ins need sex too, and this way is clean."

"Okay, so you're bisexual?"

"Yeah. I don't get bored. I have my work which I enjoy the most. I have Barry to talk with. I have cable TV and Netflix. I have my living room set up as a home theater. I have my online partners, and I clean. I always clean. I never go out, and nobody comes in, except Myron, but I clean twice a day, and use hospital grade disinfectant on my balcony."

Judy sniffed. She could smell the disinfectant faintly, but the scent of the roses overpowered it.

Tin continued, "If I get bored, which happens at night sometimes when I can't sleep, I'll go on to *INder* and hook up with someone. You know... to help me sleep."

"*INder*?"

"It's an app for people who want to hook up. Like *Tinder* and *Grinder* for shut-ins. *INder*. Of course, it doesn't have a mobile version. The accepted way is to go into the waiting room with camera on and clothes off. If I like the look of someone waiting, I'll hook up. I guess I'm pansexual."

A man's voice said, "Pansexual my ass CJ, you just jerk-off."

Judy looked up as a man wearing blue jeans and a white T-shirt approached.

"Judy, this is my friend Barry. Barry, this is Judy Vernon."

Barry rolled his eyes at Tim and smiled at Judy. "Pleased to meet you, Judy Vernon."

"I'm happy to meet you too, Barry."

"I'll leave you two to get acquainted," Tim said. "I have a report due, and Myron has organized a courier for this afternoon."

“Sorry, I’m late CJ, had a client.”

“I guessed, Baz. Maybe we’ll chat later.”

“Sure.”

“It’s been nice talking with you, Judy. Don’t be a stranger. You know where I am, always.”

“I do now,” Judy answered. “I’ll come visit you again.”

“Please do.”

Barry Power

“CJ’s my best friend,” Barry said. “We usually talk over lunch. Him there and me here.”

“He seems well adjusted, considering,” Judy suggested.

“I agree. I believe if we’d met in a world where he didn’t have his condition and I had a different job, we could’ve been a couple.”

“Why CJ?”

“Clean and jerk off. That’s about all he does.”

“Oh.”

“For all his talk, he’s gay. We hook up online sometimes. Watching men ejaculate is his thing. Me, I’m not so sure about.”

“Oh, I thought he said...”

“I’m a gay prostitute? That’s my profession. Maybe it’s not me.”

“Oh, I...”

“I don’t look at guys and think he’s cute, or he’s got a nice ass. Don’t look at women that way either. Assume I’m gay, although I never see a guy and think ‘he’s attractive’, so I don’t know.”

Most prostitutes I’ve met are motivated by something else, like Billy funding his drinking, but for Barry, it seems to be a chosen career. “Barry, I’m writing a book about real people’s lives,” Judy said. “I’d like to include your story.”

She extracted a privacy undertaking from her bag and passed it to him. “I can guarantee privacy by changing your name and editing any information that could be traced back to you.”

Barry gave the document a cursory glance. “I’m not sure I...”

“If you don’t want to talk about it, I understand, but I promise no one will be able to trace it back to you.”

He frowned, glanced at Judy, looked at the document again, then nodded. “Every person I care about other than CJ is dead, and he knows my story, so okay.”

Judy hadn’t turned her digital recorder off because Barry had been talking about Tim.

“Years ago, I watched the Jerry Springer show. There was a guy on who maintained that having sex with men for money didn’t mean he’s gay. I started talking to the TV, saying ‘of course you’re fucking gay’, but later it got me thinking. I’m not hetero, and I could see myself with CJ, so I’m probably gay. Perhaps my job has desensitized me?”

“Do you have any experience with women?” Judy asked.

“My experience with women is limited to four unhealthy encounters. I was twelve years old when I touched a woman, well, a girl, for the first time. She kept placing my hand between her legs, and I kept moving it back to rub her mound. I didn’t know where a pussy was...”

He started even younger than me. At least I knew where everything was. Judy smiled, imagining a clumsy, clueless twelve-year-old.

“The girl next door taught me where a pussy was. She would have been eleven or twelve, I guess. She took me under her house, dropped her panties, and got me to touch her pussy, then made me watch her pee.

“A few weeks later. I’d gone to my old elementary school. A teacher was working late in her classroom. I removed my trousers and underwear, which I hid on some pipes under a building. I went to her classroom, half naked, and showed her my hard, thirteen-year-old cock. She stared at me in surprise. I ran off, but stayed under the building and jerked off.

“A few months later, I ran up behind an unattractive, middle-aged woman. She was walking through a park, wearing a short skirt. White, I think? Anyway, I stuck my hand up her skirt, rubbing her pussy through her underwear. She was startled, too shocked to do anything. I ran off into the bushes and jerked off.

“That was my last experience with a woman and a good thing, too. Years later, I read the biography of a serial killer which shook me when I read about how he started. So, I did some research, and saw a pattern. If I’d stayed on that path, I may well have ended up a serial killer, or maybe a serial rapist, or perhaps both.”

“Do you really believe that?” Judy asked.

Barry shrugged. “Yeah, I do. Luckily, I discovered boys. It started when five of us went to a classmate’s house while his parents were at work. We sat around the living room and jerked off, not touching each other or anything like that, just jerking off.

“Next it was a camp with a boy’s club. There was a big lump of a boy, Phil. He wasn’t attractive. I saw him changing. He had a big lump of a cock. I couldn’t get it out of my mind. I was obsessed. That night after lights out, I eased his sleeping bag open, slid his cock out and sucked it. I loved feeling him harden in my mouth. That I could make him react like that made me feel special.

“I started hanging out with Gary Power, who liked to jerk off. At it all the time. He would sit on the sofa, put a cushion over his lap, and jerk off. Believed nobody knew what he was doing. Gary’s parents were divorced, so he’d spend every other weekend with his father. One time, he invited me to spend the weekend with him at his father’s. My parents were okay with it.

“I was fifteen when I met Ron Power. It became a regular thing. Every other weekend, I would go with Gary to his dad’s. We’d do the stuff divorced fathers do with their kids on weekends. Mini-golf, bowling, arcades, movies, videos, and pizza. The spare room only had one bed, so we had to sleep together. We jerked each other off. Sometimes we kissed and sucked each other.

“One Saturday, sometime after I’d turned sixteen, Gary’s Grandfather passed away. His mother came to collect him. Ron said he’d run me home, so I went to pack.”

Barry stared past Judy, who recognized the distant look she’d witnessed many times. *Reliving the past.*

Barry stuffed his clothes into his bag, but Ron didn’t make a move to take him home.

Ron asked, “Do you want to play mini-golf and get a video and pizza for dinner? I’ll run you home tomorrow.”

“Okay,” Barry replied, more than happy with the idea.

After mini golf, they ate pizza in front of the TV and watched videos. Ron often gave the boys half a glass of beer each, so when he gave Barry some beer, he didn't think anything of it. As Barry drank, Ron topped up his glass. If Barry thought about it, it may have seemed unusual, but he didn't.

Ron went to the bathroom and came back wearing his shirt and his undershorts. Barry didn't think anything of that either. He was used to seeing Ron in his undershorts when he made breakfast in the mornings.

Ron said, "I hear you and Gary at night. Tell me about the things you two do."

Barry was a little drunk, otherwise he might have found the question disturbing. "We touch each other's cock. Sometimes we kiss." Barry glanced at Ron's lap. His cock was hanging out.

"Where do you kiss?"

"On the lips, and sometimes on our cocks."

As Barry talked about what he and Gary did together, Ron was getting harder. He'd never seen a man cock before, and it fascinated him. His eyes fixed upon the hardening penis beside him.

"Why not take your trousers off too?" Ron suggested.

Barry did. His cock was hard.

"Are you hard, too?" Ron asked.

"Yes."

"Show me."

Barry pulled his underpants down enough to reveal his young hard package. Ron reached down and began fondling. He took Barry's hand and placed it on his cock, then he lowered his head and took Barry into his mouth.

After Barry ejaculated, they kissed before Barry took Ron's man cock into his mouth and returned the favor. *Phil's was bigger*. He liked the idea of pleasing a man.

Ron took Barry to bed. They slept together naked, fooling around with each other some more before they slept.

Barry was content. It was the first time in his life he'd enjoyed the attention of an adult.

The next day, they stayed in bed.

"Have you ever fucked someone?" Ron asked.

"No."

"Let's fix that."

Ron guided Barry inside of him.

"It was my first fuck, and I loved it. When he dropped me home, he asked if I could come back the next weekend, just the two of us. I agreed. It was the second weekend together that he fucked me. The first time hurt, but I enjoyed it. After that, Gary and I would go to Ron's on alternate weekends. Ron and I were lovers. We still did stuff like bowling and movies, but we had lots of sex, too.

“Come summer, Gary and his mother moved away, and I started going to Ron’s every weekend. I told my parents Gary, and I worked gardening at Ron’s company on weekends.”

“Did your parents ever question you or ask to meet Ron?” Judy asked.

“No. They never cared what I did. Never showed any interest in me. I got myself a summer job in a tire fitting place. After that, my life changed again. I became what I am today.”

The distant look returned.

“How was work?” Ron asked. “Did you enjoy it?”

Barry shrugged. “A fitter paid me five dollars to go into the restroom with him and jerk him off. That was fun, easy money. Would’ve done it for free.”

Ron glanced at him, then returned his eyes to the road. “When I was your age, I jerked guys off in restrooms, too, but I never got paid for it.”

“I used the money to go into the city. I needed to pee and went to that underground restroom near the town hall. A fat bald man was standing at the door and looked at me as I went in. He made me feel strange, so I went into the cubicle. I saw ten dollars being pushed under the door and picked it up. Then there was a knock on the door, so I opened it. It was that fat man. He said I could keep the ten dollars if I let him suck me. Ten bucks and a head job? My lucky day.”

Ron pulled into the parking lot of The Burger Barn, where they were going for dinner. He studied Barry and shook his head.

They were seated on wooden chairs, at a wooden table, on a wooden floor. Barry looked at the bare brick walls. He didn’t need to look at the menu. He ordered the mac and cheeseburger; Ron ordered the pulled pork burger and a beer.

Ron said, “If that’s the life you want to choose, we need to keep you safe.”

“He arranged for men to come to his place for sex with me during the day, and they paid for it. I still slept with Ron at night. The first man, my first actual client, worked in a bank. He established an account for me. Every week, Ron would deposit what I earned. He never took a share, he wasn’t my pimp. That was my life through high school. At school all week and whoring at weekends.”

Judy considered the man opposite her. Neat brown collar length hair, hazel eyes that were bright and alive. She’d met prostitutes in the past whose eyes were dull and lifeless. Fine features, straight white teeth and in good shape. *I have a feeling his life could be a book, not just a chapter.*

“Gary came to visit unannounced one weekend and caught Ron and I fucking. He stared at us, turned, and walked out. He never spoke to Ron again. His mother told Ron he was a degenerate fag and after this, refused to accept child support or alimony from him. They wanted nothing more to do with him.

“When I went to college, I rented an apartment so I could work. My parents paid my tuition and gave me an allowance. I did the minimum courses required to graduate within the time limit, which freed me up so I could work. I was earning good money, and decided to tell my parents they didn’t need to continue my allowance, because I had a part-time job.”

Barry arrived at his family home, raised his key to the door lock, inserted it, and turned. Nothing happened. *Strange*. He tried to turn the key again, without success, then knocked on the door. Three loud raps.

He studied the face of the stranger who opened the door. *Who the fuck?* “Oh, do you live here now?”

“Yes,” the stranger said.

What? How? Fuck? Barry wasn’t going to admit his parents had moved without telling him. “I don’t suppose you have a forwarding address for the people who used to live here?”

“Sure,” the guy said, and disappeared inside. He returned moments later and passed Barry a slip of paper that had an address written on it.

Barry studied the paper. “Thanks,” he muttered and turned to walk away. *How the fuck could they move and not tell me?*

He exited the taxi and checked the address to make sure he had the right place. He walked up the drive, climbed three steps and rapped on the door.

His mother opened it. “Oh, hello Barry. How’s school?”

She turned and walked into the house without waiting for a reply, which was not surprising. *They don’t realize they forgot to tell me we moved.*

Barry entered his new family home. He walked down the hallway, looking into rooms until he found the kitchen. He poured himself a glass of water and considered his parents. *I never occurred to them. Fuck them!*

“Listen,” Barry said. “Things are pretty expensive, lots of new textbooks and stuff. I’m going to need an increase in my allowance.”

“Sure,” his father said. “An extra hundred enough?”

“Better make it two.”

Barry supposed he had a bedroom somewhere, but he didn’t look for it. He left without saying goodbye and without asking for a key.

“I milked them for every dime I could. They gave me nothing else, no affection, no love, and no interest. They never pretended to be interested in me. If I’d become a serial killer or rapist or something, I’m sure the ‘experts’ would have blamed lack of nurturing. Another pattern I identified during my research.

“When I graduated, my first client, now a Bank Manager, helped me with a mortgage. Another client in real estate helped me find an apartment. It’s across the road, on the ground floor, so it’s more discreet for my clients than the one I’d rented.

“Three bedrooms older style. The front bedroom—which has an ensuite—is where I work. It’s the only room I work in. The second bedroom, also in the front, I turned into a gym. Important for me to keep in shape, in my kind of work. Nobody will pay for sex with a fat guy. I put a door in the hallway, separating my work area from my living area. The third bedroom in the back is where I sleep, living room, dining room, kitchen, and bathroom. I have a back door too, for me.”

“It sounds perfect,” Judy said.

“I used to work a lot, but not anymore. Now I do two clients a day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Occasionally, I do a third at night, but I charge more. Overtime rates. I treat it like an actual job, which it is. I’m a professional sex worker. Sometimes, we all need to work overtime. I like most of my clients, and like spending time with them. I have two or three I don’t much like, but overall, I love my job. Even when we love our job, we sometimes have to do something we don’t like.”

“Yes,” Judy agreed. “That’s life.” But it wasn’t life for Judy, who seldom needed to do anything she didn’t like.

“I went to a shrink once. I wanted to understand myself better.”

“What you don’t understand, Barry,” Dr. Jansson said, “is you’re a victim, even if you don’t think of yourself as a victim.”

Barry studied her with brooding eyes, his brows knitted as he tried to process what she was saying.

She continued, “Ron is a predator and a pedophile. He belongs in jail. You need to report him so you can have closure.”

Close what? “I’m not a victim. I’m happy with my life.”

“No,” she said. “You’re not happy. You only think you’re happy.”

Barry frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“You need therapy to accept you aren’t a victim. Then you can hopefully be happy.”

Barry shook his head. “Are you saying I need therapy to accept I’m a victim, and then more therapy to learn I’m not a victim, so I can be really happy instead of just thinking I’m happy?”

Dr. Jansson said, “You’re oversimplifying it, but basically, yes.”

That doesn’t make a lick of sense. Barry asked, “If I’m really happy, but I don’t think I’m happy, am I happy?”

He left without waiting for an answer.

“One thing Jansson was right about, I lacked the capacity for empathy. I didn’t feel empathy. I researched it a little, the result of the lack of nurturing from my parents. Another characteristic I shared with serial killers, apparently.

“Ron Power wasn’t my predator; he was my savior. Molesting women as a kid, having sex in bathrooms with men for pocket change, and an absence of empathy. Who’s to say where I would’ve ended up? I know it wouldn’t have been good. Ron gave me a way to channel my appetites into a positive life, but many would disagree.

“Of course, I’m HIV positive, but I have a regimen. An occupational hazard, so I don’t feel sorry for myself or resentful of whoever gave it to me. I told my clients because Ron said I should. I thought it would destroy my business. It didn’t. There are lots of responsible HIV positive guys out there who no longer have indiscriminate sex for fear of infecting others, but they need sex too.

“Ron was diagnosed with cancer. I took time off work to care for him. I owed him that much. Right at the end—not that I knew it was the end—he asked me to make love to him one more time. It was the first time he’d called it that.

“I did. When I was above him, we looked into each other’s eyes. I saw pure love. He looked at me with pure love, and I felt Ron’s love at the very core of my being. It was a gift I never would’ve received if I’d listened to that shrink.”

Barry closed his eyes and swallowed hard. Judy rested her hand on his. He took a deep breath and said so softly that Judy struggled to hear him. “What I received from Ron is still with me today.”

Barry shook his head and continued. “Having never heard from Gary again, Ron left me everything. His apartment, his money, and his life insurance. I bought two more apartments, rented out. It’s nice income, soon I’ll buy another. I’m not getting any younger and neither are my clients. Many have been with me for years. Realistically, who’d pay for a fifty-year-old whore when they can get a hot twenty-year-old?

“When I met CJ, I realized the third gift Ron gave me. The way Ron looked at me that night reached deep into my soul. I thought, I can only imagine what it would be like to be so afraid of germs that I avoided all human contact to the point of never leaving my apartment.

“I felt empathy for Tim and admiration that he has built a ‘normal’ life for himself, within the boundaries of his condition. Ron gave me the empathy I lacked.

“I changed my name to Barry Power. Ron was my real parent. The only one who took the time to understand me and care about me. My only regret is that my lack of empathy made it impossible for me to understand the depth of his feeling, his deep love for me, until the end.”

Barry was silent for a while, and Judy waited. Her profession had taught her to be patient when someone was opening up. Barry looked around the garden. He waved to a man tending the roses, and then refocused on Judy.

“You have the gift of listening and putting people at ease. Glad to have met you. I hope I’ll see you again. I wanted to catch CJ before he returned to work. He’s strict, keeps regular working hours with a lunch break. Helps normalize his life. I’m trying to emulate him.

“I take a holiday every year. Last year, I went to Rome, Italy. I did a lot of live streaming back to CJ, sort of like having a holiday for both of us. Let him have a holiday vicariously through me.”

“It has been interesting meeting you, Barry Power. I agree, Ron Power was a good man. I’ve been thinking I don’t come here enough, so I’m sure I’ll see you again. Enjoy your afternoon.”

John Clarke

Myron had said, “When you say people’s names, your tone conveys intimacy, as if you’re close friends, which creates instant rapport. The first time we met, I walked away feeling I’d known you half my life, not that we’d just met.”

This was why many told her their life story; not only the good, but the bad they’d experienced. Their secrets, their successes, their regrets and their shame.

Judy actually listened. She didn’t pretend to listen, didn’t offer opinions, didn’t analyze, and didn’t judge. She listened, she seldom pushed for answers, she rarely asked questions. Her most common response was silence. Some might say her silence was profound, because most people don’t like silence, and want to fill it. People opened up to her, and because she listened, they kept talking.

Judy was a seasoned professional. However, whether she listened because she was a feature writer, or whether she was a feature writer because she listened, was a gray area. She put it down to her profession as a journalist, unaware it was her character, her nature that made the difference.

As she watched Barry walk away, Judy saw a man who seemed to be the building super heading toward her. She’d noticed him tending the gardens while she talked with Barry. *Guess he was waiting for Barry to leave.*

“Hello Judy Vernon,” he said.

Judy had long ago stopped marveling at people she didn’t know, knowing who she was. Nor was she surprised he used her full name. Many used her full name.

“Hello?” Judy replied.

“John Clarke,” he said, “with an E. I work for Burt Rogers, property maintenance. He got me this side gig as the super in this magical place. A nice first-floor apartment and no rent as payment. There’s something special about The Secret Garden.”

“Yes, John Clarke there is.”

“I think there’s magic here. There certainly has been for me. Could I ask a favor?”

“Sure.”

“I’m getting married soon, and was hoping it’ll be okay if we get married here?”

“Of course it will, John.”

“Thank you so much, my wife, er... fiancé, will be thrilled. It’s a special place for us.”

“Just give me the details, and it’ll be fine.”

“I’ll write them down. Have you got some paper?”

Judy retrieved a notepad and pen from her shoulder bag. “Here you are.”

“Thank you, thank you.” He wrote the details and passed the pad and pen back. “I can’t believe I’m getting married. Never thought it’d happen... Especially to my Julia.”

“I’m glad everything has worked out.” Not that Judy knew what everything was.

“I’m a rapist,” John began. “It’s in my employment records, because I was a parolee. As you own the company I work for, I’m not telling you anything you can’t find out for yourself.”

Maybe as a woman, Judy should have been reluctant to listen, but she had a book to write. *I think there's going to be an interesting story coming.* Judy reached into her bag and retrieved a guarantee of privacy, which she passed to John. "I'm writing a book about people's lives. I'd like to include your story if you'd like to tell it." She nodded toward the paper John was holding. "I'll guarantee your privacy."

"I'd like that. It's a story worth telling."

Judy smiled and rested her hand on John's arm. "Let's tell your story."

John glanced at the digital recorder on the table between them, smiled and began. "When I was a young man, I was an addict. No secret. My Parole Officer Frank Dunn told me to be honest on my application. I guess you know him."

"Yes, I know Frank," Judy confirmed.

"I was honest, but you guys still hired me and I'm grateful. One day I was high, out of my tree, can't say I was out of my mind. I don't recall where my mind was. Probably exploring some far-off galaxy or something. I went to the laundry room, and a girl I fancied was there. My desire took over. I raped her over a washing machine. We lived in the same building, so she knew who I was. About six minutes—that's my number, six—after I raped her, I was arrested. I can't remember raping her, but I did. I only have a vague memory of having sex."

John looked past Judy. His brow furrowed. He glanced at Judy, nodded, and continued. "When I was raped inside, the pain was excruciating. I shared a cell with a gay guy, Matteo, for a while and we got talking. I suggested I didn't understand gay sex because it was too painful. Matteo explained it was because I was tight, tense, and fighting it. He said I needed to relax and welcome it, then it would be pleasurable, and I'd end up craving it. Matteo offered to teach me, but I declined.

"It got me thinking, and I went online and did a little research. When sex is forced, a woman's muscles don't relax, and open to welcome the man. They remain tight and tense and it is painful for them, extremely painful. That I never intended to hurt her doesn't make it any better."

Judy studied John. He was talking about an experience she'd thankfully never had and had never researched. *I'd better do some research and talk to some victims; this is a chapter that needs to be written.* She smiled thinly. "Continue John."

"They offered me a deal, reduced sentence, and rehab, but I foolishly declined. I wasn't thinking straight and believed I'd done nothing wrong. There was a trial. I got seven years, served six, my number again. I vaguely knew what was happening. I was still getting high, easy in lockup, and didn't really listen to the testimony.

"After they sentenced me, as the sheriffs were about to lead me away, she asked, 'Why?' I shrugged and dismissed her question, saying, 'I was high'. As if that made it okay."

"The look on her face when I dismissed her question haunted me. The rape didn't haunt me, because I don't recall it, but her expression in the courtroom did. It wasn't until I'd completed my parole that I was free to do anything about it."

Hello, Julia.

I am writing to apologize for three things.

First, I apologize if receiving my letter has stirred up memories of an experience you'd rather forget. That is not my intention, so if I have upset you again, please dispose of the letter now. You're under no obligation to read it.

Second, I apologize for my flippant response. That 'I was high' when you asked 'Why' in the courtroom after I'd been sentenced and was being led away to begin my incarceration. The look on your face at my response has haunted me all these years. Not that I understood the look, then or now. A blend of disappointment and despair is as close as I can come to describing it.

Third, I apologize for raping you. Regardless of why, what I did was wrong.

To belatedly answer your question. I did not intend to rape you. I never saw you as a victim. I was high, and in my drug induced state, I believed we were having consensual sex. I'm not blaming the drugs; I took the drugs and what I did as a result was down to me. I have done a little research, trying to understand why I did it. I didn't hate you and didn't seek to control you. The truth is, I liked you. I wanted to date you, but the drugs distorted my thinking, creating a false sense of entitlement because of my attraction to you.

When I was arrested, I couldn't understand why, because in my mind I'd done nothing wrong. I had. I'd violated you, but I didn't know that then. In the courtroom, I was resentful, and a little high, if I am being honest, and there would be no point in writing if I'm not honest.

I was incarcerated for around six hours before I learned what I'd done to you. Do you know what a hell loop is? My six years inside was a hell loop. Repeatedly reliving the experience as the victim of my own crime, the motivation for which was easy to understand, dominance and control.

I don't know how difficult these years have been for you, and for the pain I caused you, I'm sorry.

I have served my time now, the punishment I deserved. After completing my parole, I am free to write to you. I have included my address, not because I expect to hear from you, but as a gesture to demonstrate my sincerity.

I'm not seeking forgiveness; I don't deserve it. I'm not seeking anything from you. As I said, the look on your face when I brushed your question away in the courtroom has haunted me, and I've been drawn to answer your question, which I'm finally free to do.

John Clarke

Julia stared at the letter. *How did he get my address? Why would he write to me? I don't want to open it. I should send it back.* She put the letter aside.

Every day for two weeks she stared at the unopened letter on her cheap pine dining table, but didn't touch it. She had the same thought every day. *I should toss it.*

One Saturday morning, Julia sat staring at the letter. *Johnny keeps asking about his father. If I don't read it, I'll always wonder what he said.* She picked up the knife she'd used to butter her toast and opened the letter. She skimmed the letter and then read it again slowly. *At least he apologized. That's it now, it's over.*

Instead of disposing of the letter, she left it on the table. She read it every morning while she ate breakfast. After three days, she picked up her smartphone and googled 'hell loop'. 'A punishment in the afterlife where one repeatedly relives a terrible event.'

What I assumed. Guess he deserved it. No! Nobody deserves to be violated.

Weeks passed, and she continued her ritual of reading the letter every morning. She didn't understand why. Each time, it gave her something else to think about. *I guess prison rape would be brutal. At least he didn't hit me. Maybe because I let it happen and didn't fight?*

She remembered leaning into the washing machine to retrieve the last of her clothes. He came up behind her. He placed his hand on the back of her head and held it down. Julia froze. He reached inside her skirt and pulled her underwear down. It hurt when he forced himself inside of her. He didn't say anything, neither did she. Her thoughts were only of an article she'd read, suggesting if this happened not to fight. Letting it happen could save her life.

Five weeks after receiving John's letter, she responded. *Seems like the right thing to do. It's finished now.*

Six weeks after he wrote, John received a response. *Six weeks. Six again.* His hands shook so much it was difficult to open the letter. His pulse raced, his mouth dry, a tightening in his chest. He tried to imagine what the letter would say. *Probably telling me she'll never forgive me, and I can rot in hell.*

John,

I wasn't sure if I should respond. Thank you for taking the trouble to write to me. Your apology means a lot, but I'm not sure if I'll ever forgive you.

Julia

If he'd thought about it, John would have realized the smartest thing to do would be to let the matter rest. Julia's response was an obvious conclusion. John didn't think about it. He reached into a drawer, took out a pen and paper, and wrote a reply.

Hello Julia,

Thank you for taking the time to reply. It was unexpected. I am writing again to clarify that I do not seek forgiveness. What I did was wrong. I neither expect nor deserve it.

John

Julia answered immediately. She wasn't sure why, but she didn't know how to answer Johnny's questions about his father.

They exchanged letters for six months—John supposed they could've switched to email, but there was something personal about handwritten letters. John developed the courage to invite Julia for coffee. He suggested they meet at Frank's Diner, which he knew about from the company newsletters.

John stepped inside Frank's Diner and surveyed the room. *If I can apologize in person and if she sees I mean it, maybe it'll make a difference.* It was afternoon; the diner wasn't busy. The boss's girlfriend sat in a booth by the window. *Heard they're going to marry.*

A young woman approached him. "Good afternoon, sir. How many are in your party?"

"Umm... two."

"Would you prefer a table or a booth?"

John glanced around again. *A table would be more public, Julia would feel safer.* "I umm... a table today, I think."

"Take any table you want. I'll bring menus."

John nodded. He chose a table in the middle of the room and sat in a chair facing the door so he could see when Julia arrived. *Will I recognize her?*

The waitress delivered two menus and filled his glass with lemon-flavored water from a pitcher. "Would you like to order now, sir, or would you prefer to wait for your friend?"

"I'll wait," John said, and reached for his glass. His mouth was dry.

When the doorbell indicated the door had opened, John glanced at the entrance and recognized Julia standing in the doorway. His breathing became shallow, his heartbeat erratic, his mouth dry. He gave a weak wave, not knowing if she recognized him. He glanced at the woman in the corner booth, who smiled.

Julia walked to his table, looked at him, and said softly, "Hello, John."

"Hello, Julia." He wanted to say more but couldn't find the words.

Julia sat opposite him. He wanted to offer his hand, but didn't.

The waitress arrived at their table to take their order. "I'm Rebekah," she said. "What would you like?"

"What do you recommend?" Julia asked.

Rebekah smiled. "Our house coffee, and Kansas Cheesecake."

"What's your house coffee?"

"Flat white, made with the John Farrington Blend."

"Sounds wonderful," Julia said. "I'll have that."

Rebekah glanced at John, who said, "Same."

"Won't be long," Rebekah left to prepare their order.

John took a sip of water. He drew a deep breath and held it in an attempt to calm himself. "Julia," he began. "I want to apologize for..."

Julia raised her hand. "John, you've already apologized. I don't want to focus on the past. Maybe tell me something about your life now."

John moistened his lips. He glanced around the room, perhaps looking for inspiration. His boss's girlfriend smiled at him, which was all the inspiration he needed. "I live in a fairytale..."

Julia responded to his letters and accepted his invitation for coffee. She wasn't sure why she'd accepted; she didn't think she wanted to see him, but people can hide behind letters, and she wanted to know his true character, before revealing her son to him.

Julia took a deep breath, sighed heavily and registered a bell sound as she pushed the door open. She saw and recognized John immediately and glanced around the diner. *Oh, I like this place.* A blonde woman in the corner booth had looked up when the door opened and smiled. Julia returned the smile, then focused on John.

Taking another deep breath, she made her way to his table. She was concerned that seeing him would remind her of the rape; it didn't it made her think of Johnny. *Interesting.* When Johnny had been born, she was reminded of the rape whenever she looked at him, but that had changed at some point. She couldn't put her finger on when. Now, if she thought about the rape, she saw images of Johnny.

He's nervous. Unsure of himself. Didn't expect him to be vulnerable. John's vulnerability gave her confidence. She was in control, and she didn't want to talk about the past. That was done. She wanted to know John's thoughts on the future; she had a decision to make.

When John described the garden where he lived, roses cascading from balconies, it sounded like a fairytale. John displayed an appreciation of his simple life. There was a childlike quality about his enthusiastic love of his life now, and something more, a genuineness that touched Julia.

Should I tell him? Not yet, maybe get to know him a little first, then decide.

John sensed Julia was holding something back, but after their strained and tense first meeting, they relaxed and found they could easily talk about almost everything. She seemed to want to know him, and perhaps help him know himself. Over time, their weekly coffee date became a weekly dinner date. Every Friday night, they met at Frank's Diner and shared a meal. At some point, John realized, as unlikely as it was, they'd become friends.

Julia said, "I'll go to the restroom, and then perhaps we can go back to your place to umm... talk some more."

John studied Julia's back as she disappeared into the restroom. *Is this a trick? Has this whole thing been a trap, to put me back in jail?* He drank a little of his choc-mint milkshake and wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. *What if it's not a trick? What if she really wants to?*

He examined Julia as she returned and sat opposite him in their booth.

"I want to make sure there are no misunderstandings," John said. "Are you saying you'd like to come back to my apartment to have sex?"

"Yes, I want to do this, but I need to feel in control."

John nodded. "You take the lead, and if you want to stop, I promise I'll stop."

They went to John's apartment in The Secret Garden. They made love several times. John allowed Julia to take the lead, allowing her to guide and direct him.

In the morning, John made coffee and scrambled eggs on toast for breakfast. He placed it on a tray. "Come on, let's have breakfast outside."

John carried the tray to the gazebo.

Stepping out into the garden in daylight, Julia froze. "I had no idea. It's beautiful, magical. I've never seen anywhere like it."

"I told you I lived in a fairyland," John said. "Come and eat breakfast."

He studied Julia as she ate. *My God, she's beautiful. Like a princess...* he glanced around the garden. *In a fairytale.*

"Why?" he asked.

Julia smiled. "I could get used to having breakfast here. Two reasons. I've fallen in love with you, which, believe me, is a shock." Julia leaned across the table and wiped away the tears rolling down John's cheeks. "What is it?"

"I've fallen in love with you too, but didn't want to admit it, even to myself, because nothing could come of it."

"Something has come of it." Julia's chin quivered, she swallowed hard, and took a long deep breath. "And this is only the beginning."

John ate several bites in silence and watched Julia. He was overflowing with things he wanted to say, but scared to say anything, in case something he said fucked everything up. Finally, he asked, "What's the second reason?"

Julia glanced at her watch. "I need to go. I'll be back at eleven and tell you."

John was waiting in the gazebo at ten. *What could the second reason be?* It didn't matter. Julia loved him. He believed her. He'd seen it in her eyes, and her words had confirmed he wasn't imagining it. This didn't stop him from being apprehensive. It was too good to be true, and part of him was concerned he'd end up back inside.

Julia arrived at eleven with a young boy.

She made the introductions. "John, I'd like you to meet your son, John junior. Johnny, this is your father. He's been away for a while, but he's back now."

John couldn't process what Julia was saying, despite the evidence standing in front of him. He stared at them both; he was shaking. Tears were streaming down his face. *I have a son. She named him after me. But I raped her.* He couldn't find words.

The three went for a walk. John bought his son a model ship. He didn't know what else to buy him. When they returned to John's apartment, John and Johnny built it together. Julia watched them. When they were nearly finished, she started crying.

John went to her and put his arm around her shoulders. "Why?"

"I thought you might be a good father, and I was right. I've been watching you. You're so patient with Johnny, showing him how to do it himself instead of just telling him, or doing it for him."

Relaying the experience of meeting his son still carried a lot of emotion for John. Judy reached across the table and squeezed his arm as tears filled his eyes.

John reached into his pocket, retrieved a handkerchief, wiped his face, and blew his nose. He swallowed hard. "I'm sorry, I get emotional."

"Nothing to be sorry for," Judy said as she dabbed her own eyes with a tissue.

“Poor Johnny. What a first impression to be given of one’s father. A strange man staring opened mouthed, speechless, and crying.”

“I’m sure he’ll cherish that moment for the rest of his life,” Judy suggested.

“Don’t know how to be a father, but I do my best. I love doing things with Johnny. He helps me here sometimes. One day, I was working in the garden, and Julia and Johnny were sitting here in the gazebo, watching. I looked at them. Then I cut a bunch of roses, walked over intending to give them to Julia. Instead, I got down on one knee and asked her to marry me, well I think I sort of asked them both.”

“They obviously accepted.”

“Yes, I still have trouble coming to terms with it. How could the worst thing I ever did result in the best thing that ever happened to me?” John sobbed. Judy understood why.

She reached out and placed her hand on his arm without a word. As he collected himself, Judy looked at the information he’d written in her notebook to confirm the date and time. She was happy it would be on a Sunday and not a Saturday. She said, “John, Myron and I’d be honored if we could attend your wedding.”

“I’d love it if you could. I was thinking of inviting Burt Rogers and Frank Dunn, too.”

“You should... They both had a role to play in this.”

“Yes, you’re right. Without them, this would not be happening. Thank you, Judy Vernon. I’ll go call Julia and tell her the good news.”

Judy watched him walk away, already dialing Julia’s number. She was thinking of the three men she’d met that day. She remembered something Adrian Sebastian Bach had said... “Broken people don’t have to live broken lives.”

Us Again

Darnell contemplated the phone in his hand. He took a deep breath, finished entering the number, and touched the connect button.

“Hello,” a man’s voice answered.

“Hi, could I speak with Maurice Williams, please?”

“Sure, who’s calling?”

“Darnell.”

The man didn’t answer, but Darnell heard shouting, or perhaps it was squealing. “Maurice! Maurice! Maurice! Quickly it’s your Darnell.”

Heavy breathing filled Darnell’s ear, and then Maurice said, “Hello, Darnell?”

“Hello, Maurice.” Darnell wasn’t ready to call him Dad.

“I’m glad you called.”

“Bec and I are getting married. We’d like you and umm...”

“Frederico.”

“Frederico, to come.”

“Of course we will.”

“Bec would like you to do her hair for the wedding.”

“It will be my honor, but I warn you, Freddy will fuss over her like a mother hen.”

Darnell smiled. “Give me your address, and Bec will send the invitation. Short notice I’m sorry.”

“Doesn’t matter, we’ll be there.”

“Come a day early. Maybe we can talk.”

“I’d like that, son.”

After they rang off, Darnell picked up the blue and white striped note book his father had given him. He sat at the dining table and read his father’s letters for the third time.

He sobbed once, then closed his eyes, bowed his head and massaged his temples. Darnell raised his head, used his thumbs to brush away the few tears that had escaped his eyes, swallowed hard, picked up the phone, and hit redial.

Again, it was Frederico who answered the call.

“Hi, Frederico...” The name felt strange in his mouth.

“Freddy.”

“Freddy, this is Darnell. Could I speak to my dad again?”

A sharp intake of breath echoed in Darnell’s ear, but no words followed. He could hear muffled voices in the distance.

Then Maurice was on saying, “Darnell?”

“Hello, Dad...” He heard Maurice echo his husband’s sharp intake of breath.

“I wanted to ask if you’d, umm... agree to be my best man.”

Another audible intake of breath, silence, then “I’d be honored, son.”

“Maybe Freddy could be a groomsman?”

“Really? He’ll love that. Thank you, Darnell.”

“Bec will call you with the details, you know, wedding colors, that sort of thing.”

“She can talk to Freddy. That stuff is what he lives for, I think.”

Judy sipped her coffee and stared out the window. She picked up her smart phone, scrolled the contacts, selected John Clarke and tapped call.

“Hello, Judy Vernon.”

“Hi John. I’ve spoken with your marriage officiant, and confirmed your wedding will be at eleven.”

“That’s great news.”

“It’ll be a big day for weddings in the garden, because my niece will marry at two.”

“The other residents will love it. Everyone loves a wedding.”

“Oh, one more thing. Do you think Julia will talk to me? I’d like to fill in some details in your story.”

“I think she will. I’ll ask her to call you.”

Judy finished her coffee, wiped her mouth with a napkin, then reapplied her lipstick. *Don’t know why I bother. It’ll only be smeared on her lips.*

Ali stood outside L’Occasion. She glanced at her reflection in the window. *I do look good in a suit.* She always wore a suit when meeting Judy now, even on their Farrington Girl’s nights out, but never wore a suit when she dated Monica.

Ali’s lips curled up and her eyes sparkled when she saw Judy’s reflection. Her breathing quickened, and there was a stirring between her legs. *After all these years.*

When Judy arrived, she greeted Ali with a hug and caressed her from shoulders to thighs. Lips found their counterparts, then parted, allowing tongues to dance like entwined snakes mating. Judy raised her hand to Ali’s face and used her thumb to wipe her lipstick from Ali’s lips. “Knew you’d steal my lipstick.”

Ali smiled. “You stole my heart years ago, and I’m not trying to take it back.”

“You split mine, or cloned it, or something. Never understood how I could give the same heart to two people.”

Ali caressed Judy’s face and looked into her eyes. “Neither did I, but I do now. It’s Myron. His calm acceptance of me, us, and lack of possessiveness about you are what makes it possible.”

“Us possible.”

“We’d better get started. We have a lot to do today. L’Occasion has bridesmaid’s dresses, which are perfect for us.”

“Isn’t choosing our bridesmaid outfits what we’re doing today?”

Ali shook her head. "A dress isn't an outfit. It's a beginning. I don't know where your head's at. You taught me that."

Judy grinned, leaned in, and lips connected. "You've had my mind in so much turmoil, I've been forgetting the basics. Show me these dresses you think will be perfect."

Ali held the door open, then followed Judy into the store.

"I can feel your eyes staring at my ass."

"You love people admiring your ass, and you don't care who it is."

Ali took the lead and spoke with the sales assistant who passed Ali two dresses she'd put aside earlier. She handed the pale blue one to Judy and retained the pale green one. "They match our eyes," she said.

They entered the changing room together. "Help me undress," Ali said.

"You don't need me to help you undress. You just want to tease me."

Ali grinned. "I want to tease and be teased. Help me and I'll help you. No touching, just teasing like we used to. It'll be fun."

"It'll be frustrating," Judy winked.

Judy helped Ali undress and stared at her, dressed only in her underwear. She expected Ali to try the dress on and reached for it, but Ali said, "No, I'll help you undress first."

Judy didn't respond, but passively stood as Ali undressed her, savoring the moment.

"A few weeks ago, we couldn't have done this," Ali said.

"Not without ending up fucking on the floor."

"Here, let me help you with your dress."

Judy returned the favor.

The women examined themselves and each other in the mirror. Their dresses, matching in all but color, were by Marisol Design. Satin-silk, off the shoulder, gathered at the waist, full length with a side slit, which, unlike Ali's date dress, was not revealing.

"My god!" Judy said. "We look fantastic, like a matching set."

"We *are* a matching set, well, almost. We will be before the day is over. Can't wait until Myron sees us."

Ali signaled the sales assistant, who examined the women with a practiced eye, pinned their dresses where minor adjustments would be needed, and said, "They'll be ready in two days."

They unnecessarily helped each other change back into their clothes. Neither rushed, lingering soft caresses were accompanied by sharp intakes of breath and low moans.

Judy took the dresses to the counter and passed the sales assistant her credit card. Becky had offered to pay for their dresses, but Judy insisted she'd pay.

She handed the receipts to Ali, who would collect the dresses after they'd been altered. "This is your show. Where to next?"

"Luscious Lingerie."

"Luscious Lingerie?"

“Yes, we need strapless bras and matching panties,” Ali explained.

Exiting the store, they flagged a taxi.

They selected their lingerie. Ali smiled. “Matching lingerie in colors matching the dresses... *Your* rules.”

Their next stop was Crystal Creations.

Diamante vine with crystal leaves, necklace and earrings. Green for Ali and blue for Judy.

“Perfect,” said Judy. “You’ve done your research.”

“Couples shopping for me and my woman. Loved every minute of planning, and the reality surpasses my imagination.”

Judy turned Ali’s head and looked into her eyes. She kissed her gently. “I am and always will be your woman.”

The love in Judy’s eyes radiated into Ali’s soul. The way it always had until the blend of pheromone induced lust and jealous insecurity got in the way. She felt Judy’s fingers brush away her tears.

“I’m happy we’re us again. The way it’s meant to be.”

“Me too. Are we finished now?”

“No. Shoes. I found a store, Bridal Feet, that has the perfect ones.”

“They have a specialist store for that?”

“Yes, it’s not far.”

The shoes Ali had chosen were A Bidda Bling, silver open-toed bridal shoes with block heels. The foot strap and heel were decorated with crystals and pearls.

“You’ve excelled yourself,” Judy said.

“What about our hair? Do we need to agree on a style?”

“No need. I’ll talk with Darnell. Both his fathers are hairdressers. They can do us together.”

“Talking of doing us together, has Myron...”

“Not yet. We need to be patient. Time to go home.”

“Separately or together?”

“I want to say together, but we need to wait a little longer. You’d better call me when you get home.”

“You read my mind.”

“Or you read mine.”

The women flagged separate taxis.

Judy studied Ali as she arrived for breakfast the next morning. Ali was wearing a chocolate brown suit. “I quite like you in a suit.”

Ali grinned. “You’d quite like me no matter what I wore.”

Suzy Q came to take their order, wearing a short black skirt with a long protruding silver petticoat, a white shirt with gray sleeves, a black collar, and a large red bow. Her outfit was finished with knee-high white boots, but no wig today. Her long black hair nearly reached her waist.

“Usual?” she asked.

“Please,” said Judy.

They watched Suzy Q skip away, singing along with Eddie Cochran’s *Summertime Blues*.

“Nothing about wanting Asian?” Judy teased.

“I haven’t seen Su-Lin for ages. Too busy studying. I’ve almost completed a few courses. I need to get them done before Dancer’s opens because I’ll be too busy when it does. As it is, balancing study with approving plans, choosing furniture, and agreeing on layouts can be a challenge.”

“Are you disappointed?”

“No.” Ali grinned. “I’m excited about opening Dancers. Other than you, the only woman I’m seeing these days is Monica.”

“Is that causing you conflict?”

Ali shook her head. “No. Once we’re committed, I’ll walk away from Moni.”

“Are you feeling guilty about that?”

“I was open with her from the start. She always says, ‘worry about today, and the future will take care of itself.’ She never pressures or pushes me.”

“Is this why you’ve been teary lately?”

Ali rested her head on Judy’s shoulder and held her hand. “No. I don’t realize I’m teary until you wipe them away. I’m happy.”

“Happy?”

“To the point where my happiness overflows, and I don’t realize it. I’ve been dreaming of the life I’ve wanted for longer than I know, and I didn’t know exactly what that life was until recently. How can we desire something to the point of obsession and beyond, and not clearly know what our desire is?”

Suzy Q delivered their coffees and skipped away. Almost in unison, they raised their cups, sipped their coffees, replaced their cups and wiped their mouths on a napkin.

“I don’t know,” Judy said. “Sometimes we know something is happening, and we become excited about it, but we don’t know what that something is.”

Ali nodded. “It’s like we can feel energy building around us or something.”

Judy locked her gaze on Ali’s eyes and held the connection, looking deep within her. When she released Ali, she nodded. “I understand.”

“I don’t know when it will happen, but I know with certainty I’ll exist within a cocoon of love.”

“We will darling, I feel it too.”

After breakfast, Judy grabbed a takeout coffee and headed to The Secret Garden. She was meeting the soon to be Julia Clarke, to clarify a couple of points in John's story.

Sitting in the Gazebo enjoying her coffee, she saw a man enter the garden, and walk directly to her.

"Hello Judy Vernon," he said. "This is a pleasant surprise."

"Yes, it is Adrian Sebastian Bach. I was thinking about you. Are you following me?"

"Really?" He beamed. "Good thoughts I hope."

"Yes, I was thinking how perceptive you are."

"I wouldn't call myself perceptive. Following you? No, but I think it would be very pleasant following you. I could watch that fine ass of yours moving as you walked."

Judy rolled her eyes. "I thought you were sworn off women?"

"No, not at all. I'm sworn off marriage, but for you, I'd make an exception."

Judy tapped her wedding ring. "I'm taken."

"Did you design this place, too?"

"No, my husband's grandmother created this garden."

"I've been coming here for a few weeks now. Someone told me about it, but I didn't believe them. So, I had to come see for myself. It's beautiful."

"Yes, magical, in fact."

"Indeed."

Judy asked, "What photographs do you have to show me today, Adrian Sebastian Bach?"

Adrian took his smart phone from his pocket and scrolled through his photo gallery. He showed Judy a photograph of a wrap.

"Breakfast, my own creation with limited resources, and a supermarket across the road. A tortilla wrap, which I warm slightly in my frypan. Next is an omelet, two eggs, a little cheese, seasoned with salt and some herbs. Not pepper, I don't like pepper. Fried on one side and then flipped. Nice caramelization, as they say, and a little crispy on the edges. I lay it on the tortilla. Sort of a double wrap. I rip open the plastic bag and add a good amount of supermarket premixed salad."

"What's a good amount?"

"I don't know," Adrian said. "Whatever I feel like that day, I guess. I add honey mustard with macadamia dressing. It's a great dressing, easily my favorite. I roll it and Voila! It's ready. The best breakfast in the world. I tell myself it's healthy because I added salad."

"It certainly sounds delicious," Judy said.

Adrian said, "I could sit and talk to you all day, but I have a dentist appointment this afternoon. Knowing I missed the opportunity to spend the afternoon with you will make my visit to the dentist even more unpleasant, I'm sure."

"Okay, Adrian Sebastian Bach, enjoy the dentist. I'm sure we'll see each other again."

"Oh, you can count on it, Judy Vernon. Seeing each other again, I mean, not enjoying the dentist. That won't happen. As always, it's been a pleasure talking with you."

Judy smiled. "Because I allow you to do most of the talking."

"Yes," he winked, "you know me well."

Not long after Adrian left, a woman Judy guessed was Julia approached the gazebo. Judy stood to greet her.

"You must be Julia. I'm Judy Vernon."

The women shook hands. "I know. I've seen you at the diner. You were there the first time I met John for coffee."

"I often work from there." The women sat. Judy passed Julia a confidentiality agreement, which she'd extracted from her bag, along with her digital recorder. "This document is a guarantee of confidentiality. I will ensure nothing you say can be traced back to you or John."

"That's fine," she said. "I've read the one you gave John."

"I'm also going to record our chat, if that's okay."

"Yes, John said you would."

"I want to ask a couple of questions to complete the picture I'm painting. I'll be focusing on the positive outcome, rather than the negative beginning."

Julia smiled. "I'm familiar with your work."

"My first question needs to be blunt. I'm sorry. Many women in your situation would have had an abortion. Why did you decide not to?"

"I'm Catholic. An abortion was not something I considered. I had intended to have my baby adopted."

"But in the end, you didn't."

"No. I couldn't. After he was born, I held him. Some said I shouldn't if I was going to have him adopted, but I wanted to say goodbye. I took one look at him, and I knew I could never part with him. He's a part of me."

"Why did you name him John?"

"When it happened, John wasn't John to me, he was 'the guy who raped me.' Maybe that's why I can accept him now. In my heart, John and 'the guy who raped me,' are separate people. I named Johnny after his father because I didn't believe he would ever meet or know his father. I felt it was important he had something belonging to his father. The only thing I had of his father to give him was his first name."

"I appreciate you have separated John from the guy who raped you, but when you look at him, doesn't it remind you?" Judy asked.

Julia frowned, nodded, then smiled. "At first, when I brought him home from the hospital, every time I looked at Johnny, I thought about what happened. However, at some point, whenever I thought about what happened, I saw my Johnny. He's my blessing, and I thank God for him. Don't misunderstand me, I wish he'd been born from love, not from rape and I am not saying I'm glad I was raped because I have Johnny. I'm not. I wish it didn't happen, but it did, and I can't change that."

"And John?"

“Johnny had been asking about his father, and around the time when he was becoming curious, I heard from John. Coincidence? I don’t know. The universe works in strange ways. I got to know John because I needed to decide what to tell Johnny about his father. As I got to know him, I fell in love with him.”

Julia stopped talking, looked past Judy, towards John, who was tending the gardens with his son. She smiled.

“What John did was wrong, and he was rightly punished. He’s paid his debt to society, and he’s paid his karmic debt. He has the rest of his life to repay his debt to me by being the loving and attentive partner and father he is. John is a good man who did a bad thing.”

Judy nodded and smiled, maintaining eye contact long enough for Julia to know she understood. “Have your parents accepted John as part of your family?”

“Reluctantly, and to a point. They hated him, of course. If not, I think they’d have embraced him. That they accept him on any basis is a victory for John. When he met them, he faced them and answered their questions openly and honestly. That helped.

“What made the difference was the way John is with me and Johnny. He is a caring partner and an attentive father, which I think swayed them. All he can do is to be consistent and responsible and hope they will continue to soften towards him.”

“Thank you. That’s all I have for you. When I’ve completed my draft, I’ll send it to John and you and we can talk about anything you’d like added or omitted.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” said Julia as she stood to leave.

Judy stood and embraced her. “I’ll see you at your wedding.”

Two Weddings

George watched Judy cross the road. She greeted him as she always did, resting her hand on his arm. It was the highlight of his day. He studied her as she headed into the diner.

A voice said, "I'm thinking exactly the same, George. I'll bet."

George jumped, his heart skipped a beat, and his head shot round to look at Ali. He flushed at being caught admiring Judy's ass. "Oh, Good morning, Ma'am," he said sheepishly.

"Morning George." She winked. "And it's Ali, not Ma'am."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"She certainly has a nice ass," Ali said, resting her hand on his arm as Judy did. "Feels as good as it looks." She winked again.

George swallowed hard. He focused on Ali's figure as she walked away. *You haven't got a bad ass yourself.* He took a long hard drag on his cigarette, his imagination fueled by Ali's words, forming images of Judy and Ali that would be his fantasy.

Judy had barely sat before she stood to greet Ali with a gentle kiss.

"George and I have just been enjoying your damn fine ass together."

"I would think you both have something better to do."

"I don't know about George, but I don't."

"And you shouldn't be teasing poor George."

"You do."

Judy opened her mouth to say something, but Suzie Q came skipping over to take their order.

Today she wore a black dress with a pink floral design. Almost normal except for the white lace protruding from the sleeves and white petticoats. A hair bow from the same material as the dress, pink hair, thigh length white stockings and pink shoes completed the look.

She confirmed their usual and skipped away.

"I always wonder how she can tuck that beautiful long hair of hers under those wigs," Judy said.

Ali smiled. "I tend to think about what's under her skirt, not what's under her wig."

Judy snuggled closer to Ali. "As long as it's only thinking."

"That phase has passed, apparently," Ali said. "She must make pretty good tips to afford all those outfits."

"I think she buys them cheap from China. After breakfast, Freddy, Darnell's stepfather Frederico, will come to my place with us and do our hair."

Suzy Q brought their order.

The bell rang as the door opened, and a Hispanic man, wearing a loose fitting silky white shirt, peach colored trousers and tan shoes, joined them.

“Ali, this is Frederico, and this is my friend Ali.” Judy made the introductions.

Ali offered her hand. “Freddy. Everyone calls me Freddy.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Ali said.

Freddy studied the women for a moment. “Are you a couple?”

“Not quite,” Ali said.

“Matching hair styles is going to be challenging, because you have different hair types, but I’m sure I can come up with something. We’d better make a start if I’m going to finish in time.”

Judy smiled at Ali. Each wore one of Judy’s dressing gowns while Freddy fussed over their hair at the dining table.

Freddy styled Judy’s hair first. Being finer, it would be more difficult to hold in place. He replicated the style on Ali, whose thicker hair was easier to manage. Their hair was tied in a loose bun at the back. Several strands were strategically left out of the bun. These had been curled and framed the women’s faces. Creating what Freddy called “disheveled elegance.”

Freddy finished fussing and nodded, apparently satisfied. He said, “I better get back to the hotel room to get ready for the wedding.”

Judy and Ali thanked him. Saw him to the door, then went to the bedroom to dress. They removed their robes, revealing unnecessary nakedness. They stood together, looking into a mirror, admiring their own hair and each other’s body. Their outfits, including the matching underwear, laid out on the bed.

“I don’t know how healthy this is,” Ali said.

“It’s probably not, but I’m happy we can enjoy each other without getting carried away and crossing lines.”

Myron was standing at the door. They hadn’t heard him arrive. He was staring with his mouth open.

Judy smiled. “We’re getting dressed. Are you gonna stand there staring, or are you going to kiss people hello?”

Myron didn’t speak. He walked to Judy and kissed her, but he didn’t glance at her. His eyes were locked on the naked Ali. He stepped to Ali, and kissed her as well, then turned and left the room.

The women looked at each other and burst out laughing. “Guess we showed him more than he’d bargained for,” Judy said.

“You’re not jealous that he couldn’t take his eyes off me?”

“When you’re naked, I can’t take my eyes off you either, so we’d better get dressed.”

Myron stood in the living room, staring at nothing. *What’s wrong with me? Why can’t I just let it be about sex?* He knew, if he allowed it to be about sex, he could have bedded Alison with Judy’s blessing and participation.

It was a man’s dream, but despite aching with desire almost to the point of ejaculation to feel Alison wrapped around him, he knew allowing it to be about sex would be a mistake.

He closed his eyes and swallowed hard. *Find a way to make it work.*

Alison was the first dressed. She entered the living room and walked to Myron. She fondled the lapel of his charcoal grey tailored suit and pretended to straighten his matching tie. She traced his torso through his tailored pale pink shirt.

"I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable," she said as she put her arms around his neck and pulled him close.

Her lips found his, her tongue demanding entry into his mouth, as if on a mission to moisten his suddenly dry lips.

Myron reveled in her deep, passionate kiss. "No, you're not," he said. "You like knowing I desire you..."

Ali slipped her hand down and began massaging the iron rod, uncomfortably restrained in his underwear. "I can feel how much you desire me," Ali said.

Myron involuntarily emitted a groan or a moan or something in between. He closed his eyes and swallowed hard. *God, not now.* How he prevented himself from ejaculating, he didn't know.

He took a deep, calming breath. "You like knowing we both do. If this was about sex, we'd be late for these weddings."

Alison frowned. "If not sex, then what?"

"In time, sex alone would be less than satisfying, and everything would be lost. I don't want that. I don't want something part time and temporary, and neither do you." He glanced at Judy, who'd entered the room. "Either of you."

"No," agreed Judy. "We don't."

Looking at Judy, Myron said, "You'd better come here and kiss us. Then reapply your lipstick and we'll get going. We have two weddings to attend, and my will power is almost exhausted."

It was a beautiful sunny Sunday with an azure sky and a faint breeze. Judy stood with Ruth and Ali, talking about the magic and beauty of The Secret Garden.

Myron, Art, and Burt Rogers were talking about the renovations at The Shipyard and Dancer's Bistro.

Frank Dunn was with Burt's wife exploring The Secret Garden. Many residents and neighbors, including Barry Power, were standing around the garden talking amongst themselves. Tim Clean was peering out his window. Too many people for Tim to come out to the balcony. Barry was looking at Tim, as if to reassure him. Judy smiled.

The marriage officiant called for everyone's attention, and requested they be seated in the white chairs set out in front of the gazebo, like two columns of soldiers standing at attention with an aisle between them.

The blue sky, the green grass, the red, pink, and white roses, the happy residents, and neighbors combined to create an idyllic scene.

Ruth said, "We should have more weddings here. I'll have a word with the marriage officiant later, and tell him The Secret Garden will be available for weddings, no charge."

"I agree," Judy said. "I'll have a word with Tim Clean. He can handle scheduling, as long as it's by phone. I'll speak to Burt too. He can make setting up the garden for weddings part of John Clarke's job. I'm sure he'd do it for free, but he should be paid for his time."

"That's settled then," said Ruth.

John Clarke was waiting in the gazebo with his best man, his son, Johnny. Both were radiant as they watched Julia walk down the aisle, escorted by her father. Julia was equally radiant; they were obviously a happy family. Something Judy believed neither of them would have imagined possible. After delivering his daughter, Julia's father sat beside her mother in the front row.

The marriage officiant performed the ceremony, with Johnny handing his father, and then his mother, the rings to place on each other's fingers. The officiant instructed John to kiss the bride, and he complied.

Darnell took a deep breath. He glanced at his reflection in the mirror. *Can't believe I own a tailored suit.* He'd intended to rent a suit, but Uncle Myron insisted he have one made, 'because you never know when you might need one in the future.' They'd visited a relative of Uncle Myron's and had the suit and a pale pink shirt tailored to Uncle Myron's exacting specifications.

Next, it was a shoemaker whom Myron had referred to as Uncle Saul. *Didn't know people still made shoes by hand.* Despite everything, it had never occurred to Darnell that he'd own a tailored suit and handmade shoes.

If someone had told him when he'd shared a cell with Hamlet, that in a few years he'd own a part of two restaurants and be marrying a white girl, he wouldn't have believed them.

Marrying Bec was not why he was nervous. Soon his parents would meet for the first time since Maurice had left, and he was terrified the tension would spoil the wedding. *Inviting him was a mistake.*

Darnell was getting ready in his father's hotel room. His stepfather, Freddy, was first back, but a man married to Maurice was going to take some getting used to. Then again, having Maurice back in his life was not something he'd adjusted to yet.

"Oh Darnell, those women are so beautiful!" Freddy gushed. "Are you sure they're not a couple?"

"They're close friends."

"I know lots of people who are 'close friends.' They often have benefits no one knows about. Anyway, I better go make myself beautiful. Thank you for making us part of your wedding. Maurice cried when you asked him. To be honest, I've caught him crying over you often over the years, but these were happy tears."

Darnell nodded. He didn't know how he should respond, or whether he would ever adjust to Freddy, who was always full on and gushing.

In a moment of sentimentality after reading Maurice's letters, Darnell had asked Maurice to be his best man. Freddy was a groomsman. He'd told his Moms later, who'd said it was a good idea, but he wasn't sure if she meant it.

A knock on the door. Darnell opened it and hugged his Moms and Grams hello. He'd wanted them to meet here, so any tension could be dealt with before the wedding.

His grams held him at arm's length and examined him. "Darnell, I didn't know you could be so handsome."

"Thank you, Grams." *I think.*

Freddy, dressed in a loose black silk suit with a bright blue shirt and a red bow tie, came out of the bedroom. "Oh..."

Darnell said, "This is my dad's husband, Freddy. Freddy, my Moms and Grams."

"Frederico," Darnell's Moms said. "So nice to finally meet you."

That was all the invitation Freddy needed. He seemed to float across the room and hugged both women.

Darnell's head turned to the door when he heard the door unlock in response to the keycard being waved over the panel. *Maurice is home.*

More hugs all round. He looked at Darnell. "Your Bec looks stunning today."

Darnell grinned; his shoulders lowered. *There's no tension here.*

It didn't take Maurice long to change. His outfit was identical to Freddy's, but he wore a bright green shirt.

Freddy said, "I love it when Maurice and I wear matching outfits."

Darnell had booked a van to take the family to The Secret Garden.

Standing at the mirror, Rebekah studied her reflection. She didn't know how he'd achieved it, but Maurice had created magic with her hair. He'd layered, gathered and swept her hair back, in the process creating a waterfall of curls which cascaded over her shoulders, reminding her of the roses cascading from the balconies at The Secret Garden.

A series of diamante and pearl hair combs held her hair in place, creating an impression of a sparkling vine woven through her hair.

She'd expected to be sad because the invitation she'd sent to her parents had been returned unopened, as she knew it would be. Somehow, Maurice being present, and being an important part of the wedding, made up for her parents' absence.

He was never a Papa to me, anyway. Uncle Myron is the only Papa I've known. If he hadn't cared when no one else did, I'd have nothing.

Suzy Q, who was helping Rebekah get ready, interrupted her thoughts. She had changed into a qipao, in traditional red with a gold floral design. Her long black hair hung straight down. "You can't sit admiring yourself in the mirror all day," she said. "Time to get you dressed Rebekah."

Rebekah smiled. Maurice had not only created her amazing hairstyle, but he'd also applied her makeup. Having a stylist as a father-in-law was useful. She stood, wearing only her white underwear, ready to put on her gown.

Her wedding gown was the same décolleté, flowing white satin wedding gown, trimmed with pearls and lace Aunt Judy had worn. When Aunt Judy suggested they have her gown altered for Rebekah, she'd jumped at the chance. For Rebekah, it was like wearing her Mama's wedding dress.

Suzy Q helped Rebekah put her dress on and zipped it at the back. “You are so beautiful today. I want to get married too.”

“You’ll have to talk to Leon. Please pass me my bouquet.”

She handed Rebekah her bouquet and said, “Throw it to me. I want to catch it.”

Rebekah smiled. “Do you know what that means?”

“Yes, in China, the bride doesn’t throw it. She hands it to someone. I want to marry Leon.”

Rebekah studied her reflection in the mirror. She remembered her years in hell with Jack. *How can this be happening?*

Then Suzy Q was dabbing Rebekah’s tears with a tissue. “Don’t cry, you’ll ruin your makeup and I can’t do it like Maurice can.”

“Let’s go,” Rebekah said.

For Myron, the afternoon was the main event. His charge, Rebekah, would marry Darnell. They’d decided to marry before Dancer’s Bistro opened, because they weren’t sure when they’d have the opportunity while running two restaurants. As it was, they would have a short honeymoon, but it was better than no honeymoon.

Myron stood alone. As always, his appearance was immaculate. He wore a charcoal grey tailored suit and matching tie. His tailored shirt was pale pink, the sleeves protruded from his jacket by precisely half an inch as he’d specified. His handmade black leather shoes shone.

He continually glanced at his phone, waiting for the message telling him Rebekah was arriving. He took a deep breath. *I’m only walking her from the car to the gazebo. Nothing can go wrong. No reason to be nervous.*

Raising his eyes from his screen, his gaze focused on his two women. Despite the color of their outfits being different, they were a matching set.

In his heart, Alison was already connected to Judy and himself. The encounter that morning had driven home the need to connect the dots and find a way to become a family. It also increased the temptation to let it be about sex, but Alison wasn’t someone to have sex with on the side, not for him, and not for Judy. He knew the real reason the women hadn’t given into their desires; despite, he was sure, getting carried away occasionally.

He believed one event would enable everything to fall into place, but he couldn’t imagine it occurring soon. *I... We need to be patient.*

His phone buzzed in his hand. He glanced at the screen. Rebekah would arrive soon.

Myron was waiting at the curbside when Rebekah’s limousine arrived. He opened the door and assisted her from the car. Suzy Q slipped out behind her.

She whispered, “Don’t forget to throw me the bouquet.” She darted down the nondescript gray passage between the buildings into The Secret Garden.

“You are stunningly beautiful, Rebekah,” he said.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek. “Thank you,” she whispered.

He frowned. “For what?”

“My life.”

The Tenth Street Tavern

Judy and Ali were sitting in their booth at Frank's Diner, waiting for their breakfast. *Don't know if we'll still be able to have breakfast together when Dancer's opens.*

Ali said, "I've got a meeting with Burt, Darnell, Rebekah, and Dancer later. Focusing on getting the restaurant set up distracts me."

"Here's Suzy Q with our breakfast now."

"Looking at her cute little ass distracts me, too."

"Behave yourself."

While they ate their scrambled eggs, they listened to The Flamingos version of *I Only Have Eyes for You*.

"I only have eyes for you, Judy," Ali said.

"That's clearly not true..."

"Why don't you come with me? We could use your input."

Myron and Judy had discussed it and agreed to have Ali handle these planning meetings. She needed to find her feet as restaurant manager and work with Darnell, Rebekah, and Dancer. If either Myron or Judy were present, everyone would defer to them.

"I have plans today." Judy squeezed her hand. "You'll be fine."

Ali frowned. "What plans?"

"I'm going to visit Myriam in her bar. You want to come? She'd love to see you. In fact, I'm sure she'd open her legs for you... If you want *that* experience."

Ali shuddered. "God no! I don't even want to think about it. Besides, she's a fucking bitch, can't stand her. Never understood why Frank married her."

"I can. She's actually quite attractive, and she's not such a bad person."

"Well, if you think she's so attractive, you go there. No... Don't you dare. If you did, it'd kill me."

"Don't worry, I wouldn't. Mind you, she's offered."

"I'm sure she has," Ali spat out the last words. "The slut."

"Nothing wrong with being a slut." Judy grinned.

"Well, it proves you wrong. I wouldn't fuck *anything* with a pussy and a pulse."

"That's because you know Myriam. There's a history and you don't like her. If you met her in a bar, you'd probably go there."

Ali was thoughtful for a moment. "Yeah," she said, "you may be right. That's a sobering thought. I don't know anything about the women I've picked up."

"Or the men."

"Two, as an experiment."

"Experimenting is fun, but sometimes experiments can have disastrous results."

"Hadn't thought about it like that. I've been enjoying my freedom, but too busy now to go to bars."

“That’s a good thing.”

“Here’s Rebekah and Darnell now. Looks like they’re ready to go. See you tomorrow. Enjoy Myriam.”

Ali stood, leaned over and pressed her lips lightly against Judy’s, the tip of her tongue teasing Judy’s lips.

“I’m sure I’ll enjoy *talking* with Myriam, if that’s what you mean.”

Judy watched Ali leave. *Glad we’re back to normal.* She glanced at her watch. *Time to go myself.*

The taxi delivered Judy to the Tenth Street Tavern; she paid the driver, got out, and gazed at the building. *Well, it is a tavern, and it is on Tenth Street. Unimaginative, but accurate.*

It was a blond brick building with three large windows facing the street, and a door with a tired-looking red awning. An uninviting low-end suburban bar.

Judy pushed the door open and glanced around the dimly lit tavern. The furniture and the bar were fake wood, worn, and jaded after too many years of use and cleaning. Twenty-five years ago, it may have been fashionable in a suburban sort of way. Now it looked tired. *Still, the bar’s clean, so credit Myriam for that.*

Myriam was behind the bar, wearing a low-cut lemon shirt and a short white skirt. *A bar woman’s uniform in Myriam’s mind?* She reached up to replace a bottle on the top shelf, giving Judy an eyeful of her aqua colored lace panties. Myriam turned to see who’d entered. She was at home here. Myriam, like the tavern, looked jaded and past her prime. *Made for each other.*

“Judy Vernon,” Myriam said. “It’s been a long time. Thought you would never make it down here.”

“Hello Myriam. I’m sorry. Time gets away.”

“Time keeps on slippin’ into the future.”

“Isn’t that a line from a Steve Miller song?”

“Yes. What can I get you?”

“How’s the house red?”

Myriam shrugged. “Passable, nothing fancy.”

A bit like you. “I’ll try a glass,” Judy said.

She poured a glass of red. The glasses on the bench gleamed from the under-counter dishwasher. Watching Myriam make a whisky and soda for herself was an experience.

The bottle was on the top shelf, another flash of aqua lace covered ass. A measured shot and the bottle replaced, giving Judy an encore. The second act, she bent forward from the waist to take the soda from the under-counter refrigerator, her breasts freed from the prison of the red lacey bra swung freely. Judy averted her eyes, and the mirror reflected everything Myriam had to offer, trimmed with aqua lace.

Myriam placed both drinks in front of Judy and came around the bar to sit, facing her, not the bar. Judy turned to Myriam, and there it was.... short skirt ridden up to reveal aqua

lace panties, with her unruly pubic hair protruding from the lace. As during her previous visits, Judy found her eyes riveted to Myriam's crotch, like a car wreck you can't stop staring at.

Myriam smiled. She seemed to think people staring at her barely covered vagina meant she was still attractive. "The offer stands," Myriam said. "I'd be happy to open my legs for you anytime you want, and you won't have to pay. I was joking before... I'd do you for free."

Judy dragged her eyes away. In contrast to her pubic hair, Myriam's hair was well kept and dyed caramel with honey highlights, Judy guessed. She didn't know why she was so mesmerized by Myriam's vagina, because she didn't find it or Myriam attractive, but it had a magnetic effect on her.

"As attractive as that sounds, Myriam, I'll pass," Judy said.

"Up to you, but the offer and my legs will remain open if you ever change your mind."

She forced herself to focus on Myriam's hazel eyes, which were alive, and didn't have that 'tired of life' look she'd displayed when they'd first met.

Judy said, "Speaking of which, have you got a new man, or woman, in your life?"

Myriam smiled. "Both."

"Oh, interesting. Together or separately?"

"Together. Sometimes I'll take a customer into the office for a quick fuck on the sofa, if I'm horny. Keeps 'em coming back hoping they'll get some more. One guy, Victor, married—less complicated that way—always hanging around at closing time, so occasionally after I'd closed up, I'd take him into the office for a quick fuck before going home. Helps me to sleep.

"One day a woman came into the bar, shouting and screaming at me. Turns out she was Victor's wife, Vivian. Imagine that Victor and Vivian. I call them the V team. They'd had a fight, and Victor told her he was having an affair with me. Stupid bastard, you never admit it. Bill, my Bull Dyke cook, comes out of the kitchen, meat cleaver in hand, and that quietened Vivian down real quick. Bill's scary. Strong as an Ox, hard as nails and covered in prison ink.

"Vivian sat at the bar and cried. I gave her a drink to settle her down. Bill glared at her, nodded at me, and went back to the kitchen. When Vivian settled down, I poured us both a drink, came around to sit with her, gave her a chance to talk. I noticed she was staring at my pussy, like you are."

"Oh. Sorry," Judy said and forced her attention back to Myriam's face.

"I don't mind. I had Squirrel watch the bar. That's Bill's girl. Helps behind the bar when I'm busy, helps Bill in the kitchen and is our waitress too. Just the three of us work here. Pretty little thing is Squirrel. Bill caught me checking her out one time, and said, 'if you touch her, I'll take my meat cleaver to your pussy and extend your gash to your chin.' I believed her.

"I suggested to Vivian we could talk somewhere more private, made her another strong drink, and took her back to the office. One thing led to another, and I did her there on the desk. Fuck me, if she didn't go home and tell Victor. They had another fight, and both of them came back. I gave them a drink and told them we'd talk after closing, when I took them back to my place and to bed.

“Always wanted to do a couple. Victor, being a man, loved the idea, not that Vivian didn’t enjoy it too. I made sure she did. We’ve been together ever since. They have their place, and I have mine. They’re married so no losing my house in a messy divorce. Perfect for me, to be honest.”

Myriam took a long drink from her glass. She wiped her mouth, then belched quietly. Judy took a sip of her wine. *She’s right, it’s passable*, nodded and waited for Myriam to continue.

“You hungry? The food here is pretty good, not flash like downtown mind, but good. Having a decent cook made a difference here. When I took over, the food was shit. Now it’s good. We have a lot of single men around here, divorced losers, most of them. Come in for their dinner and a couple of drinks most nights, or stop for a drink on their way home. Business is steady, it’ll pick up soon, still early. A lot of guys call in for lunch. Some eat here twice a day. Decent food, reasonable prices, and a friendly atmosphere. Never any trouble. If there is, Bill takes care of it.

“We do all right for a couple of dykes and a slut. Joe, the owner’s happy. Gave me ten percent of the place, so it’s mine now. Bill taps the kegs and keeps the pipes clean, strong as an ox is Bill. It used to be a dump. The last manager was lazy, the place was always dusty, and the pipes were dirty. I don’t think he ever cleaned them, and the food was shit. They used to buy that rubbish you heat in plastic bags. Bill learned to cook inside. We’re doing okay.”

A strong woman with a lot of tattoos came out of the kitchen. Short brown hair and hard brown eyes. She wore sleeveless Demin overalls, the bib and brace type, and a white T-shirt. No bra. There was no doubting who or what Bill was. She was a caricature of herself.

“Here’s Bill now,” Myriam said. “Bill, this is my friend Judy Vernon. Judy, this is Bill.”

Judy stood and extended her hand. Bill took it. She had a powerful grip. She gave Judy a thorough appraisal. “Pleased to meet ya,” she said to Judy and to Myriam. “You’re wasting your time. She’s too classy for you.”

Myriam replied, “I offered, but she declined.”

“Don’t blame her, even I wouldn’t go there.”

“Still can’t take her eyes off my pussy, though.”

Judy flushed and looked away.

“Not her fault. You’re always shoving your skanky pussy in people’s faces. Put it away or you’ll put the fine lady off her lunch.”

Judy asked, “What do you recommend for lunch, Bill?”

“Chicken,” she said. “I do a real nice chicken.”

“I’ll have the chicken then. Thank you, Bill.”

“Okay, going for a slash, then I’ll get onto it.”

Myriam said, “She likes you. At lunch it’s toasted sandwiches and fries, although we call them panini. Our lunch guys are mostly contractors, plumbers, electricians, a few salesmen and local workers. They don’t have too long for lunch, so need something quick. Sometimes they’ll want a beer, but usually it’s coffee. Filter coffee, nothing special. Proper meals we do at dinnertime.”

Myriam smiled to herself, an amused half-snort escaping her nose.

“What’s so funny?” Judy asked.

“Make a good name for a sitcom, *Two Dykes and a Slut*. Don’t you think?”

Judy grinned. “I’m sure it would.”

Two customers came in, and Myriam excused herself. She used a handheld device to take their orders.

Returning to the bar, she said, “It sends the order direct to the kitchen. I used to get busy and forget to tell the kitchen about orders sometimes. Now the machine prints out when I confirm it on this thing. You want another wine?”

“Sure,” Judy said. “Modern technology is amazing, don’t you think?”

“I guess so, but learning how to use it is difficult.”

It wasn’t long before a young woman brought food out to the men. Toasted sandwiches piled high with fries. *Looks appetizing. It would be a popular lunch spot with working men.*

She examined the girl. Squirrel, she presumed. Long, light brown hair, bright brown eyes, a straight nose, and a full mouth with a warm smile. She wore a tight white blouse and tighter short shorts that left little to the imagination. Judy joined the men in watching her walk back to the kitchen. Another reason men would come here for lunch, she supposed. *Myriam was right. Squirrel is an attractive young lady.*

“Touch her and Bill will slice you from clit to chin,” Myriam said. “Bill’s a local girl, everyone knows her, and everyone knows she put the last guy who messed with her girl in the ground. No one would have the balls to touch Squirrel, and if they did, they wouldn’t have them for long.”

Three more guys came in, and Myriam went to take their orders. *Could be a story in Bill.*

It wasn’t long before Squirrel brought Judy’s lunch. Judy thanked her and watched her walk back to the kitchen. *Very nice.*

“Clit to chin,” Myriam said.

Judy examined her lunch. *Inviting.* A spatchcock chicken—luckily, a small one—with home fries and a salad. Not a fancy modernized version like Darnell would’ve produced, but well prepared and cooked.

Judy cut a piece of chicken and placed it in her mouth. *Delicious.* The chicken was moist. Many bar restaurants like this overcook their food and it’s too dry. She tried the home fries. They were exactly as they should be, crispy on the outside, fluffy on the inside and covered with some herbs and seasoning. The salad was fresh and came with a blue cheese dressing. It was a satisfying meal.

Understand why single men would come here for their dinner.

Bill

After the lunch rush was over, Bill came into the bar as Judy exited the restroom. Bill studied her as she crossed to the bar and took her seat on the bar stool. *I'd go there.*

Bill poured herself a beer, sat beside Judy, and smiled. *Sweet innys I bet.* She sipped her beer and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "That's lunch done, aside from the occasional straggler. Squirrel's cleaning up in the kitchen. How's the chicken?"

"Wonderful. Thank you for recommending it."

"Myriam tells me you're *The Judy Vernon*. I read your stuff, like the way you write, and you've got a nice ass too, if you don't mind me saying."

"Not at all," Judy said. She didn't roll her eyes.

Like the way she says my name. "I like your food blogs, learned how to use a computer inside, learned how to cook inside too. Your blogs inspire me to be a better cook, even though I'm just cooking in this place, and that's all I'll ever do."

"When I started, they were having the food delivered from a restaurant supply company, pre-made meals in plastic bags. It was shit. Most of the other stuff was frozen. I like the way you describe food, and the freshness you talk about inspired me. Mostly, I use fresh ingredients now. I'm thinking about getting rid of the potato chips and switching entirely to home fries. What do you think?"

"Your home fries were great. I don't like those prefabricated chips at all, so perhaps I'm the wrong person to ask."

"Our customers are okay with frozen chips, but they would be. I've had a lot of positive comments about the home fries since I started serving them with the chicken. So, I think I'll make the switch. I like to go to the market in the morning before I come in, buy the ingredients myself. The panini are okay, but they're just commercial panini. I thought of making them myself, but we're not equipped."

Judy suggested, "You might want to think about Alice's Bakery. They make a good panini, and they deliver fresh daily."

"Could be worth a look, maybe a bit more expensive, but with home fries and good panini, we could charge an extra buck or two, I think."

Bill glanced around the tavern at the guys, who were still enjoying their lunch. Most sat alone.

"Still good value for our lunch guys, mostly working men on the road all day. I'm proud of my food. That's the main thing. Makes me feel I'm worthwhile, you know."

"Yes," said Judy. "I do."

"How do you know Myriam?"

"I was a friend of her first husband."

"Frank. She talks about him a lot; says he was going to be the mayor."

"He was, but he had a little bad luck."

"Yeah, I heard. Something to do with that Billy, who died about a year back."

"They were business partners."

“She must’ve cried for more than a week when she heard Billy died. Surprised me because until then he was always that ‘loser bastard who destroyed my life.’ Guess you never know how people really feel.”

“No, we don’t,” replied Judy.

“Can’t imagine Myriam as the Mayor’s wife. Then again, I think she would surprise people. Most see her as the dumb slut she pretends to be, but she’s not. She’s not dumb, I mean, she’s a slut. Not that I hold it against her. I was a slut, too.”

Judy nodded. “Many of us have that phase.”

Bill grinned, then continued. “Been down on more pussy than *The Titanic* or whatever the saying is. Funny, I don’t consider myself a slut, never did. It’s like that, isn’t it? Nobody ever considers guys to be sluts, no matter how many they sleep with. Let’s face it, I might have been born without a cock, but in every other way, I’m a guy. Can’t pretend otherwise.”

Judy nodded. She reached into her bag and passed a document to Bill. She placed her digital recorder on the bar, but didn’t turn it on. “Bill, I’m writing a book about people and their stories. I’d like to include your story. I’ll change names and other details, and the document I gave you will guarantee anonymity. Would you like to tell me your story?”

Bill read the document. Looked at Judy, glanced at the digital recorder, shrugged, then nodded. “Sure, why not? Everyone knows my story.”

Judy leaned forward and turned the digital recorder on. “Thank you, Bill.”

Like the way she says my name.

Bill knew Myriam was hovering, pretending to be busy, trying to listen to what was being said, but she didn’t care. She had nothing to hide from Myriam.

Bill subconsciously leaned a little closer to the digital recorder, frowning a little as she concentrated on her words. “Never been with a man, never wanted to. That’s for girls and fags, and I’m neither. I tried to be a girl once, when I was a kid. Wore skirts and dresses. It never sat right with me. Though, I quite enjoyed the breeze up my skirt.

“Never had a cock inside me, real or plastic. Nothing except the odd finger. Guessing my hymen’s intact. Who’d think it, an old prison dyke like me, still a virgin? Only technically mind, I lost my cherry when I was fourteen.

“I used to have a girlfriend, never slept around. One day we’re in a bar and a guy’s giving her a hard time for being with a bull dyke. What they used to call me, but they only ever said it once. I lost it. Used to happen a lot; had a temper on me. Anger issues, they call it now.”

Bill finished her beer, leaned across the bar, and refilled her glass. Noticing Judy’s glass was nearly empty, she snapped her fingers at Myriam and pointed at Judy’s glass.

Myriam stood in front of them, bent over, and leaned down to take a wine bottle from the fridge. Her breasts swung free, her lacy ass framed in the mirror.

“Jesus Myriam,” Bill said. “Put those sloppy old things away before you have someone’s eye out.”

Myriam topped up Judy’s glass, saying, “You love it. Neither of you can take your eyes off them.” As if to emphasize her point, she replaced the bottle slowly and deliberately, giving them another show.

Bill sipped her beer, cleaned her mouth with her tongue, and contemplated Myriam as she attended to another customer. “She’s not stupid. Our most popular drink is whiskey soda. Usually bar tenders keep the cheap spirits low and the expensive stuff on the upper shelves. Not Myriam, Cheap whiskey on the top shelf, so anyone ordering it gets a show. Guys do like to ogle Myriam’s lace covered ass and pussy in the mirror when she bends to get their soda from the fridge. Not to mention her tits, practically falling on their faces. We make more money from whiskey than we do from beer.”

“Yes, Myriam knows how to use what she’s got,” Judy agreed.

“She does, but sometimes she over uses it.” Bill resumed her story. “I was angry too. Angry with my parents, angry with God, angry with the world because I was born this way. I wanted to be normal like everyone else, but I’ve learned no one is normal, or perhaps that’s what makes us normal?” Bill shrugged.

“I beat the guy to death with a pool cue. Didn’t mean to kill him. Had a few assaults on my record, but I’d avoided prison. Got fifteen years for manslaughter and served every day. Paid my debt. I dumped my girlfriend, couldn’t ask her to wait. Of course, nothing but pussy inside and I took full advantage for a dozen years, until I met my Squirrel.

“As soon as I was in, I was recruited as muscle for the top dog. She was a *bitch*. There were three of us who provided the muscle. She treated us like morons, told us we were morons. She was a nasty piece of work, ran things based on fear and thought it was respect. If she didn’t like the way someone looked at her, she’d have us beat her up.

“I didn’t like that, and I didn’t like being told I was a moron. None of us did. I didn’t get a good education, because I was always getting suspended or expelled, usually for beating some boy who made fun of me or called me names, but I’m not stupid.”

Bill paused, sipped her beer, and considered the woman sitting beside her. *God, I would. She’d taste sweet, can tell. Who am I kidding? I’ll never have a fine woman like this.* Bill sighed heavily, took another mouthful of her beer, and continued.

“I, err... Somebody shanked the bitch in the shower. They never found out who did it, not that the guards tried too hard. They didn’t like her either. Everyone was glad to see the back of her.

“I took over but changed things. She liked to run all the schemes and scams, contraband, drugs, whatever. Not me, too much trouble and too much looking over your shoulder. I followed the mafia model. I divided everything up and allocated territories. But everyone paid a tribute to me. This was true of all existing and new business.

“They did the work and took the risks; I took a piece and protected their operation. I treated everyone with respect, instead of demanding they treat me with respect. The guards, mostly, were happy because there was little trouble. I wouldn’t allow it.

“No inmate took action against another without it being sanctioned by me. If they did, there were consequences. If there was a dispute, I’d settle it. Maybe someone wasn’t happy because someone didn’t pay the correct fee when they’d rented her bitch for a day or something. I’d decide if anything needed to be paid and how much, and they paid it.

“Occasionally a new girl, or a transferee, would have ideas about taking over, or taking a piece for themselves, but that nonsense didn’t last long. My muscle educated them. Learned a lot about running things inside.

“I ran the kitchen too. Sometimes we’d get an inmate who had been a professional cook somewhere, and I’d get them to teach me culinary skills, because I love creating a meal

from a pile of ingredients and I wanted to be more creative, and add layers of flavor to what I cooked. I always figured I'd end up in a bar kitchen like this when I got out."

She sighed, picked up her glass and gulped, then wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. She stared at Judy, trying to decide whether to tell her what she wanted to say. *Who am I kidding? I'd do anything she wanted me to.*

"There was one guard. A real mean bitch. Used to have leather gloves tucked into her belt. Her thing was putting her gloves on and molesting girls. I think she got the idea from an old Australian prison show or something. That's when I met my Squirrel. I found her crying in her cell. She'd been molested by the bitch, so I decided to teach the bitch a lesson.

"We cornered her in a storeroom. My girls held her, and I removed her utility belt and hung it up. I unzipped her skirt and let it drop. We pushed her tights and underwear down and forced her onto the floor. The girls held her legs open, and I gave her a taste of her own medicine, and I wasn't gentle.

"Then I looked at her face. She was terrified and crying. I felt sorry for her. I kissed her gently, then used my tongue. Stopped forcing myself on her and began making love to her. She responded, and I brought her to orgasm."

Bill studied Judy. She made and held eye contact. "That's my thing, going down on women, and I am very, *very* good at it, or so I'm told."

Judy didn't break eye contact. She smiled and rested her hand on Bill's arm. "I'll remember that."

Bill swallowed hard and looked away. *Oh, God!* "Afterwards, she lie on the floor shaking and twitching from the orgasm I gave her, but the fear remained in her eyes. I pulled her up, dressed her as gently as I could, put her utility belt back on. She could have sprayed us with pepper spray or used her radio and called for backup, but she didn't she just stared at me. I whispered to her, 'Stop molesting girls, and get yourself a girlfriend.'

"We left her there. She never reported us. She was quite senior, so she could choose her assignments. Word was she had herself transferred to the night watch in the solitary wing. Took up with a crazy bitch who'd butchered her family for whatever reason—sentenced to death, but it got commuted to life in solitary confinement.

"It's quiet in solitary, so they could spend their nights as they wanted. No one could surprise them, because no one could come into solitary, unless she unlocked the door and let them in. It was considered one of those retirement jobs, just sit around all night with nothing to do, so people guessed she'd had enough and was biding her time until retirement.

"I don't know if anyone knew what happened, but everyone, including the other guards, was glad to see the back of her. I had Squirrel transferred into my cell, and we've been together ever since. Guess I took my own advice."

Bill drained her beer, leaned across the bar, and poured herself another. "Myriam's the boss, but we work as a team. Besides, she needs me." Bill drank some beer, belched and wiped the foam from her freshly poured drink from her mouth. "Not to mention she's scared of me. Myriam doesn't understand boundaries. If you give her an inch, she'll take a mile, so you gotta keep on top of her. Make sure she doesn't fuck anything up by being Myriam."

Bill sipped a little more, placed her glass on the bar, and locked her eyes on Judy's again. *Not much I wouldn't do for a taste of that.*

“Got offered a parole hearing a couple of times but declined. That would have left Squirrel there by herself, plus I didn’t think I could make it on parole. Chances are I would’ve gotten a bastard parole officer on my case all the time, and working with parole hanging over your head is no fun, I hear. They treat you like shit and you can’t do anything about it, so best not to risk it with my temper.

“I did my time, got out two months before Squirrel. Told my girls if anything happened to her or if anyone touched her, I’d get myself put back in and gut them.

“When I got out, I was lucky because Myriam was looking for a cook, took one look at me and hired me, figured I could deal with any trouble, too. She gave me an advance to rent a place and agreed to take Squirrel on. For all her bullshit, Myriam is all right.”

The door opened, and a customer walked to the bar. “Always get a few stragglers after lunch. We don’t have rigid hours in the kitchen. If they want something, we make it for them. Can’t make money resting in the afternoon. Watch this.” Bill nodded towards Myriam, and Judy followed her gaze.

Myriam reached up to the top shelf to get a bottle of whiskey. She replaced the bottle before mixing the drink and gave an encore performance. A little ice. Then she bent over to get the mixer. Finally, she gave the customer, who was entertained by the performance, his drink and he went to his table happy.

“He’ll quickly down it and return to the bar for another show,” Bill said. “I’ve seen guys wait until she replaces the bottle on the top shelf and then decide they want a double, so they can have a repeat performance. She’s not stupid.”

“No,” agreed Judy. “She’s not.”

“I wouldn’t go there myself because I got Squirrel, but her ass is in pretty good shape. I enjoy the show, but wouldn’t admit it to her. And I didn’t notice you looking away.”

Judy flushed. “Not my type, but I have to admit, I find it difficult to look away, and I do kinda like her.”

Squirrel came out of the kitchen, Judy saw her, and glanced away.

“It’s all right, you can look.”

Judy smiled. “That’s a pretty girl you’ve got there.”

“Oh yeah. Sexy too. I’m lucky and I know it.”

“Bill, we have an order,” Squirrel said.

“Stragglers,” Bill said. “It was nice meeting you, Judy Vernon. I really enjoyed talking with you.”

“Yes Bill, I’ve very much enjoyed it, too.”

Darnell's Creations

Judy and Ali were listening to Louis Armstrong's *La Vie en Rose*. It was the music Dorothy had played at Kansas Café. Judy smiled. *This is more like it.*

Suzy Q brought them breakfast. A pink kimono today, with red Sakura blossoms and flowing sleeves. Her hair was braided on either side, and tied back into a bun adorned with red, pink, and white silk sakura flowers on a red and black fan.

Judy studied Ali, watching Suzy Q skip away as usual. "God, I can feel what you're thinking."

Ali indicated George, who was bussing a table nearby with an eye on Judy as he did so. "I can see what George is thinking. Notice the bulge in his trousers."

"I've noticed several times, quite impressive. Besides, what are you doing staring at poor George's crotch?"

"Hard to miss it."

"It's certainly hard." Judy grinned.

"You *like* making him hard!"

Judy shrugged. "I like to know I'm still attractive."

Ali smiled. "You can ask me or feel between my legs to see how attractive you are."

"You love me, so it doesn't count."

"So does poor George."

"Maybe."

"You know he does. I'm too focused on Dancer's opening to think about sex these days. Moni comes over most nights after work. All very domestic, but she doesn't mind, and I enjoy her company."

As she ate breakfast, Judy's mind filled with images of Ali and Monica, at least what she imagined Monica would look like.

"Ali?" she asked. "Have you and Monica settled into a relationship?"

"I don't know. Not exactly. I think we could, but it wouldn't have a future because she's looking for love, and my heart is twice taken."

Judy stared out the window. *Monica thinks Ali will change her mind.* She turned her head and studied Ali. "Do you think you're being fair to her?"

Ali shrugged. "She knows the score, and she knows Myron is close to making it happen."

"You're using her, and knowing how she feels about you, you're being selfish."

Ali looked past Judy and out the window, but didn't respond.

Judy nodded and smiled.

"We'd better head down to the docks," Ali said.

"Yes, Myron will meet us there."

Judy snuggled into Ali in the back of the taxi, in the same way she did with Myron. Feeling contented and loved. *Myron's right, I don't want Ali on the side. I want them both.*

When they stepped into The Shipyard, Judy grabbed Ali's arm then froze. Deep blue carpet with gold patterns, angel chairs in every color of the rainbow sat in matching pairs at each redwood table. A small, polished dance floor in the back corner, and a jukebox. The deep blue carpet and colorful chairs balanced each other rather than clashing, as one might expect. The ambience in the room seemed right, neither too dark nor too bright.

"What?" Ali asked.

"I don't recognize the place."

Dancer was behind the new redwood bar; he had a confused look on his face. "Good morning, ladies," he said as they entered.

"Oh, hello Dancer," they said, almost in unison.

"I'm showing Judy around," Ali said.

"Fagified!" responded Dancer.

Ali finished giving Judy the tour and left her at the bar. Judy was proud of Ali for the taste she'd shown in the design of everything. *Myron knew she could do it.*

Judy sat at the bar, looking forward to chatting with Dancer.

"Still early," he said. "Let's see if Shirley Temple is as good a Barista as he claims."

Judy nodded.

"Hey Shirley," he called out. "Can we have a couple of coffees in here, please?"

"Aye, aye, Captain," Jason answered.

Dancer rolled his eyes.

Before long, Jason brought their coffees. Black for Dancer and flat white for Judy. "Ali told me."

He handed Dancer his coffee. "Captain my Captain," he said.

"You've got a mouth on you," said Dancer.

"Yep, and I know how to use it, too. You planning on switching sides now the bar has been..." he stopped and winked at Judy, allowing Dancer to finish his sentence.

"Fagified!" Dancer obliged. "Not a chance, sweetheart."

"Well, the offer is always open if you change your mind."

Dancer rolled his eyes. "In your dreams."

"Oh Dancer, you have no idea."

"This is the nonsense I have to put up with now," Dancer said to Judy.

"I have an idea," Jason said. "We could find ourselves a married couple. You can keep the wife busy while the husband has his way with me."

"I don't know how you come up with this shit."

Jason winked at Judy. "I know... What about Judy and Myron? I'd quite like to have Myron, and we all know you'd like a piece of miss Judy here."

Judy smiled and winked at Dancer.

“Sorry, boss,” Dancer said. “He really is incorrigible,” and to Jason, “Haven’t you got work to do?”

“Yes, sir!” Jason said as he disappeared into the restaurant.

Judy glanced at Dancer, who was smiling at Jason. *There’s genuine affection there.*

“He’s a pain in the ass sometimes,” Dancer said.

Judy grinned and Dancer clarified, “I don’t mean that literally. To be honest, the boy is good for me. His lighthearted banter is exactly what I need. Don’t get me wrong, I like my drunks. Well, I did before the changes to the area chased what was left of them away, but they were often morose. Got a bit wearing over the years. I didn’t realize it until Shirley Temple lightened things up.”

“I can see that, Dancer.”

“Mind don’t tell him I told you that. Actually, when it’s the two of us, he’s quite normal. Interestingly, he only puts on the outrageous act when there are women around. When he’s with his own kind, he becomes a cute boy. He’s certainly a character.”

Judy looked up when the door opened. It was Frank Dunn.

“Hello, Judy,” he said.

“Hi, Frank, this is my friend Dancer.”

Frank extended his hand. “Pleased to meet you Dancer, Frank Dunn.”

“Likewise,” Dancer responded. “Would you like a coffee, or perhaps...”

“Black coffee is fine, thanks.”

“Hey, Shirley Temple, can we have another black coffee?” Dancer called out.

“Aye, aye, Captain,” replied Jason.

“Darnell invited me to check the place out,” Frank said. “Got a couple of guys starting here tomorrow.”

Jason brought Frank’s coffee. “Well... hell-lo,” he said, extending his hand.

“Frank Dunn.”

“I’m Jason, if...”

“Haven’t you got work to do?” Dancer asked.

“Yes, sir.” Jason saluted.

Dancer rolled his eyes. “Don’t mind him,” he said. “He gets a little excited when he meets a new man.”

Ali joined them. “Are you staying for the tasting, Frank?”

“I probably shouldn’t, can’t accept gifts from...”

“Nonsense,” said Ali. “It’s on me. My treat.”

“Okay then, thank you,” Frank said. “Would you mind showing me around?”

“Of course not. Come on, it’ll give your coffee a chance to cool.”

Myron arrived with Art and Ruth shortly after Ali and Frank disappeared into the restaurant. Judy stood to greet her husband and parents-in-law.

"Hello young Myron. Art, Ruth," Dancer said.

"How do you like the new place, Dancer?" Art asked.

"Fagified."

"You'll get used to it," Myron said.

"That's what I'm afraid of," replied Dancer, only half joking. "Can I organize you folks some coffee?"

"Yes, please," Ruth said on behalf of her husband and son.

Instead of calling out to Jason, Dancer went into the dining room to request the coffees.

Probably suggesting to Jason he should be on his best behavior.

"Ali is showing Frank Dunn around, then she'll want to give you a tour," explained Judy.

"She's done a wonderful job here," Ruth observed, glancing around the bar.

"Indeed," agreed Art, "I didn't recognize the place."

Burt Rogers arrived before Dancer returned.

Myron suggested, "Maybe we'll check out the new rooms while Alison is busy."

They went through the back of the restaurant, which took them to the refurbished lobby of The Old Seamen's Lodge, where Irving Jones was on duty.

The lobby was unrecognizable from the one Judy had encountered on her visit three years earlier. The old, caged reception area had been replaced by a modern, colorful pink and green counter, with the baggage storage area rebuilt to its side.

The vending machines had been moved, and a doorway had been opened into Dancer's Bistro and The Shipyard. The sofas had been replaced with angel chairs and coffee tables, matching those in The Shipyard, the chair colors the same as the counter, and the floor had been covered with the deep blue, gold patterned carpet.

He proudly showed them through two of the new rooms, all twelve of which were booked for tomorrow's opening. "Makes me think," Irving said. "With the changes to this district, it may be time to think about renovating some of the older rooms."

Myron glanced at Art, who nodded. Myron said, "Burt, perhaps you and Irving could come up with a plan for a staggered renovation and we'll consider it, but I think you're right, Irving."

A nod, and Art demonstrated confidence in his son, without making a big deal of it. Myron had showed similar confidence in Irving, without letting on they were several steps ahead. Judy admired both.

It was time for the tasting. The tables in the restaurant had been put together to form a long table. Darnell, Rebecca, and Ali were preparing to bring out some sample plates.

Dancer called to Jason, "Come and take a seat Shirley Temple. After all, it's your lot who'll be ordering this food. Tell us what you think."

Jason sat beside Dancer.

Interesting, Dancer made sure he was included.

Rebekah brought the first of the dishes. “We’ll have special plates for you, Uncle Art, and Aunt Ruth. We won’t give you anything that’s not kosher.”

To the table she said, “Stuffed Chicken Feet.”

“How does one stuff chicken feet?” Dancer asked Darnell.

“Take off the nails, boil them for about ten minutes, put them in an ice bath for a few hours and then it is relatively easy, a few slits and you can pull the bones out. They’re stuffed with a crab and prawn mixture, and some spices, of course. Then we sew them up, and deep fry them. Crispy on the outside, but the filling remains moist. I can teach you Dancer.”

“No need. Never eaten chicken feet before. They’re good though,” he said as he bit into one. “Surprisingly good.”

“Thank you. It’s something different and won’t be to everyone’s taste. The lunch menu, which we’re not tasting today, will be a standard businessman’s lunch, but we think we need something different for dinner. We designed the dinner menu to attract the new type of customers who are moving to the area.”

Rebekah explained, “Today, we have a sampling of starters, entrees or mains, and sides. Ali has the menu available for anyone who wants to check it out.”

“Ash steak,” Ali announced. “Cooked directly on coals. Darnell had a ‘fire pit’ installed. We’re fully booked for both lunch and dinner for the next week.”

Darnell delivered the next plates. “Coulubiach, or my take on it,” he said. “It’s of Russian origin but was refined in France. It’s a salmon pie which contains rice and eggs. Traditionally, they use boiled egg, but we wrap the salmon topped with rice in spinach and an omelet, so the traditional ingredients, with a twist.”

“So a fagified fish pie,” suggested Dancer.

“Something like that,” smiled Darnell. “We have an excellent Beef Wellington, no twist, because it’s the sort of dish people order expecting it to be traditional.”

Rebekah brought soup. “Fruit de la mar,” she announced. “The seafood we use will change based on what’s seasonal and fresh. Being close to the Fish Market, we’ll have a selection of seafood dishes, but we won’t compete with Bait & Switch because they’re not open for dinner.”

After giving everyone time to finish their soup—vegetable soup for Art and Ruth—Darnell brought out an interesting dish. “I researched fish and chips,” he explained. “I saw some pictures of fish pieces with chips served together in a paper bag. Nothing unusual about that, but it gave me an idea. This is my take on a ‘Bag of Fish and Chips’. Char grilled calamari tube, stuffed with crispy fried whitebait, and angel hair potato chips. We make our own tartar sauce.”

“It’s bloody good,” exclaimed Dancer, unable to contain his enthusiasm long enough to swallow.

Ali delivered the next plates to them. “Beetroot Gnocchi.”

“I like the color,” Jason observed, to wind up Dancer, Judy guessed.

Dancer gave Jason a sideways look, but held his tongue.

Everyone was talking amongst themselves, speaking about the food in glowing terms.

Darnell and Rebekah brought out more dishes. “This is our premium offering. Lobster Tagliatelle,” he announced. “Braised in burnt butter and served in the shell with the pasta in a light and creamy tomato and parmesan sauce draped over the lobster tail.”

After they’d cleared away the empty plates, they brought a selection of sides. “Smokey Cauliflower Bites, Roast Rosemary, Asparagus and Baby Potatoes, Roasted Carrots with Fennel and Thyme, Lemon Pepper Roasted Broccoli, and Brussel Sprouts roasted with Cranberries. Each item on the menu has recommended sides, but there is a menu for sides. Guests can change or add additional sides if they prefer,” explained Rebekah.

This food is exceptional in concept, taste, and presentation. How many mini-features am I going to need to write?

Darnell said, “Our pastry chef doesn’t start until tomorrow, so we don’t have our desserts for tasting, except one. All the other guys have been here all week, learning the menu and learning how to prepare, create and plate them. Most are off today, because I think we’ll be busy after tomorrow.”

Ali brought out a tray of desserts. “Mini Sangria Gelatin Rings,” she announced. “A selection of berries and other fruits, set in a sangria jelly and served with our own vanilla bean ice cream. It’s refreshing and colorful.”

“Oh... it’s so pretty,” proclaimed Jason.

Dancer rolled his eyes.

Darnell went to the kitchen while his guests enjoyed their dessert. When he returned, he was met with a spontaneous round of applause.

“Darnell and Rebekah,” Myron said. “I can confidently speak for everyone when I say you two have excelled with this menu. The menu at Frank’s Diner is exceptional, which is borne out by its continued high level of patronage, but this is taking great food to the next level. You’d better get used to being busy.”

Ali said, “We open for breakfast tomorrow. No bookings for breakfast, so drop by and try our breakfast buffet. We’ll cook eggs to order. Filter coffee, using the John Farrington Blend, which is our house blend of course, will be included and bottomless, as will brewed tea. Specialty coffees and teas can be ordered, but these aren’t included in the buffet price.

“Lunch is a straightforward traditional style businessmen’s lunch, two courses. Starters are soups and warm or cold salads. Mains are the usual steak, lamb, chicken, fish options with an eggplant parmigiana for vegetarians. Cooking time is short, tailored for our lunch guests having limited time.

“Lunch begins at twelve, which is when The Shipyard will open as well, so we can offer alcohol with lunch. The Shipyard menu will be available while the bar is open from midday until midnight. Three to six will be café, or bar menu only. Dinner from six until ten.

“There’s a danger we may be understaffed at first, if it’s busier than we anticipate. Darnell and I have contingency plans in place.”

“I think you’re all taking on a lot of work here, Ali.” Ruth observed.

“We are, but it’ll be worth it, I think. We’ll do a Sunday Brunch from eleven until two, to use up any stock we haven’t used, similar to what Rebekah and Darnell do at Frank’s Diner. Breakfast is every day, of course. The rest of Sunday’s we’ll be open as a café only, because The Shipyard is open seven days.”

Frank Dunn called Myron and Judy aside. "I'm proud of them both, the leading lights of the program. Thank you both for all you've done for them, and the others I've placed with you guys."

"They've done all the work," Myron said.

"Not to mention they both have a gift for food," Judy added.

"That's a part of it. The management training and the mentoring..." Frank Dunn expanded.

"We gave them a chance," Myron said. "You too, not just us."

"They are the ones who ran with it, and they earned this second venture," confirmed Judy. "I wouldn't be surprised if this is only the beginning."

Frank Dunn nodded. "I think you're right. I have a few visits to make before the day is done. Thanks again for including me in the tasting."

They said their goodbyes and went to find Ali.

"Mama is right, darling," Myron said, looking at Ali. "You're going to be busy."

Interesting, he's calling Ali darling now.

"Yes, Myron. Thank you for giving me a piece of this. It's exciting, a wonderful opportunity, and exactly what I needed. I was out of control, to be honest."

"You've settled down now," Myron said.

Ali's face turned pink.

Judy kissed her on the cheek. "He's right, darling. You were making us both crazy."

Pink deepened to crimson, and Ali stammered, "I-I-I."

"Seriously Ali," Judy said. "You've done a wonderful job, as Myron said you would, but are you going to be okay with this? Long days and late nights, and the kids."

"Don't worry, I have it all worked out. The boys will come here after school and do their homework in the café. They can have dinner here. Darnell will make them something a little less fancy, and after dinner, they'll take the bus home. They're in high school now, so they can take care of themselves. I think they're both looking forward to it. John's okay with it, too."

"I'm sure you've thought everything through, but if you find you need an assistant manager, don't hesitate. You may be busier than you expect," Myron said. "I'll leave my ladies to entertain themselves. I have a meeting."

Myron turned Judy's face to his and kissed her goodbye. He placed his hand on the back of Ali's neck and pulled her to him. As their lips almost caressed, he slid his hand down her back, resting on her butt.

Why does watching him with Ali arouse me?

Myron had a quick word with Dancer, then left.

Ali locked her eyes on Judy's. "You know, he almost..."

Dancer's Bistro

Judy arrived at Dancer's Bistro at six the next morning for their grand opening. She wanted to support Ali.

The bistro was buzzing with excitement. Bain-Maries, which kept the breakfast offerings warm, were being placed on the bar. A blend of the aromas of bacon, sausages, their vegan options, hash browns, mushrooms, baked beans and other breakfast items filled the air. Wait staff carried cereal dispensers and milk jugs. Jason fussed over tea and brewed coffee urns, and the breakfast chef was ready at the egg station.

Ali was checking on everything, hovering over the wait staff and breakfast chefs. *I bet they're glad she won't be here for breakfast every day.*

Ali came to greet her with a rushed kiss, little more than a lip brush. Her head spinning from the buffet to the door, to the kitchen, as if she didn't know where to focus her attention next. "Calm down," Judy said. "You're going to drive everybody crazy."

"I-I just want..."

"Come, have coffee with me and let them do their jobs. You can observe from here."

"I-I can't, I..." Ali frowned, her eyes darting around the restaurant.

Judy signaled a waitress. "Can you ask Jason to make us some coffees please..." She read the name tag. "Justine."

"Yes, ma'am."

Ali opened her mouth to protest again, but Judy took her hand and dragged her to the chef's table. "Stop fussing."

"Yes, ma'am," Ali said, rolling her eyes.

"You need to relax. Trust them to do what you hired them for."

"I know, I-I..." Ali glanced around the room, looking for something that needed her attention.

Jason brought their coffees himself. "Look at you two stunners," he said. "You two could just about turn me."

"Together or separately?" Judy winked.

"Oh, separate. I couldn't handle the two of you together. If that's what you want, talk to Dancer." He grinned. "I think that man could take on all three of us."

"You should be so lucky," Judy said.

"Oh yeah, don't I know it..." Jason said as he almost skipped away.

Judy sipped her coffee and watched him return to his station. "Dancer says Jason's only outrageous in front of women."

"He's a riot," Ali said. She leaned in, and her lips found Judy's.

Judy wiped her mouth after her last sip of coffee when the head breakfast waitress, Jeanne, approached and asked, "Should we remind people passing by we are open now?"

Before Ali could answer, Judy squeezed her hand.

"What do *you* think?" Judy asked Jeanne.

Jeanne said, "We could put the special's board out, reminding people we're open for breakfast."

Judy glanced at Ali, who took her cue and said, "Good idea. Do it."

Judy smiled.

"Yeah, I get it," Ali said. "Let them do their jobs."

Judy jumped when Dancer said, "Good Morning, ladies."

He barely had time to sit when Jason placed a coffee in front of him. Dancer glanced at his coffee, and then at Jason. "You're all right sometimes, Shirley Temple," he said.

Jason said, "They've been waiting for you. Got plans for you, I understand."

Judy and Ali looked at each other and giggled.

Dancer rolled his eyes. "What's good for breakfast?" he asked. "Thought I'd better check things out for myself."

"Why don't I order us some rolled Japanese Omelets, and I'll bring us back a share plate from the buffet," Ali suggested.

"Good enough for me," Dancer responded.

While they ate breakfast, a delivery from the fish market arrived. Judy knew from Frank's Diner there would be other deliveries from the vegetable market and the butchers Darnell used. Darnell went to the markets early, seeking the freshest seasonal produce.

Ali fetched the kitchen hand to help with the deliveries.

After breakfast, Judy said, "C'mon Ali, let's go for a walk and enjoy the morning air."

Ali frowned and looked around the restaurant.

"Everything's under control," Judy said.

Dancer added, "I'll head home too. I'll be here for breakfast every day. It's close and better than what I'd make myself. So, don't worry about breakfast, Ali. I'll keep half an eye on things."

Judy took Ali's hand, who nodded and allowed Judy to pull her out of the chair. Leaving the bistro together, Dancer turned right, and the women crossed the road to O'Rourke's Park.

As they passed the public conveniences, Judy said, "That was our Billy's office."

"Poor Billy. Without Frank, there was no one to save him from himself."

Judy shook her head and glanced across the bay. "He didn't want to be saved."

Judy led Ali to the seawall. She stood behind her with her arms draped over Ali's shoulders.

"Close your eyes," Judy instructed. "Feel the cool sea breeze caress your face."

"I'd rather feel you caress..."

Given the position of Judy's hands, the first thing she could think of to pinch was Ali's nipple.

"Ouch... What?"

“Shh!” said Judy. “Close your eyes and concentrate on the moment. None of your nonsense.”

Judy closed her eyes too, chin resting on Ali’s shoulder. “Feel the breeze on your face, smell the salt air, listen to the wire halyard tapping against the flagpole. Always makes me think of morse code.”

Ali leaned into Judy. “I can hear the sea gently kissing the seawall.”

Judy turned her head, her lips caressing Ali’s jaw line. “Like this.”

“Mmm.” Ali turned towards Judy until their lips touched.

Judy’s tongue parted Ali’s lips and caressed its way into her mouth.

When they separated, neither looked at the vista laid out before them, at the sailboats gliding across the waves on the breeze, or at the ocean dancing under the sunlight. Instead, their eyes locked with the same intensity which had connected them on the day they’d met.

A gull, hovering unseen above them, screeched like a car with worn brake pads, which broke the spell, releasing the hypnotic handcuffs.

Ali glanced at her watch. “We’d better go back.”

Judy nodded, leaned in and pressed her lips against Ali’s, which parted to accommodate her tongue. She took Ali’s hand and led her back to the bistro. “I love us,” she whispered.

When they returned to Dancer’s, the hum of people talking over breakfast was subdued. Many tables were now vacant. Empty Bain-Maries were being taken to the kitchen for washing and storage until the next morning. Jason was fussing over cakes in the refrigerated display case, between flitting from table to table, placing the café menu on the vacated tables.

Burt Rogers and Irving Jones sat at the chef’s table, discussing the renovations to The Old Seaman’s Lodge. Judy joined them to listen, while Ali went to ask Jason to make more coffee and check on the transition from buffet breakfast to morning café.

Judy had integrated into Myron’s world but still had difficulty coming to terms with sitting in her new restaurant, casually discussing renovations to the family hotel. *How different my life is than it was three years ago.*

Jeanne approached. “Breakfast is ending, but we have food left in the buffet.”

Ali, who returned with their coffees, glanced at Judy, then said to Jeanne, “What do you suggest?”

“What if we amend the specials board and offer half-price buffet breakfast with a limited selection, but we include coffee and eggs?”

“Agreed. Let the kitchen know there may be late orders for eggs.”

“I’ll put a sign on the notice board at reception, too,” offered Irving.

“Yes, let’s do that,” agreed Ali.

Judy smiled.

Dancer returned a little before twelve. Ali was busy, so Judy headed into the bar to have a glass of wine with Dancer. Jason was there, delivering a coffee for Dancer.

Judy nodded at Dancer, who poured her a glass of red.

She sipped the wine. "Oh, not your usual house wine."

"It's our new house red. We've gone upmarket."

"I like it."

"Twice the price."

She took another sip. "Worth it."

"I'm going to order lunch, bar menu of course, got a feeling we'll be busy later," Dancer said. "Frank's Poutine, I think."

"I'll join you and have the mac and cheese. We can share if you like."

"Great thinking." Dancer pushed a button on the restaurant side of the bar.

Ali arrived with an e-order pad in hand. She entered their choices on the pad and took a sip of Judy's wine. "That's quite good," she observed.

"Everything running smoothly?" Judy asked.

"Yes, Leon has the kitchen humming. Darnell and Rebekah will be here soon to check things out. Just wondering what I'll do if we get walk-ins. Don't want to send them away, but we're fully booked."

Dancer indicated the bar, which had seating for about thirty people. "Send them in here," he suggested, "we can offer them the bar menu."

"Yes, Dancer, you're right," Ali said. "I must start looking at the bigger picture."

Judy squeezed her hand and whispered, "You'll get there."

Before long, Jason brought their lunch. "Ali called it 'Frank and Susie'," he said.

Judy smiled. "That's what we call this combination at Frank's."

Judy glanced up when the first customer in the refurbished Shipyard arrived. He was in his forties; she guessed. He wore a white shirt and dark gray trousers with matching shoes. *Office worker*. Fine features, and sandy hair. *Dyed*. His eyes caught her attention. The left was half blue, and half green, the right hazel.

"Oh, I like this," he said. "Much more comfortable."

"Hello, Joe," Dancer said. "First customer in the new bar. G&T on the house?"

"Please, Dancer." He sat at the bar.

Joe nodded towards Judy and Dancer's plates. "I heard you'll have proper food here now."

"Yes, and it's good too. Very good, in fact."

"Can I see a menu?"

"Sure, at the end of the bar near Judy, I'll pass it to you in a sec when I finish making your drink."

Instead of waiting, he moved to the end of the bar and perused the menu. "What's good?" he asked.

"All of it," replied Dancer.

"Oh, Welsh Rarebit, my mother used to make that," said Joe.

“It’s exceptional,” said Judy.

Dancer pushed the bell and Ali arrived to take Joe’s order.

Dancer and Judy finished their lunch as Jason brought Joe’s meal.

“Oh, hi!” Jason said to Joe.

Judy was sure he batted his eyes.

“Hello Jason, I’ve missed you. How’ve you been?”

“Oh, just peachy,” said Jason. He extended his hand for Joe to shake, but it was more like they were holding hands than shaking them.

“Will you be here all afternoon?” Jason asked.

“No, I’ll go back to work for a while, but I’ll come back later.”

“Now, that’ll give me something to look forward to,” Jason said as he returned to the restaurant.

“You see,” Dancer said to Judy, who smiled.

“Jason is a nice young man,” Joe said. “Mmm, this looks appetizing.”

Joe cut some Welsh Rarebit, raised it to his nose, and inhaled. “Smells wonderful.”

He placed it in his mouth. “Oh, wow! It tastes even better.”

He consumed his food, accompanied by a chorus of mmms, damns, and wows. “I can see myself coming here for lunch every day if the food is this good,” he exclaimed.

“It is,” Judy confirmed.

Joe was gazing at Jason delivering a coffee. “And some decent eye candy too,” he added.

“You got time for another G&T before you go back?” asked Dancer.

“Sure, if it’s on the house.”

“It is, and so’s lunch, because you’re the first customer of the new Shipyard.”

More customers had come in, and most had ordered from the bar menu along with their lunchtime drink. Dancer gave Joe his drink and topped up Judy’s wine. “Oh, I didn’t introduce you. This is Judy Vernon,” Dancer said. “One of my partners in this place,” and then headed off to attend to two new arrivals.

Judy extended her hand. “Pleased to meet you, Joe.”

“You too,” he said. “I like the renovations, intimate, not, umm... rustic like it was. Been coming here for a while now, hasn’t been much else around here. I bought my own place close by. Never thought I’d live by the docks, but the area’s changed, and I’m happy to have my own place again.”

“Yes,” Judy agreed. “It’s a good feeling.”

“I used to have a home, but I gave it to my ex-wife. Quite common, I suppose. Had to start again. I wasn’t born gay. People say that some of us are born with a gay gene or something, but not me. I had no gay experiences as a kid. It didn’t occur to me I could have sex with a guy. I mean, I wasn’t homophobic or repulsed by the idea. It was never an issue. I was married fifteen years and loved my wife, still do.”

Joe paused, sipped his G&T, frowned at Judy, became distracted watching Jason delivering a meal, frowned at Judy again, then sipped his drink and shrugged.

“It was a comfortable marriage; we were happy in that way people who’ve been married a long time are. We had sex once a week, normal. Sometimes, I used to masturbate in the shower, as most men do.... Nothing unusual there either.

“One day, I fantasized about having sex with a guy, no one in particular. I didn’t meet someone who changed me. It became an obsession, and I started doing it every time I showered. As far as I knew, I wasn’t attracted to guys.”

Jason again distracted him. “I am now,” he said, then sipped his G&T and winked at Judy.

“I traveled away for a conference and had a little too much to drink. I wasn’t seduced by a conference attendee or anything like that. Went to a gay bar, more out of curiosity than desire. I let myself get picked up by a guy and took him back to my room. We had sex, and I liked it. I was at that conference for a week and every night I went back to the bar and allowed myself to be picked up by a different guy.”

He raised his glass to Judy, who clinked it with her own in a silent toast. “Were you attracted to these guys?”

“No, but when I got back, I started going to gay bars here. I felt guilty and had the talk with my wife, who was shocked. It was tearful for both of us. We still loved each other. After about a month of talking and soul searching, we separated. I rented a small studio and for a time, I was out of control. Picking up guys every night, sometimes more than one... I don’t know what got into me. I was free, and I was making the most of it.”

“I know someone who had a similar experience,” Judy said.

“Over time, I settled down. My wife and I divorced, and I signed the house over to her. The least I could do, I thought. She’s remarried now. A solid guy. I like him, not that I fancy him. I was at their wedding. Freed me from alimony, so I could put money aside for a deposit.

“That’s my story. I wasn’t born gay. I spontaneously became gay in my thirties. Nothing caused it. No life shattering event. No meeting and falling in love with a guy who turned me. No repressed homosexuality I’m aware of. I wasn’t gay, and now I am. I’m not one of those ‘gay and proud’ guys, not that I’m ashamed. I’m just gay.”

Joe glanced at his watch. “Best get back to work,” he said. “I guess we’ll meet here again sometime, and when we do, I’ll buy you a drink. I don’t know why I talked to you, but I enjoyed it.”

Dancer said, “Everybody bares their soul to Judy, something about her.”

Judy smiled. “I’ve enjoyed talking with you, too, Joe. Take care.”

He pulled out his wallet to pay. “I told you, on the house today,” Dancer said.

“Thank you, Dancer, I appreciate it.”

Dancer studied Judy as he topped up her glass. “Does everyone you meet tell you their life story?”

“Pretty much.” Judy nodded.

In the evening, Judy adjourned to the Chef’s table. She was waiting for Myron and two food critics she knew and had invited for opening night. Ali appeared exhausted. She’d been busy all day. Her boys had eaten, finished their homework, and left.

Myron

Alison was in the bar when Myron entered. Going directly to her, he put his arms around her, and his lips found hers. When they broke their kiss, he stepped back and appraised her. Her shoulders were a little slumped, her movements a little less graceful than usual, and the spark of excitement—that had lit up her green eyes since her separation from John—was dimmed.

“You’re exhausted, darling,” he said, “but awfully pretty.”

She smiled at the compliment. Myron made a show of inhaling deeply.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

He winked, pulled her in tight, and kissed her again. “Checking if this is because of you or your pheromones.”

Alison grinned. “And?”

His tongue forced her lips apart and explored her mouth. His hand glided down her back and rested on her butt as he pulled her in tight against his erection.

She gasped.

“That,” he whispered. “Is genuine attraction.”

Myron caressed her a little before he released her, forgetting they were in public.

“I-I-I...” Alison put her hand on her chest as if to calm her breathing. “I-I have to...” She turned and scurried back to the restaurant, but stopped, turned her head and stared at him, before disappearing.

He smiled and walked to the bar, where Dancer handed him a whisky sour and turned away to attend to another customer. He sat quietly, waiting for Dancer to have a free moment.

My fondness for Alison has grown as I got to know her, and I’ve fallen in love. I’ve never felt possessive of Judy or jealous of Alison. Is this normal?

Judy’s love didn’t diminish or transfer to Alison. The love I felt from Judy increased. She has the capacity to love us both, and a need to be loved in return.

Myron sipped his whisky sour and gazed around the room. It was busy, and so was Dancer. He nodded and smiled.

As my love for Alison grew and transformed, my love for Judy didn’t diminish.

Myron didn’t understand the underlying psychology, but his experience confirmed one could love two equally.

Then everything changed. Alison’s increased pheromone production had caused her to act recklessly. Like Judy, he was more than a little jealous of Alison’s newfound sexual freedom, but unlike Judy, he’d kept his reactions under control.

Alison’s flood of pheromones had driven them both crazy. He’d been uncontrollably horny whenever he was in proximity of her, which he’d channeled literally and figuratively into Judy.

He’d questioned whether his love for Alison was real, or a product of her excess pheromones. Yesterday, he’d confirmed Judy’s sense of the situation. Alison’s pheromones had reduced as her focus moved from exploring her sexuality to establishing Dancer’s Bistro.

I don't want to take Alison to bed. That would be easy. They both want me to. I want to, but it's not enough. I don't want Alison to be a third wheel, our bit on the side. In time, she'd tire of that. I want Alison to be an equal partner in our relationship. To move our bi-partisan relationship to a tri-partisan relationship. I don't know how to bring it about.

Dancer remained busy. Myron nodded and smiled at him. Dancer shrugged, grabbed a bottle from the top shelf and nixed another cocktail. *Never seen him rattled before.*

It's acceptable to have multiple wives in some cultures, but Alison has children, which complicates things and will bring added pressure into the mix.

Alison may allow John and Lori to finish raising her children, but she'd come to resent us for making her give them up. Need to consider Mama and Papa too, doubt an orthodox Jewish community will accept two wives.

Still can't connect the dots. Myron finished his whisky sour and Dancer automatically made him another. "Sorry Myron, run off my feet."

"So I see. We can talk later. We'll need to get you some help."

He went into the restaurant. Judy stood to greet him. He placed his drink on the table. "Hello sweetheart. Was waiting for a word with Dancer, but he's too busy."

He pulled Judy close. His lips sought hers, and his tongue parted them. His hand slid down her back, and rested on her ass, pulling her in tight against his erection.

He heard Judy gasp. "Oh..." she said.

Myron smiled. *This can work.*

"When will the critics arrive?" he asked.

She glanced at her watch. "Won't be long. Why are you so hard?"

"Alison."

Judy gazed across the room at the woman she loved. "Good." She grinned. "Same reason I'm aroused."

"Soon," he said. "Just need to join..."

"The dots," Judy concluded.

Myron shrugged. "Have you written any mini features yet?"

"I want to wait until we're established before I write about the dishes," she explained. "I want to write about the experience, not promote our business. If the food critics write excellent reviews, it'll help us get established."

Myron glanced around, his eyes pausing for a moment on Alison. "We're doing very well already," he observed.

"Yes," Judy confirmed. "I'm concerned we'll need more staff, and so will Dancer."

"That's an easy fix. Alison is doing a fantastic job, gliding between tables, making everyone feel at home. She's a natural."

"Yes, I'm proud of her."

"She's stunning today, too."

"I think so, but I'm biased when it comes to her."

"Yes," Myron said. "I am too."

Judy smiled.

“Oh... I nearly forgot. Burt tells me the tenants in our penthouse have vacated. I was wondering if we should move in ourselves?” *A larger place would be better if Alison were to move in with us.*

“Our penthouse?” Judy asked.

Myron grinned. “Yes sweetheart, our penthouse in our building where Frank’s Diner is located.”

“I’d forgotten about that. Do you think we need to move? I’ve been in my apartment for a long time. It’s home.”

“Yes, and I like living there with you, but the penthouse is larger. It’s ours too. We could make it into our home, but we may need to remodel or renovate.”

“What about my apartment?”

“We could Airbnb it, like we do mine.”

“Guess so, hadn’t thought about moving. It’s big enough for us. Isn’t it?”

“Yes, but let’s have a look at the penthouse and then decide.”

“Okay, it’ll give me time to get my head around the idea.”

“You may fall in love with it.”

Why do we need to move? There’s something he’s not telling me.

The critics arrived together. Judy glanced at her watch. *Right on time.*

Ali showed them to the chef’s table. *Poor Ali’s dead on her feet.*

After consulting the menu, Ken Bradford explained, “We’ll try some unusual dishes, and some of the standard fare one can get anywhere, as a comparison.”

John Saxton nodded at Ali, who was waiting to take their order. “Stuffed Chicken Feet, Fruit de la mar, Bag of Fish and Chips, Beetroot Gnocchi, and a Beef Wellington. All with their recommended sides.”

They ordered both house wines, red and white. While waiting, they chatted with Myron and Judy.

When their food arrived. Ken gushed as they sampled each dish and made copious notes. John was more reserved, but took notes.

Judy studied their reactions with her professional eye. She nodded. *Excellent reviews.*

After the critics left, Judy headed to the bathroom. When she exited the stall, Ali was waiting. They came together, and their lips connected as if on autopilot.

Ali said, “Myron was flirting with me.”

“More than flirting, from what I saw.” Judy smiled.

“I think he’s thinking what we’re thinking.”

“Yes. What did you do?”

“I became aroused.”

“This might happen soon. I think we should let him set the pace, don’t you?”

“Yes, darling. He’ll make it happen.”

They kissed again and fondled each other, both more than a little aroused.

“We’re leaving now, so let’s see what he does when he says goodbye to you.”

Ali initiated the kiss goodbye with Myron, another long, passionate kiss. Judy watched her husband slide his hand down Ali’s back and caress her while they kissed.

He’s open about her. As had occurred previously when she saw them together, Judy’s arousal increased. She wanted to take them home to bed, but knew she’d have to be satisfied with only Myron for a while longer.

She didn’t know why, but knowing it was Ali who’d made him horny took their sex to another level.

Despite wanting to go home with Myron and Judy—and feeling guilty because Monica was waiting at her place so the boys wouldn’t go home to an empty house on the first night—Ali stayed until closing time.

Midnight. She, Dancer, and Darnell sat in the bar with a drink to discuss their first day. It went better than they’d hoped, and it revealed they’d likely need more staff.

Jason was there too; he’d been helping in the restaurant when needed, even after his shift had ended. Jason surprised Ali, who’d anticipated he would’ve gone off with Joe.

The night cleaners, two of Frank Dunn’s parolees, were sitting at the chef’s table enjoying a meal before they started work.

“I need a second barman, who can tend bar and take food orders, so Ali doesn’t have to come into the bar to take orders every five minutes. I’m not good with technology.” Dancer grimaced. “My experience doesn’t extend beyond my cash register, and the new one’s a challenge. I don’t use the apps on my smartphone.”

Jason said, “I know a guy who’d be perfect for the job.”

Dancer shook his head. “Fagified.”

“Oh, he’s gay, which you need, but he’s not faggy like me. Only room for one of me here,” Jason winked. “Why don’t I tell him you need a guy for one shift tomorrow night, and then if you think he’s okay, you can offer him a full-time gig?”

“Makes sense,” Dancer agreed.

Ali said, “I’ll contact the catering employment agency we use and hire two waiters and invite two chefs in for Darnell to trial.”

“It’s a good problem to have,” Darnell said. “I’m feeling positive about this place.”

“Me, too,” agreed Dancer. “I’ve never been so busy in my life.”

“Even if it’s fagified,” offered Jason.

Dancer glared at him.

“Well, I’m shattered,” said Ali. “I’ve been here since before six. Glad today was once only. I’ll be here a little before midday. If you need me, Jason, call me.”

“Yes, boss, but I’m sure we’ll be fine.”

Ali called a taxi and left to wait for it. She was tired, but excited. *Still too wound up to sleep, but Moni will help me relax.*

She was excited by how Myron had been with her and what that meant, but guilty because she knew Judy was right.

I'm using Moni and will have to give her up soon.

Bethlehem & Jerusalem

Myron was in a taxi taking papers to his uncle for signature. He still did the books for the businesses of his extended family, and they still tailored his suits and cobbled his shoes.

He glanced out the window; the sky was the shade of blue that lifts the weight from one's shoulders and leaves them lighthearted. The leaves waving lightly on the trees beckoned him. *Pleasant day for a stroll through the Jewish quarter.*

He asked the driver to pull over, paid his fare and got out. *Walking will give me time to think about Alison, and how to bring her into our family.*

He was standing at his favorite intersection in the city, Jerusalem Boulevard and Bethlehem Avenue. Jerusalem Boulevard ran through the center of the Jewish quarter. Bethlehem Avenue connected the Jewish quarter to what had been the Catholic quarter. *One of the city planners had a sense of humor.*

He was about to step off the curb when a gust of wind struck him. An aging gray Ford pickup sped through the red light, colliding with a blue Toyota Camry.

The heavy old Ford hit so hard the ground shook and the side of the Camry seemed to wrap around the front of the pickup, creating the appearance of having fused together.

This is bad. He dropped his briefcase and ran to the wreckage.

The driver was the only person in the pickup. Deep bruise on his forehead, blood running down his face, head bent sideways at an impossible angle. A glance told Myron he was dead. He focused on the other vehicle, three people. A white man driving, a dark woman in the passenger seat, and their child—based on her appearance—in the back. The man's eyes were fixed and staring over the top of his airbag. *Two dead.* He smelled gas. *Best be quick.*

He turned his attention to the woman. Her head was down. The passenger airbag had not deployed. The passenger window was broken, so he reached in and lifted her head by her hair. He looked at her face and shook his head. *Dead too.*

A girl in a child's car seat in the back looked at him. *Alive!* The driver's side was wedged in tight with the other vehicle. He tugged at the handle on the rear passenger door. *Locked.* He studied the girl through the glass. *Nothing to break it with.* He grabbed the handle of the front passenger door. *Locked. Maybe I can unlock it from the inside. Jammed.*

He stepped back to assess the situation. *The only access is through the front passenger window.* He cleared the remains of the shattered glass away with his hands, cutting them a little.

Myron leaned in as far as he could, but couldn't reach the child. He pushed the woman's body away from the door and pulled himself further into the car. The smell of gas was stronger here. *Need to act quickly.* He forced his body in further, but still couldn't reach the girl.

As he wedged himself deeper into the car, the remnants of the broken window cut into his flesh. *Just scratches.* He reached the child's seatbelt clip, but he couldn't open it, despite several attempts.

Might be because of the strange angle I'm twisted at to reach her. Is the smell of gas getting stronger? Need a different approach. Perhaps I can wiggle her out.

A man yelled, "Get out! It's smoking, it's going to blow."

I can't leave this little girl to die.

Myron somehow pulled himself further into the car. The glass remnants digging into his skin as he wedged hard against them. The girl was staring at him. *In shock. No. She's staring at something past me.*

He placed one of her arms around his neck; she let it rest there. He twisted in a little more, grimacing as the shattered glass ripped him open. He put her other arm around his neck. She clasped her arms together tightly as though she were hanging on for her life. He wiggled and pulled her until she started to budge.

"Help me, child," he whispered, but her eyes didn't register understanding.

She raised her feet onto the seat and tried to leverage herself up. Someone tugged at his waist, but he was wedged in tight. With her help, she was slipping out of the belt.

"Good girl," he said. "We can do this together, sweetheart."

The smell of gas fumes is stronger. A second pair of hands pulled at his legs now. He could hear muffled voices, but he couldn't make them out.

"Don't you let go of my neck for anything," he said.

Her grip tightened. His body was moving as whoever was trying to pull him out made progress. He grimaced as the glass from the window tore away more of his flesh.

The girl became free, except for her legs. "Try to straighten your legs, sweetheart," he said.

She obeyed and tightened her grip. As they pulled him from the vehicle, he was determined not to let go, even though they were pulled between the seats and across the girl's dead mother.

"Hold on," he said. "I won't let you go; I promise."

Then he was free of the car, and the girl, still clinging to his neck, was in his arms. Lightheaded, he struggled to comprehend what had happened. The world was bright, blindingly so after having his head buried deep into the dark interior of the crumpled car. His heart was pounding, everything began spinning.

Somebody grabbed his arm and guided him to sit on the curb. He was trying to focus, to look at the girl, who clung tightly to his neck, too close for him to see clearly.

"It's okay, it's okay," he said. "You're safe now."

He still held the girl, but his hands shook. Glancing at them, he noticed his torn clothes, and the blood and cuts on his arms. There was a noise blaring in his head. *What's that? Sirens.*

Somebody said, "Here's the ambulance now."

Myron carried the girl towards the ambulance, ready to hand her to the paramedics, but she clung tighter and refused to let go. Despite their efforts, trying to be gentle and not force her, they couldn't pry the girl off. His efforts to coax her to let go were in vain.

"We need to check her over and get her to the hospital," one paramedic said. "And you, too." Indicating the shredded shirt, and bloody gouges on Myron's stomach.

"Maybe it'll be best to take us together," Myron suggested. "She's very frightened. Perhaps it'll be easier at the hospital."

"Yes, let's do that," the paramedic agreed. "What about the others in the vehicles?"

“They didn’t make it.” Myron informed him.

A man, one of the bystanders who’d help pull Myron out, said, “You saved her life man, look.”

Myron glanced at the wreckage, now on fire. *Oh, that was the whoosh.*

A fire truck arrived, closely followed by the police. The firemen went to work to douse the flames, and a police officer approached them.

The second paramedic said, “The girl was in the car; he was a bystander who pulled her out. We’re going to take them both to St Auburn’s Presbyterian now.”

The police officer said to Myron, “We’ll need to take a statement later, sir.”

Myron winced. “Sure.”

As he was being assisted into the ambulance, a man placed Myron’s briefcase into the back with them. “Yours, I believe,” he said.

“Thank you.”

The paramedic climbed into the back of the ambulance and closed the door.

Myron closed his eyes, tightened his grip on the girl, and trembled.

They arrived at the hospital. The girl hadn’t released her grip on Myron. A nurse guided them to an examination room, and he laid the girl on the bed. A doctor, the nurse, and Myron managed to release her grip, and he stepped back to allow her to be examined.

“We’re going to need some information,” The doctor said. “Does she have any allergies...”

“I don’t know who she is,” Myron explained. “I pulled her from a car wreck.”

The girl stared at Myron with wide eyes and reached her arms out towards him. She screamed and her breathing was erratic. She wouldn’t allow the doctor or nurse near her. Myron took her hand. She calmed. Even her eyes seemed to relax, but she wouldn’t take them off Myron.

“Would you mind staying here so we can examine her?” asked the Doctor.

“Of course,” agreed Myron.

Upon completing his examination, the Doctor said, “Nothing broken, bruising from the seatbelt, but that doesn’t appear to have caused any internal damage. We’ll keep her in for a day or two for observation, to be sure. I’ll examine her again when she calms down.”

“Okay,” said Myron. “I think I’d better stay with her for a while, until she feels less frightened.”

“Now let’s have a look at you,” said the Doctor. “You said you weren’t involved in the accident?”

“No, I was passing by. I got a couple of scratches getting her out. A little on my arms, but my stomach caught the worst of it.”

Myron was standing beside the bed, bent a little, holding the girl’s hand. The doctor had the nurse cut away some of Myron’s shirt so he could examine the injuries.

"A bit more than scratches," he said. He sprayed the area with Ethyl Chloride and then used tweezers to extract some pieces of shattered glass that had embedded themselves.

"I think that's all the debris, nothing that requires stitching. A nurse will be along to clean and dress your wounds and give you a tetanus shot. Then you'll be good to go."

"Okay, thank you, doctor. That was painless."

"Because of the spray, you'll feel a few twinges when it wears off."

A woman came in carrying some clipboards with forms attached to them. "I understand the girl will be admitted, and you'll be okay to leave when your wounds are dressed," she said.

"That's what the doctor said."

"We have some paperwork to complete. Let's do yours first. What's your family name?"

"Myerson."

After they'd completed Myron's registration, she took her second clipboard.

"Now we can complete the girl's information," she said.

"I don't know who she is," Myron said.

"Can you tell me your name?" she asked the girl.

The girl was unresponsive.

"Without having any insurance details, we'll have to put her in the general ward. Once we have her details, we should be able to transfer her to a private room."

Myron focused on the terrified little girl lying on the bed staring at him. "No," he said. "I think a general ward would worsen her anxiety, put her in a private room and if she doesn't have insurance, I'll cover the cost."

"Are you sure, Mr. Myerson? It may be quite expensive."

"Yes, that won't be a problem."

"That's good of you. There'll be some paperwork for you to sign, but we can take care of that later." She left the treatment room.

A nurse came in to clean and dress Myron's wounds. She helped him remove his suit jacket and the remnants of his shirt, and placed them on a chair. *Ruined.*

While the nurse attended to him, he stood beside the bed looking at the girl, who's grip on his hand tightened. She stared at his wounds. Her eyes opened wider and her breathing quickened.

"It's all right, sweetheart," he said. "We're safe now."

Even with the spray, he winced as she cleaned his wounds with iodine, finding a few small shards of glass the doctor had missed.

"It's hard to find them all until we clean things up," she explained.

She dressed his wounds with gauze pads and an elastic bandage wrapped around his waist, which made them appear worse than they were.

The nurse smiled at Myron as he carefully swapped hands for the girl to hold without actually releasing her. She examined the scratches on his arms. "They need a clean, but we won't need to dress them," she said.

After giving Myron his Tetanus shot, she said, "Some orderlies will be here soon to move her to a room. You can stay with her if you like."

"Yes," Myron said. "I think I need to."

The orderlies arrived. Myron lifted the girl and laid her on their gurney without letting go of her hand. When they reached her room, he repeated the process. He asked them to move the visitor's chair next to the bed. When he sat, he remembered his briefcase and asked the orderlies if one of them could locate it.

He frowned at his bloody clothes on the table beside the bed. *Why bring them from the treatment room?*

He took his phone from his left pocket. He frowned. The screen was cracked. He called his wife.

Judy was at Frank's Diner, finishing her coffee, listening to Jimmy Rogers sing *Honeycomb*.

Another ridiculous fifties song.

Soon she'd head to Dancer's Bistro, where she'd have dinner with Myron and Ali. *How can I own two restaurants? And how can I openly be having dinner with my husband and my girlfriend? My life is nearly perfect!*

She read the first of the reviews for Dancer's Bistro; and smiled. *An excellent review, but I'm not sure about the title.*

Dancer's puts its Best [Chicken] Feet forward with this Delightful Bag of Fish & Chips!

She thought about the penthouse upstairs. *I must admit, I like the idea of living in a penthouse in my own city building, but my apartment has been my home for a long time.*

She'd bought it and paid for it and set it up exactly the way she wanted. The only change when Myron had moved in was a second desk in the office.

The phone rang, distracting her from her thoughts. She glanced at the caller ID.

"Hello darling," she said.

"Hi sweetheart. Something happened. I'm okay, a few scratches, don't worry, but I'm at the hospital and I'll need a change of clothes."

Her stomach sank, beads of perspiration appeared on her forehead and upper lip. "Are you sure you're okay? What happened?"

Myron gave her an overview of the day's events.

"My weekend clothes, I think."

Unlike Judy, who had different clothes for every occasion, Myron had two types: casual and professional.

"Okay," she said. "I'll leave now."

Judy called a taxi. She rang Ali on the way to her apartment.

“Myron’s pulled a girl out of an accident. Apparently, he has a few scratches himself. I’m getting him some clean clothes and will meet him at the hospital.”

“Oh, *Myron*? Is he all right? Do you need me to meet you there?”

“He says he’s fine. Guessing we’ll be a bit late for dinner. I’ll call you when I know more.”

“Okay darling, love you.”

Judy asked the driver to wait and went upstairs.

She placed his clothes neatly and carefully in a bag. He wouldn’t like them crumpled. She packed his toiletries. *Just in case*. A few minutes later, she was back in the taxi on her way to the hospital.

Judy entered the hospital, reached reception, and explained, “I’m looking for my husband. Myron Myerson. He’s not admitted, but he said he’s with a little girl who was in an accident.”

The receptionist checked the computer, picked up her phone, and made a muffled call.

“A nurse will be here in a moment to show you to the room, ma’am,” she said.

The nurse escorted her to a room on the second floor. She pointed to a closed door, and said, “This room, ma’am.” Then left.

Judy tentatively pushed the door open, stepped into the room, gasped, and froze. Myron’s shirt and suit jacket were missing. *If that’s them in the trash, there’s a lot of blood on them*. His arms were scratched, and a large dressing was around most of his stomach.

“*Myron!*”

Melanie

The furrow in Judy's brow deepened as she stared at Myron's bandaged stomach.

"It looks much worse than it is, just a few cuts and scratches," he said.

Judy glanced around the hospital room, but decided not to pursue it. "Who is she?"

"They don't know. I understand the police will be here soon to interview me. Maybe they'll know more."

"You'd better change before they get here."

"I should, and I need the bathroom... It's only... If I release her hand, she screams. She hasn't let go of me since the accident."

"Tell her you need the bathroom. I'll hold her hand. Hopefully, I can convince her to let me take her too?"

"Sweetheart," Myron said. "This is my wife, Judy. She'll keep you safe while I go to the bathroom."

Judy went to the other side of the bed and took the girl's hand. The girl accepted Judy's hand but didn't take her eyes from Myron. When Myron released his grip, her eyes widened and filled with fear. Her breathing became shallow, almost vocal.

"It's all right, sweetheart," Judy soothed. "I'll stay here with you and keep you safe."

The girl never took her eyes off the bathroom door. Judy talked to her, calmed her. When Myron returned, Judy picked her up and carried her to the bathroom. The girl's eyes widened, and she reached her arms out to Myron, who was quickly by her side comforting her.

"I'll be here when you come out, I promise," he said.

Judy took her into the bathroom, stood her beside the toilet, and continued to hold her hand. The girl remained where Judy had placed her, with a blank look on her face.

She must need to go. It's been hours since the accident. What to do?

It would have made more sense to lower her underwear, but Judy undressed the girl and sat her on the toilet, all without letting her go. After, Judy washed and dressed the girl, who was compliant, but unresponsive.

As soon as they stepped into the room, the girl released Judy and lunged into Myron's waiting arms, wrapping her arms around his neck.

Myron lay her on the bed and sat in the chair holding her hand as he'd done all afternoon. Judy couldn't help smiling despite the circumstances. Myron was so gentle with the girl.

A knock on the door, then two police officers entered. "Myron Myerson?" one asked.

"Yes."

"I'm Officer Andy La Place. This is my partner, Tom Lanahan."

Andy La Place was middle-aged, in good shape, and wore his graying hair short in a military style. His partner was younger, and a little overweight, with male pattern baldness.

Why do people describe men with male pattern baldness as going bald? Most have stopped going bald years earlier. Could be a feature in that.

“Pleased to meet you. This is my wife, Judy Vernon.”

“Ma’am,” they said in unison.

“We need to ask you some questions about the accident,” La Place said as he took a notebook and pen from his top pocket.

“Sure, but I’ll have to stay here. She becomes distressed if I’m not with her,” Myron said.

“No problem. I understand you’ve been with her all afternoon.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Has she said anything?”

“No, nothing at all. Did she say anything when you took her to the bathroom, Judy?” Myron asked.

“Nothing,” Judy confirmed.

“What’s your full name?”

“Myron Aryeh Myerson.” Aryeh was his father’s name, but he’d used Art, since he was at school.

“I need your address and date of birth, so perhaps I could see your driver’s license.”

“Judy,” Myron said. “My license is in my wallet.”

Judy nodded, removed his wallet from his briefcase, extracted his license, and passed it to the officer.

“Thank you, ma’am,” La Place said. He recorded Myron’s details and returned the license to Judy. “Mr. Myerson, could you tell me what happened?” he asked. “In your own words?”

Myron described the accident. How he’d checked the passengers to see who needed help. They’d all been dead except for the girl.

If the girl registered or understood what Myron had said, she gave no indication.

“I’ve spoken to all the witnesses,” La Place said. “They say you refused to leave the girl, even though there was smoke coming from the vehicles.”

“I’m sure they’re exaggerating. I was wedged in and they took a while to pull us free.”

“They tried to pull you out, but you wouldn’t let them until you’d freed the girl.”

Myron glanced at Judy. “It happened fast. I don’t remember.”

“In less than two minutes after they pulled you free, the vehicles were engulfed in flames. You’re both lucky to be alive.”

Judy gasped, a deep frown, and concern showed on her face.

La Place said, “I’d like to shake your hand.”

Myron tried to shrug it off. “Anybody would’ve done it.”

“No sir, they wouldn’t. Everybody says they would, but I’ve been doing this job for around twenty years, and I know they wouldn’t.”

Judy’s frown deepened. She stared at Myron wide eyed. Her chin was quivering as she tried not to cry.

He said, "If I'd let her die, I couldn't have lived with myself, so there was no point in trying to save myself if it meant leaving her to die."

Judy swallowed hard. She looked at Myron, then at the girl. She nodded and grabbed the back of the chair to steady herself.

Myron asked, "Do you know who she is?"

La Place looked at his partner. "Tom?"

"Yes, her name is Melanie Ruth Schwartzman. Social services have been notified. Other officers handled the family notifications."

Myron smiled at the girl. "Hello Melanie," he said.

She stared at him, but didn't react.

"Thank you, sir," La Place said. "If there's anything else, we'll be in touch. Ma'am."

The officers left. Judy found an orderly and asked for another chair. Myron and Judy sat either side of Melanie, quietly talking to her, using her name often.

A woman reached in and knocked on the open door. "Hello," she said. "My name is Crystal Brown. I'm from Social Services."

Judy glanced up. Crystal was a light-skinned African American woman who had the air of confidence that comes from experience.

Mid-thirties, overweight, but it sits well on her. Kind eyes, friendly. Smiles all the time. Not jaded, bitter, and disinterested, like other social workers I've met.

A woman who cares about people. A warm soft pillow you just want to hug. Judy liked her immediately.

"Don't get up," she said, handing them her card. "You must be..." she consulted the paperwork in her hand. "Myron Myerson?"

"Yes, and this is my wife, Judy Vernon."

"I understand you've been with Melanie since the accident?"

"Yes, that's right. She becomes distressed if I leave her or let go of her hand. Judy's been here for a couple of hours."

"Would you both mind releasing her hands? I need to assess her reactions."

Melanie's breathing became rapid. Judy could hear her screams building as her breathing became vocal. Then she was hysterical, thrashing her legs, with her arms stretching out towards Myron.

She glanced at Myron. His face registered distress as Melanie's hysteria grew.

"Okay, I've seen enough," she said.

Myron's hand darted to take hers, and Melanie calmed down.

"She's been like this since the accident," he explained.

"Shock, I guess," Crystal responded. "I'll ask the hospital psychiatrist to see her. She may need to be sedated. I'm surprised the trauma team didn't do it."

“She’s calm when I’m holding her hand. Maybe that’s why. Have you contacted her family?”

“I’ve spoken to both sets of grandparents... It’s er, complicated.”

“We can stay with her. At least, until the psychiatrist comes,” Judy offered.

“That would be helpful.” She lingered at the door. “It shouldn’t be long.”

Judy was looking at the open door when Crystal returned with a man who introduced himself as Doctor Richard Schmidt. Rick Schmidt was tall, with a slight stoop.

Well-groomed brown hair, despite male pattern baldness. Difficult to determine his age, anywhere between late thirties and early fifties. His demeanor was pleasant enough, but distant. Occupational distance. *Seeing them together reminds me of a scene from a sitcom.*

Dr. Schmidt asked, “Has she said anything?”

“Not a word,” confirmed Myron.

Schmidt took a penlight from his pocket and shone it in Melanie’s eyes. She didn’t like it, turning her head away and closing her eyes.

“She’s responsive,” he said. He examined her skull. “No sign of head trauma.”

After making some notes, he asked, “Could you both release her hands, please?”

Myron and Judy exchanged a glance. Melanie became agitated, her breathing rapid and audible, as though she was going to scream. Myron reached out to take her hand again.

“No, please don’t do that now. I need to see what she does next.”

Melanie became hysterical, thrashing her legs and reaching arms out to Myron.

“Okay, I’ve seen enough.”

Myron took her hand. Melanie calmed.

The doctor made more notes. “Shock and trauma,” he said. “I’ll sedate her. When she sleeps, you’ll be able to leave, if you don’t mind staying a little longer.”

Myron asked, “Do you need to sedate her? She’s calm now.”

“She’s only calm while she’s holding your hand. It would mean you’ll have to stay and hold her hand until she falls asleep.”

“That’s fine with me. In fact, I don’t think she should wake up alone. Perhaps I’ll stay until morning.”

He glanced at Judy, who nodded.

“That may be for the best. I don’t like sedating children if I can avoid it. I’ll make a note and leave instructions with the nurse,” Dr. Schmidt said. “If she becomes distressed, I’ll have to have her sedated.”

“I understand,” agreed Myron.

“Are you sure you’re willing to stay all night?” Crystal asked.

“Yes,” said Myron. “If I went home, I’d be worrying about her too much to sleep.”

“That’s kind of you, and helpful. For Melanie’s protection, the door will need to remain open, and I’ll instruct the nurses to check in regularly, but it shouldn’t disturb you.”

"I understand," Acknowledged Myron.

"Now I know what's going on with Melanie, I need to visit her grandparents again," Crystal said. "You've got my card. If you need anything, call me."

Crystal said her goodbyes and left.

Judy reached into her shoulder bag and placed a small bag on the bedside table.

"Toiletries, toothpaste, shaving stuff," she said. "I didn't know if they'd be keeping you in."

Myron smiled.

Later, the catering staff brought Melanie dinner, but neither Myron nor Judy could coax her to eat.

"I don't blame her," said Myron. "It doesn't look appetizing. I'm getting hungry myself, didn't have lunch, and the adrenalin is wearing off."

Judy suggested, "I'll have Ali send something over."

Myron nodded. "Why don't you have dinner with Alison? No sense in us both staying here all night. Ask her to send me some mac and cheese, a large portion, and I'll see if I can get Melanie to eat some with me."

"I could, or I could just stay here?"

"No, you go. Come back tomorrow with a change of clothes and some breakfast, but not too early in case I can get her to sleep."

"Okay darling," Judy said.

She leaned over and kissed Melanie on the forehead. "I'll be back tomorrow, sweetheart, and Myron will stay with you tonight."

She kissed Myron goodbye and phoned Ali to organize dinner before she left the room.

It was dark when Judy arrived at The Shipyard.

"Hi Dancer," she said. "Could I have a glass of red, please?"

"Of course, I'll bring it to you."

She sauntered through to Dancer's Bistro to find Ali, who was busy discussing the menu with customers. Judy sat at the chef's table and waited.

Darnell was quickly by her side. "How's Uncle Myron?" he asked, as he placed dinner in front of her. "Ali said you'd be hungry."

She thanked him and updated him on the situation.

He explained, "I called Bec, and asked her to organize the mac and cheese. I thought the little girl might like a milkshake."

"Good thinking, Darnell. Thank you."

Dancer, wearing a concerned expression, arrived from the bar as Darnell returned to the kitchen. He placed two glasses and the open bottle of wine on the table.

“How’s young Myron?” he asked. “Is there anything you guys need?”

“We’re fine,” Judy said. “But thanks for offering.”

Judy stood when Ali approached. They held each other for a long time, while Judy relayed the story.

After Judy finished her meal, and her second glass of red, she said, “I’m exhausted. Can only imagine how poor Myron feels. I’ll call a taxi and go home.”

“Sounds like you need me to come home and hold you while you sleep,” Ali suggested.

“If you came home and held me, I wouldn’t sleep.”

Ali grinned. “You would eventually.”

“Besides, your boys and Monica are waiting for you.”

They kissed goodbye, and Judy walked outside as the taxi arrived.

The next morning, Myron called Judy, who immediately asked, “How’s Melanie?”

“She shared my mac and cheese and particularly liked the milk shake and cookies. After eating, she allowed me to take her to the bathroom and then she slept. She’s still sleeping.

“I’ve packed a change of clothes for you and I’m going to Frank’s now. What do you want me to bring you for breakfast?”

“Maybe scrambled eggs for both of us.”

“I’ll bring a flask of coffee for you, and another milkshake for Melanie, too.”

“Perfect, no hurry. Best let her sleep.”

They rang off and Myron called Alison.

“Myron, this is a pleasant way to start the day. Are you okay? Do you need anything?”

“No. Judy has everything organized. I missed you last night, so I thought I’d call and say hello. Did I wake you? It’s a little early.”

“Just out of the shower.”

“Now that’s an image. What are you wearing?”

“Nothing, I always shower naked.”

“I’d like to see you naked... Again.”

“Anytime.” She chuckled.

“Guess I could wash something for you.”

“You can wash everything.”

“I’ll let you get dressed,” he said.

Judy greeted George outside the diner as usual, and Suzy Q upon entering the diner.

She sat in her booth listening to Teresa Brewer singing *Till I Waltz Again with You*, while she waited for her coffee and scrambled eggs. Other than Myron having stayed at the hospital with Melanie, it seemed like an ordinary day.

Suzy Q wore a black, charcoal gray, and turquoise leather tunic. It looked as though it should have a matching sword, but the six white petticoats detracted from the warrior princess image. Her long black hair was braided, and she wore high-heeled black ankle-high boots. When she skipped away after delivering Judy's breakfast, she flashed the turquoise lace on black panties, despite the petticoats.

A good thing Ali's not here, she'd be fidgeting in her seat.

Judy's phone, still set to silent, vibrated on the table, and she glanced at caller ID.

"You must be psychic. I was just thinking about you."

"Aren't you always thinking about me?" Ali asked. "What were you thinking?"

"That you'd be fidgeting in your seat."

"You're the one who's psychic. I've been fidgeting since Myron called this morning."

"What did he want?"

"Apparently to tease me as I was naked, just out of the shower, unless it was something else, and me being naked distracted him."

"It distracts me." Judy ended the call.

Myron's bringing Ali closer.

Judy opened her iPad and searched for a news report about the accident. The article described the crash and gave details of the couple who'd died. It suggested everyone told Myron (who wasn't named) the car would catch fire, and he should get out.

Myron couldn't leave her, even if he died. I understand why, but I could've lost him. Goose bumps washed over her. She shuddered.

The report said minutes after Myron got the girl—Melanie—out flames engulfed the vehicles. Judy's heart was pounding. *Don't know if I could go on without Myron.*

Judy picked up her phone and called Ruth.

"Mama," she asked. "Did you hear about that car accident yesterday afternoon?"

"Yes. Everyone's talking about it. Little Melanie Schwartzman is lucky to be alive. A young man risked his life to save her."

"Have you read the news report yet?"

"Not yet. I haven't gotten around to it, but I will."

"Good, before you do, you need to know Myron was the 'young man' who got her out. I think the article is making the situation seem worse than it was. Myron's fine. He stayed with Melanie in the hospital last night, but he's fine. I was with him and will go back soon."

Ruth shouted, "Art, it was Myron who saved young Melanie from that car wreck yesterday! Judy says he's fine." Then to Judy. "Newspapers always exaggerate, so thank you for letting me know. How's little Melanie, by the way?"

"She's fine, a little traumatized, but she's calm when Myron is with her. That's why he stayed. How do you know who she is? The article doesn't say."

“Oh... She’s family, sweetheart.”

“Family?” Judy frowned. “Myron didn’t know her.”

“No... He wouldn’t. My grandmother’s sister, my great aunt... She was much older than my grandmother, so I didn’t know her. She married a Schwartzman. That family is strict orthodox, they have some funny views. Didn’t approve of us, so they kept their distance. Melanie is Myron’s... Let me think... Fifth cousin, I believe. Something like that.”

“I’ll tell him, but I’ll wait until I get there. I want to see the look on his face!”

“Good idea. Thank you, Judy. Now Art and I can spend the day talking about our son, the hero.”

Family

When Judy arrived at the hospital, Myron was seated in the same chair, holding Melanie's hand. A nurse told Judy, "Myron held the girl's hand all night."

Myron was talking to Melanie, who was communicating by nodding or shaking her head. She hadn't found her voice, but she was communicating. Judy's heart warmed.

Myron asked, "Do you remember Judy?"

Melanie nodded and smiled shyly.

Progress.

Judy laid out breakfast, scrambled eggs, on the table between Melanie and Myron. Handing each a fork. Myron began eating, with comments, for Melanie's benefit, about how good the food was. Melanie barely touched her own breakfast, preferring to share Myron's. She released his hand while he fed her.

A flask of coffee for Myron, and a peanut butter milkshake for Melanie, who didn't need coaxing to drink it.

"I spoke with Mama this morning," Judy said. "Do you know the Schwartzman side of your family?"

Myron shrugged. "There are a lot of connections on my mother's side, but she was much younger."

"Apparently, Melanie is your fifth cousin. Your grandmother's eldest sister married a Schwartzman."

"Didn't know that," Myron said. "I don't think I've met that part of the family."

"Mama, didn't think you had."

"Did you hear that, Melanie?" he asked. "We're family."

She stared, but didn't react.

When Myron went into the ensuite to shower and change, Melanie seemed happy to stay with Judy, but her eyes remained riveted to the closed door.

After Myron finished, Judy took Melanie to the ensuite for a wash and to go to the bathroom. *Wish I'd bought some clean clothes for her. Maybe I'll grab some later.*

The social worker, Crystal Brown, arrived shortly after they'd finished breakfast.

Myron updated her on the improvement in Melanie's demeanor. Judy guessed the nurses would have updated Crystal on Melanie's condition.

Crystal smiled and nodded. "I've been to see both sets of grandparents, neither are umm... able to take her."

Judy asked, "What will happen if her family can't take her?"

"She'll have to go into care," Crystal explained. "I'll need to locate a foster family to take care of her, at least in the short term."

Myron said, "It turns out Melanie is a cousin of mine." He glanced at Judy, who nodded. "Would it be possible for Judy and me to care for her?"

Crystal smiled. *What I was hoping for.* It would lessen her workload and be better for the child than a group foster home. *Cousins is a bonus, easy to verify.*

“You’d need to be registered as foster parents,” she explained. “There’s a process and all being well, I can fast track it. Shall we begin?”

Myron glanced at Melanie, and then at Judy, who nodded. He said, “Yes, what do we need to do?”

Crystal was prepared. She retrieved an application from her briefcase and placed it on the table in front of him. “You’ll need to complete this form. To be approved, you’ll need one hundred and fifty points which I don’t see as a problem, and my personal recommendation, which will be a formality, unless I turn up something untoward.”

“I can fill it out now,” he said. “What else will you need?”

“I’ll need your full names and social security numbers and your address, so I can begin the process. We’re connected to the Police Records System, so I can check if there is anything in there about you. Your financials for the last five years, a copy of your marriage certificate and two personal references for you both together or individually. I’ll need to inspect your residence.”

Myron said, “Fine. Can you start the process with our details while I complete the application?”

“Yes,” Crystal confirmed. “That’s my plan. There’s an office here for social services officers on call.”

“I can have the financials here in less than an hour,” Myron said. “If you wait a few minutes for me to make a couple of calls to inform our referees what it’s about, I’ll give you their details. Are verbal references sufficient?”

“Yes, exactly what we need.”

Judy said, “I’ll go home now and be back with our marriage certificate.”

Crystal nodded. “This should be a quick approval, but I’ll need to have it signed off by my supervisor.”

“With our residence,” Myron explained, looking at Judy, who nodded again. “We are currently in an apartment, but we’ll be moving into a penthouse when the renovations are complete. We can arrange for you to see both this afternoon if you’re available.”

“Sure, I think that’ll work.”

Melanie had been listening to the conversation, but it was hard to know if she understood what was happening.

Judy left to retrieve their marriage certificate.

Myron made the first of four phone calls. One to arrange for their financials to be couriered to him at the hospital. He then rang Frank Dunn on the assumption a reference from someone within the system would carry more weight. His next call was to the mayor, who agreed to be a referee for Myron and Judy. Last, he asked Burt Rogers to make himself available to show Crystal and Judy the penthouse later in the day.

Handing his notes with his referees to Crystal, Myron said, “Frank Dunn is a Parole Officer, I don’t know if...”

“Yes, I know him. We occasionally have mutual clients.”

“Our second referee will be Mayor Simmons. That’s his private cell, and he’s expecting your call.”

“Oh,” said Crystal. “They are exceptional referees.” *Give them a lot of points.* “We use an elaborate point system to determine people’s suitability as foster or adoptive parents. It allocates points, sometimes negatively, for everything. I’ll go to the office and make a start, then return for the application.”

Crystal looked at the screen in front of her. She sighed and entered Myron and Judy’s personal information as a joint application.

Reference calls needed to be made through the system, which not only created a date and time stamp, but recorded the call and analyzed the content allocating points using algorithms.

The program took into consideration what was said, and the way it was said, content, the tone, the words used, and the implied meaning. Crystal didn’t understand how it worked. However, she understood it had taken many years to develop and was continually being refined.

It allocated points for the referee. For example, a professional from within the system such as Frank Dunn would score much higher than an aunt, or a neighbor, a colleague, or a high school teacher.

They received maximum points for both content and referees.

Neither had so much as a parking ticket, so the police checks had resulted in bonus points.

The AI seemed fair to Crystal, who’d been dubious when it was first introduced. Processing the application was onerous for caseworkers, but she figured when the wellbeing of children was concerned, it was worth the effort.

This may be the easiest foster application I’ve ever processed. They both have nearly half the points they need, and I’ve not looked at the application yet.

When Crystal entered Melanie’s room, Myron was talking to Melanie, who was answering with nods and shakes. “Still no words,” he said, “but she’s communicating.”

“That’s a positive.”

“Yes,” Myron agreed. “I have the application here. I have our financials, too.” He indicated an envelope under the application. “Judy is picking up lunch for us all. She shouldn’t be too long. She’s getting enough for you too, if that’s okay?”

I shouldn’t, but it’ll be an opportunity to observe them interacting with the girl. “That’s wonderful, thank you. I tire of the hospital cafeteria food.” She picked up the documents. “I’ll just start on this lot and bring it back for Judy to sign later.”

“Thank you for helping with this.”

“No, thank you,” she replied, looking at Melanie. “For everything.”

Crystal returned to the social services office. As she added information, the points increased. She opened the envelope and reviewed their financial and tax history; she did Judy’s first. *Doesn’t act like a wealthy person, no sense of entitlement at all.* If Judy’s financials surprised her, Myron’s stunned her. *I’d never have guessed they owned so many businesses.*

She'd been to Frank's Diner frequently. She'd no idea Judy and Myron owned it, and the building that housed it. They had four hundred and fifty-six points triple what they needed to be approved as foster parents. Judy, working from home and being free to care for Melanie was a bonus.

She'd checked the city records and confirmed that Myron and Melanie were related, albeit distantly.

Crystal gathered up the paperwork and returned to Melanie's room for Judy's signature and lunch. *I wonder if lunch will come from Frank's Diner.*

Judy arrived at the same time as Crystal, who entered a step behind her.

"I've got us a Frank and Susie," announced Judy. "And a mac and cheese for Myron and Melanie because she liked it last night."

"Good thinking," Myron said.

"Frank and Susie?" Crystal asked.

"Frank's poutine and mac and cheese, share plates. The poutine contains pork, so Myron and I guess Melanie won't be able to eat it. There are also coffees for us, and..." Judy picked up the milkshake. "Melanie," she asked, "Would you like a peanut butter milkshake?"

"Oh... Yes, please," replied Melanie.

Three delighted adults stared at her.

"Hello, Melanie," Myron said.

"Hello, Myron," she answered.

Judy shifted her gaze from Melanie to Myron. *He looks like he's won the lottery.*

"You know my name?" Myron asked.

"Yes, and the pretty woman is Judy. That's Crystal... I mean, you're pretty, too." She smiled.

"Oh, you've been listening to us?" Judy asked.

"Yes."

"Do you have anything you want to ask?"

"No. I'd like my milkshake now, please."

"Okay sweetheart, when you have questions, ask them, okay?"

"Okay."

Judy passed Melanie her milkshake.

"Would you like to share mac and cheese with me again, Melanie?" Myron asked.

"Yes, please."

They ate in silence. Nobody wanted to push Melanie. They would let Melanie set the pace.

After lunch, Judy co-signed the foster parent application papers and passed Crystal a notarized copy of their Marriage Certificate.

Crystal thanked her and returned to her office.

Crystal verified Judy had co-signed, logged their marriage details, and recorded the interaction she'd witnessed between Myron, Judy, and Melanie during lunch.

The system identified legal marriage as important in terms of commitment and stability and allocated points accordingly.

Now she needed to verify accommodation suitable for a child would be provided. This sounded like a small thing, but it was huge. Regardless of how many points perspective adoptive or foster parents had, the lack of appropriate accommodation could deem them unsuitable.

I'm already seeing Myron and Judy as adoptive parents, not just temporary foster parents.

Crystal shut down her computer and left to meet Judy for visits to Judy's apartment and the penthouse they would move to.

A nurse, Jenny Loader, came into Melanie's room to check her vital signs. When she said hello to Melanie, the girl answered, "Hi."

Talking to strangers is a good sign.

Next, Jenny needed to change Myron's dressing. He removed his shirt as requested, and winced as the nurse removed his dressing, revealing his wounds.

Judy gasped. "Myron! You told me it was a few scratches. You're cut to pieces!"

"It's okay, sweetheart. It looks much worse than..."

Melanie gasped, her bottom lip quivered, and she cried. She was staring at Myron's wounds. Judy was quickly on the bed beside her, holding her. "It's all right, sweetheart. There's nothing to worry about. Myron will be better soon. He's not going to leave us."

Melanie held on tightly to Judy's neck. Her head buried into Judy's shoulder. She began sobbing. *A reaction to all she's experienced these last two days.*

"It's all right Melanie, you release it. You're safe. We'll stay with you as long as you need us."

After Myron's wounds had been redressed, he joined them on the bed and held them both. "I'm going to be fine, and I'll never leave you, either of you."

On her way to meet Judy, Crystal had encountered Nurse Loader, who called her aside and relayed what she witnessed in Melanie's room. Crystal retrieved her case notes and made a record of what had transpired. "You know, Jenny, I think this one might just work out."

Crystal Brown collected Judy and drove to her apartment.

Spotlessly clean and very ordered. Not surprised. "If this is to be Melanie's home, you'd need to convert the office into a bedroom, but as it will only be for a short period..."

"I think ten days at most," Judy said.

"...then it'll be acceptable."

Burt Rogers was waiting for them, enjoying a coffee in Judy's booth at Frank's Diner.

After Judy made the introductions, they took the elevator to the penthouse. Burt produced a set of keys.

"We've taken possession from the former tenants who've moved out," Burt explained. "They've left it in good condition, but Myron said you'll want some renovations."

Judy said to Crystal, "I haven't had time to see it yet, so it's new to me too."

"We can discover it together," Crystal suggested.

"You're gonna like it," Burt said. He opened the door. "Myron wants the kitchen and bathroom renovated, but he said you'll tell me what you want done."

They walked through the Penthouse. "My God, it's huge," Judy said. "I'd no idea it was this big."

"Large living room, separate dining room, an eat-in kitchen, sizeable family bathroom, four bedrooms, three with ensuite, a laundry room, a walk-in closet which Myron reckons may not be big enough for you, and look at this spacious, enclosed balcony."

"I think this is perfect," Crystal said.

"It certainly is exactly what we need for a family. I love it. I can't believe I owned this and had no idea it was so perfect."

Burt looked at her. He raised an eyebrow. "It was tenanted when you acquired the building, so this is the first chance you've had to look at it."

"My God Burt, I can't believe the timing of the tenants vacating."

Crystal was in awe of the penthouse, and she was in awe of Judy.

Judy asked, "How long will it take to renovate?"

"Myron suggested it has become urgent," he said. "If we start on Monday, a week to ten days. I can delay a couple of projects a few days and put everyone on it, with overtime, of course."

"Sure, Burt, do that. Myron and I will work on our ideas over the weekend. Are there floor plans?"

"Myron has them."

"Perfect, and as an added incentive, tell the guys they eat downstairs for free while they're working on it."

"They'll be queuing up to get on the project."

Crystal said, "I think it's perfect the way it is."

"I agree, but the kitchen and bathroom need updating. I don't think we'll need any structural changes, so it'll be quick. Besides, I'm thinking if we can work on it as a family project, it will give Melanie a distraction and help her feel she belongs."

Burt frowned.

Crystal said, "I think you'll be a wonderful mother, Judy."

Burt's frown deepened.

"Do you have time for a quick coffee? I need to wait a while to organize dinner for tonight."

“Yes,” agreed Crystal. “Then I need to get back to my office and finish my report and recommendations. I’ll need my supervisor to sign off. I think it’ll be the quickest approval on record, certainly of any I’ve been involved in.”

After coffee, Crystal asked, “Can I drive you back to the hospital, Judy?”

“Thanks,” Judy said, “but no. It’s out of your way. It’ll be easier for everyone if I take a taxi.”

Burt said, “I’ll drive Judy to the hospital.”

Judy smiled. *He wants me to fill him in on what’s going on.*

They left together. Crystal headed to her car, Judy and Burt to his.

Judy told Burt what had happened during the last few days.

“Well, you can start having new furniture delivered in a week. We’ll get started gutting the kitchen and bathrooms tomorrow, and if you and Myron can get me your plan by Sunday night, we’ll get it done in a week,” Burt said. “I’ll start making some calls now to put our regular suppliers on notice. We may need some urgent deliveries next week.”

Burt dropped Judy at the hospital and was making his first call before she’d closed the door. Judy watched him drive away. Her head was spinning.

The Penthouse

When Judy arrived at the hospital room, Melanie was in the bathroom by herself.

“Oh,” Judy exclaimed. “The first time since the accident.”

“Yes, a good sign I think,” Myron suggested.

“I’m concerned because she hasn’t mentioned the accident, or asked about her parents,” Judy said.

“I think she knows they died,” Myron opined. “We shouldn’t push it. Wait until she’s ready to talk.”

When Melanie returned from the bathroom, plans for the penthouse were spread out on the bed. Myron was trying to explain them to Melanie, with little success.

“Myron, she’s four years old.”

Melanie was indignant. She sat a little straighter and folded her arms across her chest. “I’m nearly five.”

“Sorry Mel.” Nobody noticed her first indication of familiarity.

“She’s nearly five years old,” Judy corrected herself. “This is a drawing of our new home.”

“Okay.”

Judy pointed to the plan. “This’ll be your bedroom.”

“Okay.”

Childlike acceptance? I’m not sure.

“Here’s the kitchen.” Judy indicated on the plan.

Melanie’s eyes lit up. “Can I have a peanut butter milkshake?”

Judy explained, “There’s a big kitchen downstairs that makes peanut butter milkshakes, but you can only have one each day.”

“Okay.”

Myron then asked, “Melanie, what do you want in our new home?”

“I want a swing.” She locked her eyes on his, round and persuasive, as if willing him to agree.

“Yes, we can have a swing,” he said. “We have a large, enclosed balcony here,” he pointed to it on the plan. “You can have an activity center, with a slide and climbing bars, too.”

“And a café style table and chairs,” Judy said. “We can relax over coffee while she plays.”

“Good idea.”

“I’ve been thinking. She can sit with me in Frank’s booth while I work. Read or color in books or something until she’s ready to start school next year.”

“And have her peanut butter milkshake.” Myron chuckled.

“Yes, please,” said Melanie.

It was their first family meeting.

Everything's happening so fast. Judy picked up her phone and swiped through her contacts. "Hello Burt, can you investigate a children's activity center for the balcony? It must include a swing."

Burt said, "Should be lots of options, and we'll lay impact absorbing tiles like we did under the exercise equipment at your oasis."

"You're amazing, Burt. Myron will call when we're finished reviewing the plans."

"We'll start work tomorrow."

Crystal Brown called Myron Myerson, who answered before the second ring. "Hello, Ms. Brown."

"Mr. Meyerson. Your application to act as Melanie's foster parents is complete, and I've recommended acceptance."

"Thank you. Do you know when..."

"I need to have it signed off by my supervisor. It's Friday evening, and he's very strict about not working outside his office hours." *Lunacy given the nature of our work.* "Normally, it'd have to wait until Monday morning, but I think I can convince him to make an exception." *Because of who your referees are.*

"I believe the hospital intends to discharge Melanie tomorrow," Myron suggested. "After another visit from Dr. Schmidt."

"I should be able to have your application signed off before then," she said. *Signing off on Saturday morning would be preferable to explaining to the department director why he hadn't done so.*

Crystal rang off, promising to keep Myron informed.

Myron called Ruth. "Mama, we won't be home for Sabbath. We're still in the hospital with Melanie. If everything goes well, we'll bring her home tomorrow."

"Yes, son, I expected you would be."

"I can't help but think of the day I learned I couldn't father children."

"You'll be a wonderful father, son."

Judy arrived at the hospital with scrambled eggs and toast for two. Coffee for Myron and a peanut butter milkshake for Melanie.

Melanie's eyes widened. "This is my favorite drink in the whole wide world."

Judy smiled. "You can only have one each day."

After breakfast, Judy showed Melanie the pictures of outdoor activity centers Burt had emailed. "You can choose the one you want."

Melanie squealed and bounced as she scrolled through the pictures on Judy's iPad. After she'd looked at each one, she scrolled back through them, slowly, and became serious. Sometimes she'd stop scrolling and zoom in on something, and smile or frown.

Judy glanced at Myron, who was getting as much joy from watching her choose as Melanie was getting from choosing.

Judy nodded towards Melanie. "Very serious business, this choosing an activity center."

"Yes, it is," said Myron. "She has to live with whichever one she chooses."

Judy shook her head. *I guess they are related.*

After scrolling through the pictures several more times, stopping to study some carefully, scrolling past others, Melanie nodded. She smiled at Judy but passed the iPad to Myron.

"That one," she said.

He made a show of studying the image on the iPad, then nodded and said, "I'll let Uncle Burt know which one is the most suitable."

"Why..." Judy began, but Myron raised his hand.

"If we give her a choice, we need to accept it without question," he said. "This will show her we trust her judgement and give her confidence to make decisions in the future. If her choice is unwise, she'll learn."

Judy nodded. "The same as we do with Becky." *He's already a great father.*

Dr. Schmidt arrived to examine Melanie, and hopefully, sign her release papers.

Myron asked, "Melanie, do you remember Dr. Schmidt?"

"Yes. Hello doctor."

"Hello Melanie. You seem to be feeling much better."

"Yes, I am, thank you."

"I'll sign the paperwork so she can be discharged to social services. I understand you'll be fostering her."

"Assuming we're approved, yes."

Judy followed him into the hall. "Doctor, Melanie seems to be a resilient little girl. I'm concerned she's in some form of denial, and everything will have a major impact on her later."

"It's possible," Dr. Schmidt confirmed. "However, she's not displaying signs of repressed feelings or denial. It's unusual, but she may have processed what happened during the hours she was non-communicative. As far as I'm concerned, she's fine to go home now. If she exhibits any behavior, that causes you concern, bring her in to see me."

Judy nodded. "Thank you, doctor."

When Judy stepped back into the room, Myron showered, changed, and talked to Burt Rogers about the plans.

"Let's go to the bathroom and have a wash while we're waiting for Ms. Brown."

When they'd finished in the bathroom, Crystal Brown was there. She seemed to have an endless stack of paperwork to be signed.

"Melanie," Crystal asked. "Would you like to go home with Myron and Judy now?"

“Yes please,” Melanie said. “Can I have a peanut butter milkshake too?”

“Of course you can,” she replied.

Judy glanced at Melanie, and then at Myron, raising an eyebrow. *Why do I feel we’ve been conned?*

Crystal said, “I’ll sign her release papers.”

Judy said, “Mel, we’ll go shopping today and buy you some new clothes. Would you like that?”

“Yes, I don’t have any clothes now.”

“You can choose your own clothes.”

“I like pink.”

It wasn’t long before Crystal returned. “You’re free to take your family home now, Myron.”

“We can leave now Melanie; would you like to come home with us?” Myron asked.

“Yes, please.”

She raised her arms, and Myron leaned over her. She laced them around his neck as she had when he’d pulled her out of the wreck.

“I’m not sure how she’ll react when we take a taxi to the mall,” Judy said.

“She’ll be fine,” Myron replied.

Melanie sat between Myron and Judy in the back seat and gripped their hands tightly. She didn’t appear to have any other adverse reaction to being in a car.

At the mall, they went to the children’s clothing outlet and allowed Melanie to choose a new wardrobe.

An important step in allowing Melanie to feel she belongs with us, instead of being a visitor to our home.

Their next stop was the bookstore so Melanie could choose some reading, activity, and coloring books. Finally, it was the toy store where Melanie could choose three toys. *Enough to start.*

Myron smiled. “You’re a natural mother.”

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” Judy responded.

Katie frowned when they entered Frank’s Diner for lunch.

When she came to take their order, Judy said, “Mel, this is Aunt Katie. You’ll see her here sometimes.”

Katie said, “Hello Mel, what would you like for lunch?”

“I’d like mac and cheese and a peanut butter milkshake, please.”

“I don’t know Mel,” Judy said. “I think we should only have one milkshake a day.”

“I remember, but Crystal said I could,” Melanie argued.

Judy shook her head. “She did, but after today, only one each day, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Shouldn’t we encourage her to eat something different?” Myron asked.

“Not today,” said Judy. “It’s her comfort food for now, and she wants to share it with you.”

After they arrived home, Judy got Melanie ready for a shower.

Myron sat at the dining table cutting the tags from Melanie’s new clothes and laying them out for her.

When Melanie was clean and dry, Judy allowed her to choose what she’d wear, even her underwear. After she was dressed, Judy gathered up the rest of her clothes for washing. They seldom used their washing machine and dryer, as they had their clothes laundered. It was only their underwear, socks, and bedding they washed themselves.

Judy retrieved Melanie’s dirty clothes from the bathroom for washing. Melanie took them from her and placed them in the trash.

“No,” she said.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Mel,” Judy said. “We can wash them, and they’ll be good as new.” Judy retrieved the clothes.

Melanie took them from Judy, and with a look of defiance, Judy would come to know well, repeated “No,” and returned them to the trash.

Judy looked at Myron. “I don’t know,” he said. “It could be because she saw my clothes from the accident in the trash?”

Judy rang Dr. Schmidt and relayed what had transpired, including Myron’s suggestion. He said, “I’ll make a note, but I don’t think you should force the issue.”

The next day, they had another adventure: selecting furniture for the penthouse. Myron and Judy included Melanie in every decision. She sat on every chair or sofa they considered and was asked her opinion.

Melanie chose the furniture for her bedroom. A princess suite in pink and white, with a bed above a desk, bookshelf, and sofa, with stairs at one end of the bed and a slide at the other. A matching wardrobe and dressing table and pink desk and dressing table chairs.

Myron said, “I’m not sure it’s practical.”

“Aren’t we going to respect her choices?” Judy asked.

“Yes, but she’ll want to replace it in a few years when she doesn’t want to be a little girl anymore.”

“Then we’ll replace it,” Judy said. “The important thing now is she has a sense of belonging.”

Burt Rogers, an experienced professional, with a capable team, many of whom felt indebted to Myron and Judy for giving them a second or third chance to build a life for themselves—broken people who no longer led broken lives—ensured everything went smoothly, with the renovations to the penthouse.

They moved ten days after bringing Melanie home.

Melanie settled into the penthouse with ease.

“Thank you for making me a new home,” she said.

Judy glanced at Myron. “She’s an exceptional young lady.”

Myron replied, “She seems to have adapted to her new situation.”

“Yes,” said Judy. “She’s accepted her situation without question, as if she knew what to expect, and everything is unfolding as it’s supposed to.”

“She’s cooperative and easy. No signs of her defiant attitude since you disposed of the clothes.”

“No, she usually does whatever I ask.”

Melanie enjoyed sitting opposite Judy in her booth at Frank’s, contentedly coloring, reading, or doing the activities in her books, while Judy worked.

At home, she was active and content to play on her activity center while Judy wrote on her laptop at the café table on their balcony.

Crystal Brown came to formally inspect the penthouse. After greeting Judy, she said, “Hello Melanie, would you like to show me around your new home?”

“Yes, of course. First my princess bedroom.”

Melanie finished the tour on the balcony. “This is my swing and activity center. I like to play here when Judy is working. I’ll stay here now because I think you want to talk to Judy.”

“Yes, Melanie I do. You’re very clever.”

“Yes, I know. Myron told me.”

Crystal was smiling when she met Judy in the living room. “She seems to be settling in well,” Crystal said.

“Remarkably so,” Judy replied.

Crystal handed Judy a package. “Photos of her parents. I’ll let you decide the best time to give them to her.”

Judy opened it. Two framed photographs of Melanie and her parents. She slid them back into the wrapping. “Okay, I’ll think about the best way to give them to her.”

Judy walked Crystal to the door and thanked her for all she had done.

Judy stood at the balcony door, watching Melanie play. She walked inside, picked up her phone, and called Dr. Schmidt.

“Hello, Ms. Vernon,” he answered.

“Hi Doctor, I need a little advice. Crystal Brown has given me photographs of Melanie and her parents and I’m not sure how to...”

“Don’t make giving them to her into a big thing, but don’t treat it like it’s nothing either. Just give them to her as normally as you can, when you judge the time is right.”

“Okay, doctor.”

Judy knocked and waited until she was invited to enter Melanie's room, trying to calm the butterflies in her stomach. She and Myron had agreed it was appropriate to respect Melanie's space. They were teaching Melanie to do the same when entering their room.

Judy offered the photographs to Melanie, who took them and studied them without a word.

Nervous, not sure what to say, Judy asked, "Where shall we put them, Melanie?"

Melanie didn't answer. Judy fidgeted. *Should I go? Should I wait? Why isn't she answering? Giving them to her was a mistake. I should have waited until Myron came home.* She wanted to leave, but forced herself to stay.

Melanie looked up at her. "They had to go to heaven. It's all right, they're safe now. God needed them."

"How do you know, Melanie?"

"The angel told me?"

"Oh... when was this, sweetheart?"

"When he took them to heaven."

"Oh, I..."

"When everything stopped. We were driving home. Everything stopped. There was another car... and then there was an angel. He said, and I remember exactly, 'Your parents need to go to heaven. I've come to make sure they get to heaven safely because God needs them now. Don't be scared, Melanie. God has sent someone to take care of you. A man who will keep you safe. When the man comes, you need to hold on to him, and not let go until you feel safe.'"

"That's what I did. I held on. I didn't think I'd ever let him go. But I did. I let him go when I felt safe, like the angel told me."

"The angel said, 'You'll have new parents who will love and care for you the same as your first parents did. Don't be sad Melanie.'"

"Oh...", said Judy. "I'm glad the angel came."

Melanie put the framed pictures in her bookcase. "I'm not sad. Everything happened like the Angel said. I can remember them now. I'm not sad. The angel told me."

Judy hugged her.

Melanie smiled. "It's all right, Mama. We don't need to be sad. The angel told me."

Judy turned her head and wiped the tears spilling from her eyes.

Later, she rang Dr. Schmidt and relayed what had happened.

"I'll make some notes, but don't be concerned," Dr. Schmidt said. "I've been doing this job a long time. This isn't the first time a child who experienced a tragedy has talked about an angel keeping them safe. I can't explain it, but it's happened enough, I can't deny it either."

Myron and Alison

Friday afternoon. Judy was dressing for her date with Ali, and Melanie was ready to go with Myron for Sabbath with Art and Ruth. He'd suggested Melanie spend weekends, so she'd bond with Mama. Melanie would likely defer to Judy if she were there. This way, Judy and Ali could still date on Friday nights.

Myron arrived home and went to the balcony where Melanie was playing. After greeting her with a kiss and cuddle, he found Judy in her walk-in closet. She wore red aphrodisiac lingerie.

"Wow," he said, as a tent pitched itself in his trousers. "Now I feel guilty." His hands danced over her body as his lips caressed her lips.

"Why?" she asked. "I think horny is the word you're looking for."

"Because I'm going to rob Alison of her sexy girlfriend." Myron winked.

Judy frowned. "What?"

"I want to date Alison tonight. I need to talk to her. Can you take Melanie home for Sabbath?"

She nodded. "I've worked out it's not going to happen."

"Not now. The timing is wrong. If it's meant to happen, it'll happen in the future."

"Are you sure?"

"If it doesn't happen, it was never meant to."

Judy pushed herself hard against him. "If Mel wasn't here..."

"She is, and we're both grateful."

"Yes, and that's not what I mean. If she was out, I'd have had you naked by now."

Myron smiled.

Judy pulled on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt and made her way to the living room. Melanie came in from the balcony.

"Mama, where's your pretty dress?"

"I'll take you to Sabbath. Papa will have dinner with Aunt Ali."

"But you always date her."

"Papa's turn tonight."

She picked up her phone, chose the contact at the top of her list and tapped call.

"What are you wearing?" Judy asked.

"My green suit."

"Take it off and put your hot date dress on, and don't tie your hair back."

"Why?" Ali asked.

"I'm not dating you tonight, Myron is."

"Why?"

“He wants to talk with you, and I don’t know what else.”

“If I didn’t know what he’s going to say, I’d be more excited.”

“I’m taking Mel for Sabbath, so I don’t expect him until tomorrow. Whatever you two need to do is fine with me.”

“Are you sure?” Ali asked.

“Yes, I’ll tell him too.”

“If you’re okay...”

“You have my blessing, but don’t force anything. Let the night unfold as it will, knowing you don’t have to be concerned about me.”

“I’m nervous now.”

“I think you mean excited.”

Myron and Melanie came into the living room. He was saying “...because Mama wants to take you to Sabbath, and I want to have dinner with Aunt Alison. Now you’d better pack your bag.”

“It’s already packed, Papa.”

“It’ll soon be time for you and Mama to leave.”

Judy said, “I told Ali about the change of plans.”

“Okay,” Myron said.

“She knows I’m not expecting to see you until tomorrow. I’m comfortable with anything.”

“I don’t have any plan beyond talking to her.”

“I’ve never had plans beyond talking to her, but...”

He smiled. “I understand.”

“Yes, and I’ll understand. More than understand.”

Melanie said, “Are you ready, Mama? Time to go.”

“Okay Mel,” Judy kissed Myron goodbye and said, “Come, kiss Papa goodbye while I get my bag.”

Myron studied their wine rack. *Needs to be perfect for the occasion, not heavy, but not too light.* He chose a bottle of Barolo La Serra—a bright, floral, and energetic, aromatic red with notes of strawberries, flowers, and lemons—which he decanted into a Sagrada decanter and placed two matching Cornet Sagrada glasses on the marble kitchen bench.

He selected a love themed play list from Apple Music. Then went to the balcony, listening to Ed Sheeran’s *Perfect*, while waiting for Alison.

I know what I need to say. Disappointing. Nothing can be done. Don’t know what’ll happen, don’t know what I want to happen.

He drank some water. Went to the bathroom and washed his face. He checked his sleeves, making sure they protruded from the jacket by precisely half an inch, unnecessary as his suit and shirt were tailored to his exacting requirements.

He fiddled with his tie to ensure it sat perfectly. It did, because Myron had tied it precisely. He took a cloth from the drawer and ran it over his shoes. Not needed, he still visited the shoeshine stand at the Biltmore Hotel daily. Closing the drawer, he took a small cloth from his breast pocket and polished his glasses. He appraised himself in the mirror, nodded and returned to the balcony.

All of Me by John Legend was playing. *Judy told us she was okay with it, gave us her blessing. More than that, it's like she was making sure we had no excuses not to. It's like she wants us to.*

Myron picked up his phone, called Pier Two, the restaurant he'd booked, and canceled his reservation. *Best we stay home, free ourselves of inhibitions.*

He made a second call.

"Hello Uncle Myron."

"Good evening, Darnell."

"What do you need?"

"A special dinner for two."

"Of course, anything in particular."

"No. I'll leave the menu to you. Delivered to the penthouse."

"Sure, it'll be a pleasure."

He heard the door open and ended the call.

He entered the living room, as Alison stepped in from the entrance foyer.

"Wow!"

He froze and stared at her as she walked toward him, accompanied by Bruno Mars, *Just the Way You Are*. The slit in her dress revealing a flash of sea-foam colored lace trimmed panties with each slow calculated step.

She reached him and slipped her arms around his neck, guiding their lips together. His arms held her waist and pulled her in tight. She disengaged one arm and slid it down his torso, resting on the hardness pressing against her. She caressed it.

"I guess you like my dress," she whispered.

"I like you," he replied. "More than like, but you know that."

"Yes, and I love you too."

They held each other and began moving to Christina Perri's *A Thousand Years*. Before long, they were slow dancing and slow kissing.

This slow dancing is making everything happen too fast. Need to slow things down. He untangled himself from her. "I'll pour us some wine."

She smiled. "Please. Where are we going for dinner?"

"After Judy talked with me, I canceled our reservation. Dinner will come to us. I thought a night with just the two of us might be what the doctor ordered."

Alison winked. "So now Judy's a doctor?"

He smiled, disappeared into the kitchen, and returned with two glasses of wine. She took the offered glass and clinked his before taking a sip. "Perfect," she said.

They sipped their wine, their gazes fixed upon each other. "Perfect plan, from my perfect man."

Myron studied her through his glass, hoping she wouldn't notice the color warming his face. *She means that.*

Kiss Me by Sixpence None the Richer began playing. He placed his glass on a coaster on the black walnut and maple coffee table; she did likewise. He stepped to her, placed his hand behind her head, and guided her until his lips found hers. She took his cue, caressing his lips with her tongue.

His eyes closed, his hands explored her body through the smooth, form fitting dress. Allowing his touch to generate images and feed them into his mind. When their lips parted, their eyes connected.

"Enough with the word games," he said. "Alison, I love you completely, without reservation or condition."

The eyes of the woman he'd confessed his love to never left his.

"I can feel you, Myron. I have for a long time. I feel the same. I love you," she said. "You are the only man I've truly loved. I'll love you for the rest of my life. I know it with certainty. I can feel it, feel you, feel us, the three of us. When I said you're perfect, I meant it, the perfect man for me, and the perfect man for us."

Myron leaned in and lips caressed again.

He excused himself and went to the dressing room, returning without his jacket, tie, and shoes. Alison stood sipping her wine. He could feel her eyes upon him, studying his every move.

Myron picked up his glass, and sipped, accompanied by John Legend singing *Nervous*. He sat on the high-backed black leather red tinged sofa, sipped his wine again, then returned his glass to the coffee table. He watched as she followed him, at what he believed was a calculated distance, his eyes riveted on the flashes of emerald. She took a sip of wine, then placed her glass beside his.

Alison crouched to undo the straps of her shoes; her dress revealing more than a flash of sea-foam and lace tight across the velvet honey pot between her legs. She stood, stepping out of her shoes.

Instead of sitting beside him, she eased herself onto his lap, her dress falling open. Her fingers undid a button on his shirt and then another. His hardness pressed against her as she fidgeted and adjusted herself, apparently to position his desire exactly where she wanted it. All the while, his eyes were riveted to the emerald lace covered slice of heaven that was his for the taking.

Hungry lips devoured each other. His hand slid up her thigh and caressed the gateway to heaven through sheer panties, which did nothing to hide the desire thrusting against his fingers.

Myron's practiced fingers massaged her through her panties.

My God, I'm wet. Never had a man make me so wet.

Her pelvis was moving, involuntarily rubbing her against his fingers. His hardness pressed firmly where only Monica's fingers had entered. It pulsed with desire for him.

John Mayer's *Your Body is a Wonderland* played. Her mouth, which had the same desire to be filled, was drawing his tongue deeper inside.

Experienced nothing like this. I want him inside of me wherever he wants to enter my body.

Alison's pelvis moved with increasing urgency, her clitoris rubbing rapidly against his fingers, and being rubbed equally in return. Her anus rubbing hard against his restrained penis, which was thrusting against her willing opening.

Why do I want him in there so much? Never wanted a man there before. Maybe that's why. I want him to take me completely, to fill my body in ways it's never been filled.

She repositioned herself, released his belt. Her fingers opening the button above his fly, then moved to ease his zip open. He raised himself for her to lower his trousers and underwear and free her desire.

Her hand tightened around the shaft. *It's throbbing!*

Her eyes appraised it, looking to confirm her touch. *My God, look at the size of that monster.*

Hold on, We're Going Home, by Drake played. She lifted herself as he eased her panties below her knees, where they fell to the floor. His fingers moved inside her. She lowered her head, mouth open, salivating to be filled.

So my mouth gets it first.

The sound of the door chime mercilessly returned them to reality.

"I'm sorry," Myron said. "Dinner has arrived."

Alison raised her head when the bell chimed and gazed into his eyes. She winked and flicked her gaze to his erection. "And just when I was about to eat."

Myron stood and restrained it back in his undershorts. "It'll be here for your pleasure all night."

"And I certainly plan to be pleased."

Dressed, he kissed her and headed to the foyer.

Myron took two hot box pouches from the delivery driver and passed him the tip he'd prepared earlier.

The driver took the fifty, glanced at it, beamed at Myron and said, "Thank you, sir."

Myron nodded. *You're lucky to get anything with your timing.*

He took the packages to the kitchen and read the note, Darnell included.

Six course degustation. I've numbered them so eat them in order. Leave them in the oven on a low heat to keep warm. Don't open the lids until you're ready to plate or they'll dry out. Put the ice cream in the freezer.

Myron washed his hands at the kitchen sink, did as instructed and returned to the living room. Alison was still on the sofa, sipping her wine. He glimpsed her panties on the floor where she'd dropped them.

He collected his glass and took a sip, turned, walked to the door, turned back to look at her again. "Come on," he said. "We should eat first. We have all night."

She stood and walked to him, his eyes riveted on the flashes of nakedness as her dress revealed her jewel as she walked. He remained in the doorway, and kissed her as she reached him, slipping his free hand inside her dress.

"Oh... God," she moaned.

He led her to the dining room. He'd set his place at the head of the black walnut and maple table, and hers on his left. She sat with crossed legs. He glanced at what the split in her dress exposed. *How can I prepare dinner?* He couldn't take his eyes off her heart-shaped manicured offering.

Myron shook his head, sucked in a deep breath, turned, and headed to the kitchen. He steadied himself against the bench, took several deep breaths, rinsed his hands again, then opened box one and plated lobster ragout, with baby vegetables, lime and ginger as attractively as he could.

As he and Alison enjoyed the first course, he forced himself to focus his attention anywhere but where he wanted to.

Myron said, "I could feel what you want, the way you were pushing against me. I've never wanted that before, but I want you that way."

"I've never had it that way. Never even considered it, but you're right, I want you there. I wanted to draw you in."

"Interesting," he said. "Perhaps that's going to be our thing. Something that's ours."

Alison nodded.

"Are you ready for the second course?"

"I'm ready for something."

Myron took their plates to the kitchen, rinsed them and put them into the dishwasher. He plated the second course of quail ballotine, smoked speck, broad bean puree, Dutch carrot, and a small, sealed container of pan juices. He carried them to the dining room, then brought the wine decanter in and topped up their glasses.

They ate, listening to Oasis, *Wonderwall*.

Myron asked, "Do you understand why, other than occasionally getting carried away, you and Judy haven't consummated your love?"

"Since I separated from John, it's because neither of us wanted her to break her promise to you, not, umm, intentionally anyway."

"That's what you tell yourselves, but you've both always known I've never had an issue with you two, although she was right."

"What do you mean?"

"You're too close. Sometimes I can see you're thinking the same. I watch and you seem oblivious to everything except each other. I think if you hadn't maintained a degree of separation, you would've bonded completely, excluding the rest of the world."

Alison nodded. "Not so much lately."

“Judy felt threatened. She didn’t want you with others, but didn’t want to risk excluding me. Not that she understood it.”

“I suspect she did, without knowing it.”

“Time for the third course?”

“I can prepare it.”

“Not tonight. Tonight I’ll do for you.”

“You’d better kiss me first.”

She stood, and Myron put his arm around her waist and pulled her in. His other hand slid inside her dress and caressed her nakedness. Their breathing quickened, moans echoing male and female. This time, it was Alison who pushed him away.

“Wait darling, I’m not going anywhere tonight.”

Myron took a deep breath, calmed himself, took the plates to the kitchen, rinsed them and his hands. He put the plates in the dishwasher, then plated the third course of orange and mustard sous vide duck breast, with white polenta, and silver beet. He returned, accompanied by Sade, *By Your Side*.

He continued while they ate, “I have to be the one who joins you, who links you together, creating a tripartite relationship. She may not have known it, but she was waiting for me.”

“I think we both knew it, but didn’t.”

The fourth course was thyme infused Victorian lamb fillet, with fondant potato, eggplant caviar, and a jus.

Alison said, “This food is sensational, glad they’re small portions.”

“Darnell has created a wonderful degustation,” Myron smiled. “I’ll never forget this meal, for lots of reasons.”

Sam Cooke sang *You Send Me* while they ate. Myron said, “Knowing what we needed to do and why was the start, we needed to identify the barriers. The first one is Frankie and Charlie. They’ve needed to adjust to their parents divorcing, John having a new partner, you being a lesbian, and starting a new job caused a significant upheaval in their life. Entering an unconventional relationship with Judy and I and having their living environment change again may be a step too far.”

“Frankie takes everything in his stride, but although Charlie’s putting on a brave face, he’s struggling.”

Venison eye fillet, with butternut pumpkin, and green split peas finished with a juniper red wine sauce comprised the fifth course.

Alison said, “I think this may be one of the best nights of my life,” as she topped up their glasses.

“You might think differently, come morning,” Myron suggested.

“I doubt it, whatever happens.”

“The next barrier is my parents are part of an Orthodox Jewish community, and I don’t know if putting them under the pressure of the community’s judgment over their son being in an unusual relationship would be something I’d be prepared to do.”

“I’m sure they only care about your happiness.”

“You’re right. I’d concluded this would need to be their decision, but I don’t want to put them in a difficult position.”

Something by The Beatles was playing when Myron took her hand. “I’d been working on those barriers and believed I had found a way for us to overcome them.”

“But?” Alison raised an eyebrow.

Myron didn’t answer immediately. He stood, kissed her again, and walked to the kitchen to plate their dessert. Umeshu poached Nashi pear, with vanilla bean ice cream.

As they enjoyed their dessert, he said, “Melanie. Other than requiring our full attention to help her adjust, we’re hoping to adopt her, and it’s unlikely that would be approved if we were in an unconventional relationship.”

Alison sat silently, staring into nothing. Myron knew to patiently wait while she processed what he’d said.

Finally, she whispered. “I understand.”

Myron took the last of their plates to the kitchen. Ali topped up her glass and went out to the balcony, looking out over the city lights. Warm tears rolled down her cheeks. Richard Marx, *Right Here Waiting*, was playing.

She felt, rather than heard, him step behind her. He took her glass and placed it on Judy’s café table. He turned her to face him, lifted her chin, and gently kissed her tears away.

“Don’t cry,” he whispered.

“It can’t happen, can it?”

“It can’t happen now, but it will happen.”

“You believe that?”

“I’m sure of it.”

“What if it doesn’t?” she asked.

“It was never meant to.”

“We could just take the opportunities we’re presented with, sometimes three of us, sometimes two.”

“You don’t want that, and neither do we,” Myron said. “It’d make it about sex, and it’s not about sex. It’s much deeper than trying to find opportunities for sex. It’s about building our lives together.”

Alison sobbed. Myron cupped her cheek in his hand. “I don’t want to diminish our love by making it about sex. Some people wouldn’t understand this, but I know you do. If we only look for opportunities to have sex, we’ll change the focus and it’ll become about sex, and sex is short term.”

Alison nodded. “Kiss me,” she whispered.

After they’d kissed, Myron said, “We have our lives ahead of us. If we need to wait a few years until your boys go to college and Melanie settles down, we won’t regret it.”

“And if our feelings change, and it never happens?”

“We still won’t regret it, because it wouldn’t have worked.”

She nodded. “I know you’re right. I knew that’s what you wanted to tell me tonight.”

“We still have tonight,” Myron said. “If you want it.”

Alison reached her hands behind her back and unfastened the hook at the top of her dress. “Unzip me,” she whispered.

He did, and she eased the straps off her shoulders, allowing her dress to fall to the floor.

Monica

Alison opened her eyes. Myron was lying on his side, staring at her. She smiled and reached down to caress him.

“So I’m still attractive in the light of day?” she asked.

“I think I’ve already answered that question.”

She moved closer and rested her head on his shoulder, smiling contentedly.

“No regrets about last night?” he asked.

“Myron,” she purred. “Not what I expected, but it was perfect. You were perfect.”

“I’ll organize breakfast. What would you like?”

She gazed at the erection she was fondling and moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue.

“You can choose what I have for breakfast.”

After eating Judy’s usual breakfast, delivered from Frank’s downstairs, Alison stood. “I’d better shower. Should’ve brought a change of clothes. I’m gonna need to go home before work.”

“There’s a closet full of clothes. I’m sure you’ll find something suitable...”

“For every occasion,” Alison laughed.

“Did you want me to come and wash something?”

“I told you. I want you to wash everything.”

“I’d like to make sure everything’s clean.”

Naked, she offered her hand, which he took.

Alison was standing in Judy’s walk-in closet, wearing pale blue lingerie from Judy’s aphrodisiac collection. She was staring at Judy’s clothes, trying to decide what to wear. *Spoiled for choice.*

“That completes the set,” Myron said.

Alison jumped, startled. She turned to look at him, now dressed in slate gray slacks and a forest green polo shirt. She twitched a little. *So handsome.*

“What set?”

“You’re wearing Judy’s underwear. I’ve already seen her wearing yours.”

“Oh, I... umm, you knew about that? Did she tell you?”

“Did you two think I don’t know which underwear is my wife’s?”

“Oh, umm, I...”

Myron smiled. “To be honest, I liked it.”

“Not sure what to wear.”

“I think that pale blue skirt and matching blouse are meant to go with that underwear.”

Was thinking that. Alison smiled. “You know this?”

“I pay attention.”

“Of course you do. Come fondle Judy’s underwear before I dress.”

In a taxi on the way to Dancer’s, Ali extracted her phone from her bag, scrolled through the contacts, found the number she wanted, then tapped call.

“Hey, you.”

“Hey yourself.”

“What’s up?”

“Come to Dancer’s when you finish work tonight. I’ll buy you dinner.”

“I’d love to, but are you sure?”

“Wouldn’t have invited you if I wasn’t.”

When she arrived, Ali greeted Jason with a hug and a peck on the cheek and asked for a coffee. She dropped her bag in her locker, had a quick walk around ensuring everything was in order, then sat at the chef’s table to enjoy her coffee, and reminisce about her night with the man she loved.

Her ringing phone interrupted her thoughts.

She glanced at caller ID. *Of course it is.*

“I borrowed some clothes,” Ali said. “I didn’t think to bring a change of clothes with me.”

“Which clothes?”

“Guess...”

Silence... “Pale blue, the ones you think match my eyes.”

“Did Myron...”

“No. How was last night?”

“Perfect.”

“I asked Myron.”

“What did he say?”

“Perfect.”

Ali smiled. “It’s unanimous.”

“Yes, I guess so. What did...”

“Let’s just say, I learned some things are worth waiting for, and I’m prepared to wait.” Ali sighed. “Years if necessary.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s everything. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

Later, Ali picked up her phone, and hit call.

“We’re not normal.”

“Why not?”

“Something Myron said.”

“What?”

“Doesn’t matter. All those years ago, Nancy awakened me, but I stepped back from the life after Sara. I never thought about my vagina. It was a part of me, but it was passive and I seldom gave it a thought.”

“That’s normal. Most people forget about having genitalia, I suppose.”

“That’s my point. I almost forgot it existed. It was passive. Then I met you. Since that day, I’ve been more or less permanently aroused to some extent. My vagina has been an active part of me, and I’m always aware of it, even before I became sexually active when John left.”

“Before Myron, I recall I didn’t have sex for two years. Well, I did once. African American girl, Joanne. Picked her up in a bar, back to my place for sex. A one-night stand that stuck in my mind. Other than that, I almost forgot it existed.”

“That’s not unusual.”

“Myron reminded me I had a vagina and what it’s for, but you’re right, since I met you, and you made my knees weaken, I’m always in a state of arousal.”

“That’s my point. We’re not normal.”

“We’re normal for us. Our connection or something. Whatever it is, I’m happy about it.”

“So am I.”

“Then what’s your point?”

“I don’t know.”

An hour later, Ali knew who was calling before she glanced at caller ID. *She’s been thinking.*

“It’s not arousal,” Judy said. “Well, it is, but that’s only a symptom.”

“Of what?”

“Kama muta.”

“Kama Sutra?”

“No, kama muta. Look it up.”

Ali googled the term and called back.

“Something about the momentary emotion that occurs when love ignites.”

“Only for us it wasn’t momentary. It’s permanent.”

Monica stepped into Dancer's Bistro and surveyed the restaurant. *Oh, this is nice, and busy. There she is, pretty. I like that blue. Have I seen it before?* She smiled as Ali made her way to her. *Wonder how she'll greet me, here.*

"Hello beautiful," Ali said, wrapping her arms around Monica's neck and drawing her in for a passionate kiss.

She's not pretending. "Anyone would think you're glad to see me."

Ali winked. "Always happy to see my girlfriend."

A warmth washed over Monica. *Love it when she says it first.*

"Come to the chef's table. I'll be up and down because I'm working." Ali took her hand and led her to the back of the restaurant.

Ali seated Monica and passed her a menu. "It's all good. What would you like to drink?"

"Surprise me. Something that'll make me think of you."

"Too easy."

Ali returned with two pink gins.

Monica smiled, picked up her glass, and offered a toast. "In your pink."

Ali fixed her eyes on Monica's crossed legs. "You should wear skirts more often."

"Talking of which. Is that a new outfit? I don't recognize it."

"No, I didn't get home last night. I borrowed it from Judy. What would you like for dinner?"

Monica shrugged. "I can't decide. How about some of those unusual dishes you told me about?"

Ali nodded. "Okay, Chicken feet and a bag of fish and chips to share." She went into the kitchen, returned a few minutes later, surveyed the room to ensure nothing required her attention, then sat.

"So, you stayed with Judy last night?" Monica asked. "Must've been some date."

"No, I didn't date Judy. I spent the night with Myron."

Myron? That's what they've been waiting for. Monica swallowed hard, licked her lips, and took a big mouthful of her drink. "Oh, and how was it?"

Ali's face lit up. "Perfect."

"Perfect?"

"Yes. I've never made love to a man like that before. We held each other all night. We didn't fuck, but we made love with our eyes. Although, to be honest, that monster of his was hard every time I touched it, so I don't know how we managed it."

Monica gulped her drink. *I don't like where this is going. Did she bring me here to say goodbye?* She frowned. "Monster?"

"It's the biggest one I've held." Ali frowned. "I don't think I've asked you. Mon, have you ever been with a man?"

Monica shook her head. *Men are dirt.* “No, never.” *Why would I want to have sex with dirt?* “The closest I’ve come is girls who want to be guys. Didn’t like it much. I prefer pretty girls like you.”

Darnell placed a share plate of chicken feet on the table between them. “Stuffed chicken feet,” he said. “Enjoy.”

Ali said, “Monica, this is my friend and partner, Darnell.” Monica offered her hand. “Darnell, this is my girlfriend, Monica.”

Why did she introduce me as her girlfriend? She’s never done that before.

“Pleased to meet you.” Darnell smiled.

Great smile. “Glad to meet you, too.”

“Try the food,” Ali said.

Monica cut a piece and tentatively placed it in her mouth. The idea of eating chicken feet wasn’t something she’d have considered. “Oh. Mmm... These are wonderful.”

“Everything in my restaurant is wonderful.” Ali winked. “Especially the manager.”

Monica focused her gaze on Ali. *I don’t understand what’s going on.* She picked up her glass and drained it.

Ali stood, took Monica’s glass and said, “I’ll get you another. Eat.”

Monica picked at her food, but couldn’t eat. Her pulse was racing, the butterflies in her stomach felt more like a flock of pigeons that had been disturbed in the park. She took her drink before Ali sat down, had a large gulp, and placed her glass on the table.

Monica locked her gaze on Ali’s. “Jesus Ali, would you tell me what’s going on?” She sighed heavily and swallowed hard. “I don’t know what this is about.”

Ali rested her hand on Monica’s arm. “I’ve never seen you like this. You’re always so cool and calm. You surprise me.”

“I surprise myself, just tell me.”

“Long or short version.”

“Short.” She gulped another mouthful of drink.

Ali sipped hers. Monica frowned. *Get on with it.*

A late reservation arrived. Ali excused herself.

Jesus. Her gaze followed Ali as she moved with fluid, economic grace. No movement exaggerated, nothing stood out to grab attention, and yet the symphony of her movements demanded attention.

Monica raised her glass to her mouth as she watched Ali greet and seat the customers. *She’s a natural.*

Ali returned and sipped her drink. “Our food is getting cold.”

“Talk to me.”

“Short version. Myron, Judy, and I want the same thing, but there are reasons it can’t happen now.”

“When?”

Ali shrugged. "Two or three years, I guess."

"And?"

"My girlfriend always says worry about today, and the future will take care of itself."

"She does, eh?"

"Smart girl, my girlfriend, and beautiful."

"Both true." Monica smiled.

Ali brushed her hair back and focused on Monica. "My heart is elsewhere, and I can't offer you a commitment, but I enjoy being your girlfriend..."

"Exclusive?"

"I have no right to ask for that without giving you a commitment."

"And Friday nights?"

"I haven't thought that far ahead, but every other Friday night I have my Farrington Girl's Night."

"So, I could plan on dating someone else every other Friday night?"

"If we're not exclusive, you could date someone any time you want, but I'd prefer you only fucked them and saved your dating for me."

Monica smiled. *Three years is a long time, anything can happen.* She raised her glass. "To my girlfriend."

Ali clinked her glass. "What do you want to do?"

"Eat chicken feet with my gorgeous girlfriend."

Monica had finished giving the boys' breakfast, and they'd gone to school. *Can't believe how happy I've been since she made us official. Never wanted a girlfriend before, and never wanted kids, but I do now.*

Ali came into the kitchen, having showered. She wore a dressing gown, and Monica glimpsed underwear, as Ali pulled the gown closed. *When we first got together, she wouldn't have showered without me. Guess this is what domestic life is.*

They shared a kiss. "Oh," said Ali. "The boys have already left for school."

"You were so long in the shower, I thought I was gonna have to come and get you."

"Maybe that's what I was waiting for."

Ali's phone rang. She tapped answer, but didn't speak. Then. "Really?"

That's Judy.

"Maybe." Ali ended the call.

"Why don't you two greet each other?" Monica asked.

Ali shrugged. "I don't know. It's like we're having a continuous conversation, I guess. Never thought about it. Come on, get dressed. I want to take my girlfriend to breakfast."

Monica smiled. "I need a shower."

"Make it quick."

Monica rolled her eyes. *The difference between being a lover and a girlfriend.*

The taxi stopped outside Frank's Diner. Ali paid the driver, grasped Monica's hand, and said, "Come on." Ali dragged her out of the taxi.

Monica glanced up. *Frank's Diner, isn't that...*

A bell dinged, and then she was inside. Monica glanced around the busy diner. Her eyes settled on a waitress.

An Asian girl wearing a short, layered skirt, white, light blue, white, together with a matching sleeveless blouse in white with a pale blue collar and pale blue lace over her cleavage. A tartan panel in blue and white ran down the sides. Four bright blue buttons on the bodice, a tartan bowtie, at her cleavage, a second around her neck, and a third on her white hair. White gloves extended past her elbow, with blue lace at the top. Knee length white boots completed the ensemble.

Monica swallowed. "She's cute."

"That's our Suzie Q. She gets the juices flowing, but she's straight."

Monica surveyed the room. A family in the corner booth. A man, little girl, and a blonde woman. She froze. The woman was glaring at her. *It can't be, Ali wouldn't...*

She realized Ali was still holding her hand and dragging her to the corner booth. *What's this about?* Ali almost shoved her in the booth, and said, "Slide over."

The man stood, hugged Ali, kissed her with more than a light brush and said, "Hello darling."

The woman didn't move. She sat frozen, glaring at Monica, who was now sitting opposite, glaring back.

The girl said, "Hello Aunt Ali."

"Hi, Mel."

"Who's your friend?"

Ali smiled and looked at Judy as she answered Melanie. "This is my girlfriend, Monica."

Girlfriend! What's going on?

"Hello Aunt Monica," Melanie said.

"I'm pleased to meet you," Myron said.

"Hi," Monica replied without breaking the glaring contest.

"Would you two stop glaring at each other and say hello?" Ali said. "We're all gonna be friends, so there's no reason for this nonsense."

"Why didn't you tell me you were bringing *her*?" Judy asked, transferring her glare to Ali.

"She didn't tell me we were coming here either, so you're *not* special," Monica said.

"Because if I told you, one of you would have made excuses."

"Knowing about her is one thing, but..." Judy began.

“I hate to agree with *her*, but I do,” Monica said, her pulse racing and her heart pounding. *Why didn’t she warn me?*

Myron said, “Monica, we haven’t been introduced properly. I’m Myron, I guess you’ve heard of me.”

Monica glared at Ali. *Monster cock*. “I certainly have.”

“The way she’s gone about it may have been insensitive, forcing the issue instead of easing into it, but you each fulfill a role in Alison’s life. She needs both of you,” Myron suggested. “Given how you both feel, we all feel about her, I’d say you have much in common.”

Judy and Monica looked at Myron, then at Ali. Monica saw Judy’s eyes soften and offered her hand. “I’m sorry Judy. She made me feel I’d been ambushed, and I reacted.”

Judy smiled. “That’s exactly how I felt.”

Ali’s right, she’s beautiful.

“Yes,” Monica said, glancing sideways at Ali. “She has the ability to make us feel the same.”

“I knew you’d be friends,” Ali said. “You both have excellent taste in women.”

Monica smiled, leaned across the table and whispered, “Or in women who taste excellent.”

Judy laughed. “We seem to agree on a few things.”

Monica glanced at Ali, then winked at Judy, whispering, “Besides, I did get into your panties the other night.”

Judy smiled, then locked her eyes on Ali’s. “Not an entirely unappealing thought.”

A Peanut Butter Milkshake

A few weeks later, Myron and Judy were enjoying coffee on the balcony, watching Melanie play on her swing. Judy picked up her cup, inhaled, and sipped her coffee. Being new, the swing was silent, and so was Melanie.

The tranquil scene was interrupted by the sound of Myron's phone.

"Hello," Myron said. "Yes, it is."

He frowned.

"I would like any documents you have relating to Melanie," He said.

Myron listened; his frown deepened.

"Her birth records, early medical records, that sort of thing."

Now Judy, who could only hear Myron, frowned.

"I'll come by and collect them, and I'll ask Melanie if she wants anything. I can bring her..." Myron stopped mid-sentence.

Judy's frown deepened.

"I can collect it, too. Are you sure you don't want..."

Myron stared at his silent phone.

Judy gave him a quizzical look. "Melanie's grandparents are clearing everything out from her parent's home."

"Okay," Judy responded.

He asked, "Melanie, what do you want from your old home?"

"I don't want anything, thank you."

"Isn't there something you miss and would like to have?" Judy asked.

"No, Mama."

"Come on, Mel, there must be something."

Melanie stopped swinging and glared at Judy defiantly. "I have everything I need."

Concerned Melanie was suppressing her emotions, Judy took her to see Dr. Schmidt. They sat in black vinyl chairs, across a standard woodgrain Formica desk, in a small room with freshly painted white walls, the smell of which dominated the room and a gray tiled floor. Judy supposed if he'd been in private practice instead of working for a public hospital, his office would have been very different.

Judy gave Melanie a sideways glance, grimaced and explained, "She refuses to have anything from her life before the accident. The day I gave her the photographs of her parents, she began referring to me as Mama and Myron as Papa. We like this, but I'm worried she's suffering from post-traumatic stress or something."

Dr. Schmidt nodded. "Possibly to remind herself she has new parents." He turned his attention to the girl. "Melanie, why don't you want your things from your life before the accident?"

She looked past Dr. Schmidt as if looking at someone or something behind him. “The angel told me I need to accept I will have new parents and allow them to care for me.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean you should forget your old life,” Dr. Schmidt said.

“He said, ‘You need to let go of what was, and hold on to what is.’ I must listen to what the angel told me.”

Dr. Schmidt returned his attention to Judy. “I’m not sure how long she’ll hold on to this angel. It seems to be her way of accepting what happened, but she’s showing no signs of PTSD.”

“If you’re sure.”

“Melanie’s engaged with life. She’s not withdrawn and has no clinical signs of depression.”

“And you’re okay with her having this, angel?”

“I can’t explain the angel, but I can’t discount it. While working as the resident psychiatrist here, I’ve seen *many things* I can’t rationally explain. After we met, I read your book, Ms. Vernon. I’d think you’d accept some things can’t be explained.”

Judy smiled. “I believe her, doctor, but she’s had a traumatic experience I can’t imagine, so I wanted to check with you.”

“One possible explanation is Melanie’s subconscious created the Angel to shield her from the stress of witnessing her parent’s death. Although, I can’t explain how a four-year-old’s....”

“I’m five.” Melanie corrected, having had her birthday a week earlier.

“...a five-year-old’s subconscious could create such an elaborate self-protection mechanism, but as I said, I’ve seen many strange things.”

As they prepared to leave, Melanie said, “Mama, now that’s over, I think we really need a peanut butter milkshake.”

Judy studied her. She knew she was being conned into a second milkshake, but agreed anyway.

A little more than six months after Melanie came home from the hospital, they headed to family court for an adoption hearing. That the adoption process proceeded so quickly surprised them.

Crystal Brown explained to Judy, “Both sets of grandparents have signed waivers of their rights regarding Melanie. With Myron’s record as Rebekah’s guardian, and him being related to Melanie, there’s no reason the adoption shouldn’t proceed.”

“Please don’t misunderstand Crystal,” Judy said. “We’re delighted, but it’s happening faster than we’d anticipated.”

“There are other criteria. The child needs to have resided with you for a minimum of six months, which she has. I’ve completed all the required assessment reports, and my recommendation is that the adoption proceed. Dr. Schmidt’s assessment of Melanie’s mental health and how well she’s adapted to her new environment confirms there are no reasons not to proceed.”

“Okay, Crystal, I guess...”

Crystal smiled. "In a nutshell, you tick all the boxes."

Family court judge J. Clarence Holmes was presiding. The J was for John. He'd taken to using his middle name, which he didn't like, because he'd hated the constant 'John Holmes' jokes more than his middle name.

Being referred to as *The Black John Holmes* made him cringe. His friends argued it was a compliment, but he didn't appreciate being compared to a legendary seventies porn star, who's middle initial was also C.

Clarence was reading the case file to familiarize himself with the situation before making his formal ruling. He read Crystal Brown's notes from her interviews with the child's biological grandparents.

The view of the paternal grandparents was: *Jews shouldn't marry other races, especially black people. They didn't agree with Melanie's existence and had no interest in caring for her.*

The maternal grandparents believed: *Our community is no place for a white girl. It would have been better if Melanie had died in the accident with her parents.*

He shook his head. *This is sad.*

Judge Holmes re-read the report. He frowned, trying to get his head around what he was reading. *One set of grandparents wishes she didn't exist. The other set wished she'd died.* Anger rose inside him, replacing the sadness.

He looked at the little girl. *That her grandparents can't see what a beautiful treasure she is defies my comprehension.*

"Ms. Brown, can I take it that your reports from the grandparents are accurate?"

"Yes, your honor," Crystal replied. "Although I may have softened the language a little, as they are part of the official record."

Clarence Holmes gazed at Melanie again. There would come a time when she'd have access to the official records if she wanted to see them.

"Rightly so," he said. *The longer I do this job, the less I understand people.*

He focused on Myron. "Myron Aryeh Myerson, will you accept the rights and responsibilities to raise Melanie Ruth Schwartzman as your child?"

"Yes, your honor, I will."

He turned to Judy. "Judith Vernon, will you accept the rights and responsibilities to raise Melanie Ruth Schwartzman as your child?"

"Yes, your honor, I will."

He smiled at Melanie. "Melanie Ruth Schwartzman, may I call you Melanie?"

"Yes, sir," Judy whispered in Melanie's ear. "Yes, your honor."

Clarence Holmes said, "Well Melanie, I have some questions for you. Is that okay?"

"Yes, si.... Your honor."

"Melanie, would you like Myron and Judy to be your Mom and Dad?"

"Yes, your honor."

“Will you love them and listen to what they say?”

“Oh yes, your honor, I do.”

The adoption decree itself was twenty-two pages long, and he trusted his clerk had ensured it was correct. The hearing was a formality. All the legalities had been attended to in the documentation.

Family court judge J. Clarence Holmes stamped the adoption papers loudly. He didn't use a gavel and to him, the sound of the stamp hitting the papers on his bench had the same degree of finality. He turned to the last page. Judge Holmes signed and dated the stamp, legalizing his ruling.

“Well, Miss Melanie Ruth Myerson, would you like to take your family home?”

“Yes, please, your honor. Umm. Your honor, is it okay if we stop for a peanut butter milkshake on the way home?”

“Yes, young lady it is.” He winked at her. “In fact, I hereby decree that you shall stop for a peanut butter milk shake on the way home.” He smiled.

“Thank you, your honor.” Melanie looked at her parents triumphantly.

Judy and Myron exchanged a smile. Melanie had manipulated a second milkshake that day... again.