

**UNTRAINED HEARTS**

by:

D. J. Vallone

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*“It is one of the mysteries that God has revealed through the years that He is able to sow the seeds of gain in loss itself. When you have been utterly stripped of everything, out of that poverty, weakness, tenderness, bruising and grief, He can turn the whole thing into gain, and the latter end is so much greater than the former.”*

*—Ray Prinzing*



## **PART I**

### **DECISIONS**



## Chapter One

As soon as the green arrow lit, Danny hastily gunned the Regal GS into a left turn onto Big Beaver Road. At his wits' end from waiting for innumerable signal changes, now hurrying to avoid a late arrival to work, he foolishly disregarded the skin of fresh snow which had become dangerously slick under a steady stream of rush hour traffic. Suddenly his back tires lost traction. The car pitched left and immediately began sliding uncontrollably to the right.

Adrenaline rushed to Danny's heart. He steered right, hoping it was the correct action. In the split-second he had to react, he couldn't remember if one was supposed to turn *into* or *away* from a spin, or for that matter which way was which. An answer came almost instantaneously. His right rear wheel slammed into the curb and bounced up onto the easement where he could see a tree and a traffic sign rapidly approaching.

"Jesus," he said out of both supplication and desperation.

Fortunately, the car began responding to his turn of the wheel. *Thank you*, he thought. But just as quickly it careened off in the opposite direction, yet somehow managing to miss the stationary objects. Then, before Danny could catch his breath, the Regal dropped back onto the road with a *creak* and a *bump*.

In these few frightful seconds Danny became a spectator in a docudrama of his own helplessness. But he wasn't about to give up; that wasn't his style. So, as the car spun around to face the oncoming traffic, he abandoned all conventional wisdom and slammed on the brakes.

The Regal shuddered catawampus to a stop.

Drivers with smiling faces overtook him on either side. "You think it's funny," he muttered. "Well I'd like to see you try it one time."

When a break occurred in the line of cars, Danny gently eased the car around and continued east on Big Beaver—only a couple more miles to his daily destination: Base Line Technologies, Inc., his employer for the past fifteen years.

*How stupid of me, he thought. What was I thinking? I could have totaled the car back there.*

Most days he'd have stuck to the freeway and would not have had to make that left turn off Adams Road at all. But with the least bit of snow in the morning, I-75 turns into a parking lot for miles approaching the Big Beaver exit. Considering the probable bottleneck this morning, Danny thought he'd outsmart everyone else by getting off at Adams and taking the two-lane south to Big Beaver. *Big mistake* was what it turned out to be. Adams was jammed up like the post office at five o'clock. He'd lurched along in stop-and-go fashion for nearly half an hour before getting to the intersection for his left turn at Big Beaver. Maddeningly, no more than a half dozen cars slid through with each cycle of the signals. He was going to be late again.

Now, the specific hours the manager of recruiting kept should not matter, providing he put in a full day. But at Base Line, managers were expected in their offices at eight-thirty, barring natural disaster or death. And unfortunately, regardless of its near-calamitous effect on Danny's car, today's snowfall hardly qualified for disaster status. And, as far as death was concerned...well...Danny wasn't desperate enough to wish for that.



*These miserable drivers...I wish they would...* It has been Danny's long-held belief that most of them should pack up and move to Florida or some other Sunbelt destination. All they do is complain about winter anyway—*it's too long, too cold, too gray*. And they certainly can't drive in it.

Then again, today was not at all atypical for January, a month he considered the low point on the calendar by nearly every reckoning. Arriving in the wake of the high spirits of the holiday season, it is a time for extraordinary coping skills, made even worse by the short gloomy days and the awful weather. Moods in metro-Detroit sink deeper by the day and the natives will soon need either psychotherapy or a vacation in the tropics.

Of course there were exceptions: snow-happy skiers, for example. They must possess an extra chromosome or something—according to Danny Predmore anyway.

Still, after four decades in Michigan, Danny has learned to tolerate winter. Besides, winter is hockey season, and hockey is the sport of sports, a man's sport, the best thing to come out of Canada since Lafayette.

And there was one other bright spot: his birthday was fast approaching. Regardless of the fact that this Saturday would be his forty-second (another needless reminder that he is a little past his prime), and laying aside for the moment that he might not have anyone special to share it with, it will still be his special day. He couldn't allow a lack of companionship to spoil things for him. Besides, if he played his cards right later this morning, he just might end up with a date.

It was eight thirty-four when Danny stepped out of the GS onto a crunchy layer of snow. A cold wind stung his face as he approached the glass-encased high rise where Base Line Technologies occupies the sixth and seventh floors. Gusts swirled furiously, whipping the falling snow into visible cyclones. Danny pulled his trench coat tightly around his neck. His eyeballs

froze and the bitter chill burned him down to the base of his spine. *Guess it's about time to put the lining in my coat*, he thought. *Looks like winter's here with a vengeance.*

Passing through the revolving doors, Danny Predmore joined a gathering of other road-weary commuters in line for the only functioning elevator.

Blue numbers glowed out into the pre-dawn darkness of Julie Baker Predmore's tastefully decorated bedroom. As the clock ticked over to 5:35, sounds of harpsichord and strings from Vivaldi's *Winter* gently emanated from the radio's tiny speakers. The early morning disc jockey from KCRW—Santa Monica evidently had a sense of humor. Today in the Los Angeles basin the mercury would probably reach 75 degrees under a golden sun.

Julie rolled over and hit the snooze bar—for the second time.

A couple of minutes later, however, she groaned a feminine groan and sat up, allowing her head to clear before standing and walking to the kitchen to brew coffee. She desired a taste of *French Roast* this morning and she thanked God for such simple sensory pleasures.

Next, she ran a toothbrush over her teeth and splashed her face with tepid water from the tap. Then, in preparation for her regular morning ritual, she snatched a pair of sweats from a shelf in her closet along with a sports bra and white cotton socks.

She pulled off her nightshirt revealing a firm, graceful body to no one in particular, dressed, and started her stretching routine. First the back, then the arms and shoulders, the legs, and finally some floor exercises for the abdomen and buttocks.

Coffee aroma wafted into her bedroom but Julie wouldn't allow herself the pleasure of anything beyond olfactory enjoyment until after her run.

At 5:45 she dashed out the back door into the awakening morning. She jogged east along a quiet West Balboa Boulevard. Streetlights glowed softly, illuminating the beach town concrete. Cars slept in their drives and in the metered spots within the roadway median. Light spilled over the horizon ahead of her, up into a colorless night sky. Chilly morning air enveloped her in dampness but it wasn't cold enough to bother Julie. In a few moments she'd be sweating anyway. *Perfect running weather*, she thought.

She by-passed Cannery Village where the "Party Central" night people hang out; no one was stirring at this hour. Then she headed for the beach, to follow the shoreline down toward Newport Pier.

No surfers were visible this morning as Julie ran along the hard sand below the tide line. It occurred to her that surfers always watched the tides. She, on the other hand, has never concerned herself with such things—like precisely when it would be low tide or when surf conditions might be at their optimum. Still, to Julie's eyes, the tide seemed pretty low this morning. She imagined at any instant some young studs might drive up in a sport/utility vehicle with *boards* on the roof, or a couple of bleach-blond guys in wet suits might jog onto the beach from a nearby apartment, *sticks* under their arms, ready to dive into the returning tide.

The mental mystery ended there for her though. Most beach boys wouldn't even give her a second look, old woman that she was, though she has worked arduously to keep her youthful figure, pulling it back from the effects of childbearing and gravity and age. But then again, surfers weren't on *her* prospect list either, given their general lack of ambition and net worth. She'd much rather a guy with a house on Lido Isle.

A small gathering of gulls circled overhead as Julie passed one of the rocky groins running off the beach. She looked hard toward Catalina but there wasn't enough morning light for the island

to be visible yet. Her breathing was deep and rhythmic now. The damp air refilled her lungs over and over again with oxygen and the sting of salt. She liked that sensation, the exhilaration of it.

Suddenly she detected the faint fish odor almost always present around Newport Bay in the morning. It reminded her of driving in from the desert, when the humid coastal air first entered her lungs bringing with it the fragrance of life and the aroma of the sea. She would never forget that experience in June of last year, driving down from Riverside, breathing Pacific air for the first time in over a quarter century. Finally, she was home again.

After a little turn to the left she slogged through the softer sand, heading for 28th Street and the idyllic Lido Isle. It was another grand and glorious morning for Julie Predmore and she had it all to herself.

Once inside his office, Danny shut the door before shedding his trench coat and rubbers. He glanced out the window onto the winter scene below. Everything looked white. The roads had yet to be cleaned and salted. Snow was being blown about to the degree that some of it actually appeared to be going back up again. This was, however, only a temporary diversion in the ultimate journey of each finely crafted flake. The day looked beautiful and serene, especially when viewed from the warm confines of his sixth story office.

This private office with the view of the freeway, Big Beaver Road and points north was given to Danny a year ago along with his promotion to Manager of Recruiting. He deserved it. Five years of performing as the top recruiter for the firm definitely qualified him for the position and its accompanying perks. During that period he clocked the sixty to seventy hour weeks which eventually cost him his marriage—a heavy price to pay for entrance into middle management.

But Danny only occasionally allowed himself the luxury of regret. He couldn't live those years over again anyway, though it wasn't the years *or* his career that finally sent Julie packing. Sure, their love had waned early and the excitement and passion were long gone. And there were the kids, the job responsibilities, the mortgage and car payments. Yet they remained in the marriage twenty years without once discussing the alternatives—until two years ago, anyway, when Danny became convinced that their long, unhappy trip on the treadmill of life had gotten him nowhere in particular and he decided to have a little fling. And now, if he had any regrets at all, they would be over his decision to fool around in the first place. That was his only real mistake.

The door opened and a rotund balding man of about fifty wearing a pinstriped navy suit filled the entrance to Danny's office. "Predmore, you were late again. You need a wake-up service or something?" It was Vic DeSalvo, Vice President of Operations, in his dyed-black mustache, looking suspiciously like a gangster. "Something worth your attention out there?"

Danny stepped away from the window and smiled. "Nothing in particular, Vic. Just looks like one of those little knickknacks we had when we were kids. You know, you shook it up and it snowed inside."

"Yeah, yeah. So it does," Vic said through a smirk. "But staring out the window dreaming about your childhood isn't going to fatten the bulldog."

Vic would know about such things, Danny realized.

"What's going on with those two senior designer positions? Bill Cook is all over me to get those filled."

The “Cookster,” so-named by his colleagues, is the top sales representative for Base Line’s Engineering Services Group—the lead *pimp*. At least that’s the unofficial industry classification for salespeople who do what Bill does—the selling of bodies.

Danny grabbed a sheet of paper off his desk and held it out for Vic to read. “This job order is crap, Vic. It describes everybody and nobody. The best recruiter on earth couldn’t find these resources, and if he did, they probably wouldn’t be what the customer wanted anyway.”

“Excuses, excuses. We didn’t move you up to management so you could feed us excuses, Danny.”

“It’s not an excuse, Vic. It’s a fact. Cook and the other reps keep bringing in these half-baked job requirements expecting my staff to recruit solid citizens for their clients. And it’s not bad enough that eighty percent of our candidate pool only speaks English as a poor second language. Now we have to guess which technologies and skills the customer really needs.” Danny dropped the job order back onto his desk. “Is it too much to ask for Cook to get his client to give us a finite list of skills?”

“Maybe you should ask *him* that question.”

“I have. He doesn’t want to go to the trouble. I think he’d rather just keep up the blame game. He claims the other firms don’t seem to have trouble coming up with the right candidates. But he forgets that most of them have direct pipelines to India and China. We don’t.”

“Come off it Danny. Just tell your people to get out there and beat the bushes. In case you haven’t been paying attention, it’s not a beauty contest anymore, and they don’t line up in the hallway waiting for us to pass out job applications. Recruiters have to get out there and make things happen.”

Danny sat down with hope that his gesture might mitigate the confrontational atmosphere in the room. “I think we need to come up with a better process of communicating and working together around here or we’re not going to succeed in today’s market.”

“Sounds like another excuse to me. Just find those engineers for Cook; it can’t be that difficult.”

“Sure, Vic, we’ll find them.”

“That’s what I like to hear. Now have a good day.”

He left.

For a brief moment Danny considered calling an impromptu meeting of his staff and reading them the riot act—standard operating procedure for any other Base Line manager under similar circumstances. It’s the way this company has operated for twenty years. But Danny has never used such methods to get results. On the contrary, he has worked for the past twelve months to elicit confidence and trust from his recruiters, all four of them. Beating them up over something like this was totally out of character for him and, therefore, completely out of the question. No, he’d just send Randy Sloan a voice mail asking to meet with him as soon as possible. Then, he’d work with Randy to come up with an action plan for finding and hiring two design engineers for Chrysler. *They’re out there somewhere; we’ve just got to locate them.* This has been his rallying cry for six years, since he moved into recruiting from the accounting department.

He looked at the decorative ship’s clock on his desk. It read ten past nine in analogue fashion, and Danny realized he hadn’t had his first cup of coffee yet. Grabbing his red mug with the white Detroit Red Wings logo, he headed off toward the office break room.

\* \* \*

Julie walked the last block along the boulevard and turned the corner to her house. The morning had lightened considerably since she began her run, and traffic was now humming along on Balboa, the peninsula's main east-west thoroughfare. The chilly morning air had kept her from overheating but she'd worked up a reasonable sweat nonetheless. Reaching into her pocket, she unsnapped her key ring from its hand sewn protective loop and placed one key into the jailhouse-style iron door of her duplex villa. The heavy gate unlocked with a clank and squeaked as she pulled it open. She took one last deep breath of the fresh sea air before stepping inside and shutting the gate behind her. After proceeding through the sun porch and the main door to the living room of her small house, she was immediately bathed in the aroma of morning coffee.

She gulped down two glasses of water from her cooler and stretched again. Under the warm spray of the shower, she began to think earnestly about her day—Thursday. She'd walk to the office. No chance of rain today with the unusual high pressure and the heat wave promising to stay around for a few more days. Once at work, her first priority would be to finish typing a report that her boss, Spence, needed by noon. Next, she'd catch up on some filing and do the background checks on a couple of prospect companies. Running the D&Bs and credit reports has been one of her responsibilities since she took the position over a year ago.

Spence Eastman co-founded SunBurst, Inc., a small but successful Management Consulting firm in Newport Beach. The company helps small businesses get productive through the implementation of proven management techniques which he and his partner Mike Tattersall have developed—formulas for sure-fire success.

A highly organized person in her own right, Julie has put together her own formula for success as well, one that includes the attainment of her college degree. To that end, tonight, she will attend the first meeting of a sociology class at Cal State, Fullerton (where she had also



begun a business ethics course for the semester two nights ago). But it was exactly a year ago when she started back to school with a goal to get her BA through three years of night classes—an aggressive plan, but Julie has convinced herself to stick with it. So far, so good, she's been pulling a *four point*.

Danny never gave her much credit for brain power, but all along she knew that if she had been able to stay in school and get her degree, she'd have been the one making the "big bucks." The economic boom of the eighties would not have come and gone with her and Danny just scraping along, dangling as it were from the dark and seamy undercarriage of the middle class.

Things might have been different for their marriage too, much different.

*Nah, Danny could never have handled it if I were the major breadwinner. His pride would have suffered and our marriage would've come unraveled even sooner than it did.* So she thought this morning, anyway, while toweling herself dry in the small sixties-retro bathroom with its yellow and orange decor.

After wiping off a layer of fog she studied herself in the mirror. *I'm not so bad. Hardly a wrinkle. Hair's always been a little mousy, but nothing a trip to the salon couldn't fix. Even so, I'm not ready for the peroxide look. The old neck is starting to bag a little, though—better look for some more good exercises. These breasts have always been good, not too big; otherwise they'd just be hanging like a couple of old socks. As it is they're probably my best feature, along with my legs, that is. Never did have any hips. Even two natural deliveries couldn't fix that.*

In reality, Julie Baker Predmore was a fine specimen for a forty-year-old woman, still able to turn heads. And she had no real shortage of suitors. Unfortunately, they tended to be lonely divorcés with alimony and child support—a veritable truckload of obligations—and only one thing on their minds. Consequently, at times she has wondered where all the good men have

gone, those with depth who might appreciate her for “her.” And, if truth were told, she has been finding it harder and harder to remain unflagging in her belief that the right guy might be waiting around the next bend, ready to knock her off her feet with abounding love.

Still, she has not succumbed to self-pity, nor allowed herself to slip into melancholia over her inactive love life. Rather, she has consciously remained upbeat and hopeful, and in so doing, proved all over again something Danny never seemed to appreciate: that optimism is one of her seminal virtues.

Except for that day when Danny admitted to seeing someone else. No room for optimism in that state of affairs, she figured. So wounded by the implicit rejection, and angry with him for sneaking around, she simply asked for a divorce on the spot.

And he agreed.

Everything happened so fast neither of them had a chance to change their minds. Still, in the year-and-a-half since, Julie has had few regrets. Except for a lingering sense of loss, she has managed to leave the years of her marriage behind, convinced that she is better off than she could have been had she stayed with Danny and attempted to work things out.

Danny got to keep the house. Not a huge loss for her since it had been recently refinanced to pay college tuition bills for Daniel and Clarrie. Too proud to accept alimony (a decision she has since questioned repeatedly), Julie settled for half of their liquid assets, some household furnishings and the cottage up north which had been a gift from *her* mom and step-dad anyway. At least *that* was “free and clear.” She put it up for sale immediately. And given the timeliness of the offering—it was spring—a full-price deal was written and closed before Memorial Day. Then, she packed up her share of the furniture and china and moved to the West Coast, the source of fond and enduring memories from her childhood as a “California girl” in the sixties.

Coincidentally, her dad, now retired after thirty years with Hughes, made his home just down the coast. He and his second wife, Lora, an Amerasian and ten years his junior, had an elegant little condo in Laguna Hills. Over the past eighteen months, Julie has visited with them a half dozen times, twice more than she had in the eighteen *years* previous. And, though she couldn't exactly say they've all become close, having family nearby has lent an element of cohesion to her life.

But she would have moved out here regardless. The Southland was her birthplace, and the place she always believed she belonged. It has long mystified her why people would leave Southern California voluntarily. As a child, she'd had no choice in the matter; her mom dragged her to Michigan when her step-dad got a job at the GM Tech Center. Julie later blamed the two of them for doing so out of spite, and especially because her mother couldn't stand the sight of that "slant-eyed chippy," as she maliciously preferred to call Lora.

Julie had cried for weeks. She was fourteen with her entire life ahead of her. She didn't want to spend it in the murder capital of the world. Clearly, the move was a bad decision; anyone with a brain could see that. Even Motown Records had left Detroit for LA. But her emotional display was to no avail. She ended up like a stuck pig, two thousand miles away from the home she loved and the ocean she desperately missed.

But now she was back. And this morning, after dressing in a smart-looking, plaid wrap-around skirt and white knit top, she went to the kitchen and poured her first cup of coffee. She sawed off a couple thick slices of whole-wheat bread from a bakery loaf purchased last evening and popped them into the toaster. She clicked on the small TV, her only set, perched on the bar between the kitchen and living room. The local news crew could keep her company while she ate breakfast. There wasn't anyone else around to do the job—at least not today.

\* \* \*

Finally, when Clarrie went off to school at MSU and Danny and Julie were left alone, with nothing much left of their relationship, he'd had to make a decision. Keeping up a double life was killing him on the inside, painfully, like a cancer. And with Clarrie out of the house, there was no longer a justifiable reason for living the lie. So, one night after dinner, he just came out with it:

“Julie, I don't know how to put this except to tell you the truth. I've been seeing someone else. It's not that I don't love you anymore; I do. I've just been terribly confused and, well...this...this...happened. I'm sorry. But we haven't been very romantic for years and...well...I doubt we can ever get back what we had in the beginning.”

Things went worse than he had expected. To his great dismay, Danny found himself hurt when Julie didn't put up a fight to keep him. She actually seemed more anxious to end their relationship than he was at the time. In point of fact, he hadn't been absolutely certain a divorce was called for. And sure enough, he soon found himself regretting his decision to confess. He had simply wanted to admit to the truth of how he felt, to get his innermost, private thoughts out into the open because it seemed so wrong to continue concealing them. And, somewhere in the inner recesses of his psyche, he hoped that confessing might bring about an absolution of sorts, maybe even a renewed interest on Julie's part.

Being shaken off like a bug was the last thing he expected.

So the settlement was struck and the divorce decree took only three more months to obtain. And next thing he knew, Julie was gone. Then, just as soon as he was free to see his girl on the side without any fear of discovery or retribution, their relationship blew away on a gust of irony.

Lisa, a party girl at heart, wasn't the sort for a long-term commitment anyway. She was no great loss.

Danny eventually convinced himself that he was better off alone, at least for the time being. He could "play the field," get back into circulation after a twenty year hiatus. And this time he wouldn't be shamed into marriage like he was as a young college student when Julie first told him she was pregnant. This time he alone would call the shots. Certainly there were unattached females out there, thousands of them to be sure. So, like a kid in a candy store, he'd take his time and pick the one he *had* to have.

Only the dating game turned out to be more difficult than he imagined. He was just an average guy and, as a divorced man over forty, there were few places where he could casually and comfortably meet women. Though he kept encouraging himself that his single status was a good thing, in truth he was terribly lonely. Regret from the loss of his wife kept washing over him in waves. But, tough as it was, Danny still managed to rationalize his sense of satisfaction with the status quo—single and happy.

In his search for female companionship he tried the bar scene. But after a couple months of dropping pocket money on overpriced beer, he found not a single, good prospect—at least none which measured up to his standards.

Next he launched a media campaign using personal ads in various publications. But the letters he received mostly got filed under "desperate." Those who failed to send pictures he could only imagine as "fat" or "homely," and as such, he rejected them automatically.

A couple of candidates actually made it through his screening process. One had written, among other things, "I have never responded to a personal ad before, but I was intrigued by what you said about yourself, that you were looking for the 'love of your life.' This has always been

my desire too, and although I've been married once myself, I haven't come close to fulfilling my dream. Ever since my divorce I've been looking for that special person I know is out there and I won't rest until I find him."

Her vital signs certainly appealed to him: thirty-six, five-foot-seven, natural blond, blue eyes, shapely but not overweight, cute (at least from her photographic rendering, though it was obviously posed and possibly air brushed), no kids, a successful career in marketing, and a condo in Florida. Too bad she turned out to be a spoiled brat, conceited, controlling to a fault, neurotic, insatiable, and a lousy kisser. After three dates, he dumped her like a load of green firewood.

More recently, Danny focused on *networking*, allowing friends and friends-of-friends to fix him up. That is how he met Michele Sullivan, the sister-in-law of Bobby Brooks, one of his hockey buddies. They've been out a couple of times since and chatted by phone several evenings. Danny's been playing it cool though, hoping to get to know her somewhat before allowing things to get "complicated" between them.

Michele, at thirty-four and five-foot-two, was a tad short for Danny's ideal. In addition, as a single mom with a fifteen-year-old boy, she was borderline off-limits. From the beginning he has sensed that a serious relationship with her would be problematic at best. There'd be precious little privacy for the two of them. Moreover, her son Jason, who had reacted badly to him at their first meeting, seemingly wanted to hate and resent Danny. Predictably, Danny found himself challenging Jason's negative behavior like they were two kids on a schoolyard. The incident reinforced his concern that, if he continued pursuing the relationship, Michele would ultimately have to choose between the two "men" in her life.

In truth, Danny didn't have much hope for anything to develop with Michele Sullivan beyond the superficial dating experience. But there was no point in denying his attraction to her. She was

good looking—although not exactly strikingly beautiful—with the look of a petite, Irish homemaker: auburn hair with freckles, strong at the shoulder, a slim waist and good hips.

Most of all, Danny longed for companionship, and Michele was, as they say, “available.” And that was why he hoped that this Saturday, his birthday, he might be able to spend a romantic evening with her—alone.

After mentally rehearsing his approach, he dialed the number at the City of Troy where Michele worked as a tax clerk in the Assessment Bureau, just down the street from Base Line’s corporate offices.

*Ring, ring...ring, ring...*

“Hello, tax records, Michele speaking, may I help you?”

“Michele, it’s Danny.”

“Hi, Danny. It’s nice to hear from you.”

Danny tried to imagine how she might be dressed, business casual probably. Perhaps some wool slacks to keep out the cold and maybe a sweater. He could almost smell her perfume, an enticing fragrance, not too sweet, never overstated.

“What are you up to this morning?” he asked, trying to get a conversation started.

“Just recording some payments. We got a whole slew of checks in the mail yesterday and I’m really behind.”

“I know what you mean. Vic DeSalvo busted my chops this morning over a couple of engineers we were supposed to have hired by now. And we’re no closer than we were two weeks ago.”

“What are you going to do about it?” she asked, revealing a genuine concern.

“I don’t know. Maybe pray the rosary or something. We have zero prospects with the right skills, and we’re not even sure what skills the client is actually looking for.”

“That doesn’t sound so good. I’ll say a prayer too.”

Michele, considering all the difficulties life has dealt her as a single mom, seemed to remain remarkably positive about things.

“Thanks, I could use some divine intervention,” Danny said, half-jokingly. He then proceeded with his key question, the real reason for his call, “How about dinner on Saturday night? It’s my birthday. I’ll take you out to Larco’s if you like. Maybe we can rent a video or something afterward.”

“Oh, Danny. That’s so sweet of you to ask. But, unfortunately I’m heading down to Toledo on Friday after work to spend the weekend with my friend Marylou. We’ve had it planned since before the holidays. My mom and dad are taking care of Jason. I really feel bad about it now though, missing your birthday and all.”

“No problem, I should have checked with you earlier. It’s my fault, but I’ve never been a very good planner.” He tried not to let his disappointment show through. “Maybe next week, then.”

“Sure, that would be great. I’ll look forward to it,” Michele said with obvious enthusiasm.

“Okay then, it’s a date.”

“You bet.”

“Well, I better get back to work,” Danny said, excusing himself.

“Yeah, me too. See ya.”

“Till next week,” he said.

“Bye.”



*There goes my hope for a date on my birthday, he realized. Maybe there'll be a good hockey game on the tube.*



## Chapter Two

SunBurst, Inc. occupies the first floor of a small circa 1970 office building on the Mariner's Mile, a short distance from Newport Boulevard. Mike Tattersall purchased the bayside building at a bargain price when he was a young investor in the mid-eighties. He was working with his father's real estate company at the time. Shortly thereafter, Mike ran into Spence Eastman, a financial whiz he met in the MBA program at Stanford. Spence had recently returned to the Southland and was looking for a start-up opportunity. A month later the two of them began a management consulting business: *The SunBurst Company*. They located their offices in the building Mike owned since a small suite was vacant at the time.

SunBurst's first few business engagements went extremely well and within a year Spence and Mike agreed to incorporate the firm. Rather fortuitously, the building was able to accommodate the company's growth over the ensuing years when leases on two other office suites expired and the tenants elected not to renew at higher rents. So, with Mike as landlord, SunBurst, Inc. has remained comfortably in place between the Pacific Coast Highway and the Lido Channel for over a decade.

And there was one more reason why Spence and Mike have not been anxious to move—the parking has always been free.

This morning, however, Julie's usual spot in the parking lot remained empty. She had walked to work from her house, slightly under a mile-and-a-half, along the only direct route—over the Boulevard bridge and down the heavily traveled Pacific Coast Highway where the air reeked of exhaust and sand blew into her eyes and mouth—not a route designed for pedestrians. But after twenty-five years in the Detroit suburbs where she could go nowhere without an automobile, Julie vowed she would walk whenever possible, wherever possible.

The azure bay sparkled this morning underneath an unusually cloudless sky, putting her into an extraordinary mood. Pleasure craft bobbed peacefully at their moorings in the marina. Now and then a biker or another pedestrian passed her by smiling and waving. Such moments were precious to Julie; she had lived too long without them.

It bewildered her to meet people here who exhibited a total lack of appreciation for the coastal climate and its prevailing temperate weather conditions. But apparently there were many such California natives, completely unacquainted with the experience of a Great Lakes' winter or some other equally disdainful and agonizingly long stretch of freezing temperatures and gray days, interrupted regularly by wind-driven snow squalls that pile up tons of white powder of the shoveling variety, force cars into ditches, trees and each other, and virtually stop everything in the city but the beating of your heart. She felt truly sorry for such people; they took so much for granted. And, considering all the fears of natural disasters (anxieties which justifiably loom large in the hearts and minds of most Californians), whether shaped through personal loss or inspired by the folklore, if all these concerns were added together they'd still fail to equal the depressing power of one Detroit winter. Julie Baker Predmore knew this from experience.

She left such thoughts behind though as she opened SunBurst's heavy, weather beaten wooden door. Once inside, she removed her sunglasses and smoothed her windblown hair. At

her work area she sat down and took off her athletic shoes, replacing them with a pair of dress sandals, then stowing her Nike's underneath her desk and out of sight.

Her desk was a picture of organization. She never allowed paperwork to pile up. Years ago she learned the "touch it once" theory: either work on it, file it or throw it away before proceeding to the next document. But, because real work was often much more complex than the theory might otherwise suggest, Julie also put a "work in process" tray along with "in" and "out" bins on a filing credenza behind her. This way she could keep her main desktop clean of everything but a phone and whatever she was working on at the time. Such discipline has made her the object of occasional harmless ridicule from other SunBurst staff members, especially the sales reps who could best be identified by the overabundance of clutter adorning their own desks. Julie always sloughed off the chiding from her coworkers though, convinced that she possessed the higher-order system, a product of her well-developed and probably superior left brain.

Julie's workspace was perhaps the least private area in the building. Her job put her at the nexus of information and communications of interest to Spence Eastman, the company chairman. Therefore, she had to be visible and accessible. Meanwhile, Spence generally remained sequestered in his posh sixteen-by-twenty foot executive office, only occasionally emerging for coffee or a walk to the washroom. Oversight of the staff was generally done by Spence's alter ego, Mike Tattersall, a devotee of the MBWA theory, or *management by walking around*. On days when Mike wasn't out making sales calls, he practiced it regularly.

This morning Mike was in unusually early. At 8:35 he stopped by Julie's workstation and began some friendly badinage. "Good morning, Ms. Predmore. You're looking very lovely this morning as usual."

She smiled back at him, shaking her head. “Oh, please. You better have your eyes checked Mike. I’m a windblown bag of bones.”

“You underestimate your charm, Julie. Or are you just overly modest?”

Mike Tattersall could only be described as handsome with a well-set jaw and dark, monochromatic black hair that he gelled and combed straight back to emphasize his high forehead and bright, periwinkle eyes. Julie has always suspected him of visiting his private washroom each day after lunch to eliminate any mid-day growth of his beard and keep it hidden below the surface of his smooth, tanned face. Today, he was wearing khaki pants and a black collarless shirt, buttoned to the neck. He smiled while imposing his six-foot frame over Julie’s desk, awaiting her response.

“You obviously don’t know me very well,” Julie said. “Modesty is not one of my better qualities.” She fidgeted slightly, betraying her discomfiture with the present conversation, then switched on her PC and grabbed a folder from her IN box.

“Funny you should mention that,” Mike said. There is something I’ve been meaning to ask you. Maybe you could drop by my office some time this morning so we can talk. Whenever you have a spare minute; I should be around all morning.”

Julie was immediately suspicious. Speculation over Mike’s private life has kept the office rumor mill working overtime; his supposed exploits were legion. She knew however, that she could hardly refuse to do this one, simple thing he’d asked of her, especially since he’s been nothing but a gentleman toward her from her first day on the job a year ago last October. Still, she didn’t want his open-ended request to hang within the veil of her subconscious as she went about her morning business, so she set the folder back in its place and stood up, pushing back her chair. “Let’s do it now. I’m not buried in anything just yet.”

“Great,” Mike said. “That’s one of the things I like best about you, Julie. You always do the most productive thing possible.”

They began the short walk down the hall to Mike’s office.

“I don’t know how Spence ever got anything done before you came along.”

Mike was laying it on a little thick. Julie knew there were thousands of women in the Southland who could probably outperform her, most of them younger and prettier. Plus, she couldn’t think of a single quality or ability that might make her stand out in a crowd, except that she worked hard everyday and wouldn’t take time off unless she was deathly sick.

They entered Mike’s office suite and he swung the door to within an inch of being shut. *What is he up to?* she wondered.

Julie knew Mike was the consummate formula guy. Image and substance were synonymous to him. He was both familiar and experienced with every technique management gurus have dreamed up over the past twenty years.

“Please make yourself comfortable,” Mike suggested, pointing to a well-padded leather chair from which one had a breathtaking unobstructed view of the channel, the marina and Lido Isle. Owning the building has its particular advantages, like the view and the private washroom.

Mike seated himself in a second, similarly styled chair that completed the conversation area. “Isn’t it beautiful out there today?”

“Oh yes, so bright and clear for a morning on the coast. I couldn’t resist the temptation to walk to work this morning.”

“So that’s how you stay in such good shape, then,” Mike presumed aloud, undoubtedly meaning it as a compliment.

“Not really, no.” Julie quickly contradicted him, hoping to develop some power of her own in this dialogue which had already begun to go down the path she feared. “I’m a runner, twenty miles a week at least.”

“I should have known that,” Mike said, somewhat apologetically. “Sorry.”

“No problem. It’s a private thing, my own personal discipline, nothing more. I wouldn’t expect you to know about it.” *I should not have offered that*, she realized, but it was already too late. She hung on the edge of her chair wishing he’d get to whatever business he had in mind, hoping it to be something innocuous, something which wouldn’t pry any deeper into her personal life and embarrass her further.

“Quite the contrary, Julie. I make it my business to know the details of people’s lives. It’s a habit I developed over the years in this business. Knowing such things is what has helped SunBurst succeed where our competitors fail. It’s my *edge*.”

It occurred to Julie that everyone in the office viewed Mike as a man with an overdeveloped ego, though he generally managed to keep it in check. “I see,” she said, but didn’t. “What exactly is it you need done, Mike?”

“Nothing I need, actually.” He lifted an eyebrow but remained otherwise motionless. “Rather, it’s something I hope you will consider.” He paused.

“Well...what?” she said, her anxiety a little too obvious.

“Would you consider joining me for dinner tomorrow evening? I have a reservation at Amelia’s on Balboa. We can discuss the Williams Industries project. Both Spence and I think it’s time you take on a larger role in the development of our presentations. Williams is a good one for you to start with.”



She felt herself flush. “Oh, I’m sorry, Mike. I have other plans for tomorrow night. Besides, I have a policy not to date the men I work with.”

“Don’t look at it as a date, Julie. It’s like I said; this is a golden opportunity for you to move into marketing.”

Though not exactly coercive, nor unquestionably innocent, Mike’s offer was nevertheless tempting. She looked at him without making eye contact. “Well, I appreciate the opportunity to get involved in marketing, Mike; I really do. But I can’t let my friend Tracy down. We’ve had this Friday evening planned since Christmas.”

“I can certainly understand that, Julie. Loyalty is another one of your valuable traits.” He slid forward in his chair and continued, imposingly, “How about Saturday evening then? Or are you so heavily booked that Saturday is also spoken for?”

“Not exactly. But I did plan to study for my classes at school.”

“You’ll need to eat, won’t you?” he asked.

“Yes, but…”

“Well, okay then. Dinner will be on me. And I promise not to keep you out late. Surely, you can spare an hour or two away from your schoolwork this early in the semester.”

He had her hemmed in. There was only one way out—to acquiesce, to buy what Mike Tattersall, the master salesman, was selling. She’d hold him to his word, however. “Okay…but it’s not a date, and I’ll meet you at the restaurant. Where will it be?”

“Great. You won’t regret it. I promise.” Mike smiled, showing nearly all of his bleached white teeth. “I’ll make a reservation and let you know.”

“May I return to work now?” Julie asked, feeling herself perspire unnaturally. “I’ve got a deadline on some research.”

“Certainly,” he said.

She stood and walked toward the door. But before she could exit, Mike’s deep baritone arrested her once more. “Oh, Julie...”

“Yes?” she asked, turning back to face him.

“Thanks for your time. I know how valuable it is. If you need help getting that research done, let me know. I’ll get Margaret to give you a hand.”

“Thanks anyway, Mike, but it probably won’t be necessary.”

“Have a super day,” he said.

“Yeah, you too.”

She left.

The Alberta Clipper blew through metro-Detroit leaving five-to-six inches of fine, powdery snow and a bright blue canopy of sub-zero atmosphere in its wake. From Danny’s sixth floor office window it looked as though a layer of bakery-white frosting had been spread across the frigid landscape by the craft of nature’s hand, sculpted over open areas and cars and roof tops, fashioning them as ornaments in a giant decorated cake. Here and there evergreen trees were splattered with dollops of cream and houses sprinkled with sugary dust. Crystalline bits sparkled in the sunshine and long shadows of trees and buildings poured like chocolate over the pristine surface to garnish the winter treat.

Unfortunately, Danny could only perceive this natural beauty as another winter headache.

He left his office and exited the building as the sun was setting to the southwest, and found the north side parking lot already shrouded in gloomy dusk. Bitter wind stung his face making him shiver but he couldn’t depart for home just yet; his car windows needed scraping. A hard

crust of ice had formed on the glass, probably due to whatever warmth was left inside when he parked this morning. He opened the door, reached in to start the engine and switched the rear window defrost to *ON*. After pulling the seat forward, he retrieved his ice scraper from the rear floor mat.

While scraping the glass he heard the dreaded sound of an engine trying to crank over, but lacking sufficient power to start. Then, three more desperate attempts: *Rrrrr*, *Rrrr*, *Rrr*—each more futile than the last. A young woman emerged from the disabled vehicle, slammed the door and began walking hurriedly back toward the building.

He called to her, “need some help there?”

“I left my parking lights on this morning.”

“I’ve got some cables. Just give me a minute to clean my windshield and I’ll pull over and give you a boost.”

“Okay, great.” She managed a smile in the lip-splitting cold.

Danny finished in a hurry, not bothering with his side windows. He maneuvered his car face to face with hers, a late-model Cavalier.

“Pop the hood for me, will you?” he asked before disappearing behind his open trunk lid. Quickly he returned with a set of bright-yellow jumper cables. He lifted the hood to the Cavalier and attached them to the battery terminals. Then he completed the circuit connections on his car before looking up to see her standing in the cold, awaiting further instructions. She was bundled heavily with a hooded parka and neck-cinching scarf. Danny could see some wisps of brown curly hair sticking out of her fur-trimmed hood. Her face told her age; she was young.

“Go ahead, give her a try,” he suggested. She scurried back inside her car and turned the key.

The Cavalier immediately responded and Danny moved to disconnect the wires. He shut both hoods and returned the cables to the trunk. The girl climbed out and stood by her car once again.

“Thanks a million,” she said, shivering and straining to be heard over the car engines with their husky, cold weather wails. “You really saved my life tonight. My dad would have been upset if I called him for help on a night like this.”

“No problem,” Danny said. “It’s what us guys are for.”

He could see her more clearly now with the headlights illuminating the scene. She was a pretty girl, reminding him of Julie when they were first married. For a moment Danny considered exchanging introductions, maybe asking her to meet him for lunch one day. *But she’s so young, and she’ll probably think I’m an old man, and her father would probably kill me if I tried to date her.*

“Well, I really appreciate the help. Thanks for being there.”

“No problem. Here, let me clean the ice off your windshield for you. Why don’t you get inside and try to stay warm?”

She did so. Then, after he finished the job, she lowered the window and thanked him.

“Drive carefully now. I’ll see you around.”

“Okay, thanks again,” she said before driving off into the night.

Danny dropped behind the GS’ steering wheel, pulled the door shut and felt the warmth of the car heater. *Man, she was just like Julie. But who knows if I’ll ever see her again. Shouldn’t have let her get away like that; I didn’t even ask her name. There’s no way I could date someone that young, though. And the last thing I need is another Julie. It’s really too bad she couldn’t have stayed the way she was when she was young—happy and innocent and fun. Aw, forget it. There’s no use living in the past. Better get going or I’ll be late for hockey.*

Danny released the parking brake, shifted into drive and headed for Big Beaver Road and the freeway north. He shook off every nostalgic thought about Julie and her youth, at least for the moment, so that the only thing looking back as he merged with traffic was the bumper sticker on his car which displayed a large red cross and read: GIVE BLOOD + PLAY HOCKEY.

“You are one sorry piece of humanity, Dan-boy. About nineteen years old, you said. Are you sure she’s out of high school?” Bobby was enjoying this. Any chance to rub Danny’s nose in his own wasted opportunity was both fair game and good fun.

Danny had to defend himself. “I said I *thought* about asking her out. I didn’t actually do it. Maybe you should turn up your hearing aid.” He finished tying the laces on one skate and then squeezed into the other.

His closest friend since elementary school, Bobby Brooks, was six months Danny’s senior. He was dressed already for the ice and leaning against a row of lockers. “What’s the matter with you; you got a loose screw or something? What about Michele? If I were single, I’d be with *her* tonight, not here with a pathetic bunch of middle age guys who need an excuse to get out of the house.”

“You think it’s easy, Bob?” Danny grimaced, pulling the laces until his ankle throbbed. “Well, it’s not. And the last thing I need is another relationship where I’m locked in for life like the rest of you guys—like *I* was before the divorce.”

So you’re not going to risk anything with Michele because you’re afraid you’ll be stuck with her—is that what you’re saying?”

Danny stood up while getting into his hockey jersey with the huge number 34 on the back.

“No, that’s *not* what I’m saying. I’m saying I wish it was easier, like when we were teenagers, when girls didn’t lay heavy trips on you or expect a marriage proposal after a couple of dates.”

“Is Michele hinting around for an engagement ring already?”

“No. There’s just too many complications with Michele, that’s all.”

“Like what?”

Danny stowed his bag under the locker room bench, grabbed his hockey sticks and started walking on his blades toward the rink. “Like her kid, for instance. You ever tried adopting a fifteen-year-old? It’s like inheriting the wind.”

Following him out the door, Bobby took another shot. “Well, if you weren’t such a wimp, a little gust of wind wouldn’t blow you over. Why don’t you just date her a while and see what develops?”

“I’m trying,” Danny replied. “I just don’t have a good feeling about it.”

“But you do have a good feeling about the high school girl you met in the parking lot, tonight—right?”

“Screw you.”

“In your dreams.”

Properly fired up and prepared to engage in some serious body checking, Danny Predmore and Bobby Brooks hit the ice to begin their warm-up, joining the other ten members of their team—the Bald Mountain Blizzard. They skated around, making passes and taking shots, occasionally stealing a look at their challengers across the mid line. When the puck gets dropped at eight o’clock these guys will be ready, and they’ll be tough—at least for a bunch of slightly overweight forty-year-olds. Some of them will even have a thing or two to prove.

\* \* \*

“Why do people do the things they do? Are we acting out of some underlying motivation; are we exhibiting some habit of behavior; are we performing according to some societal pattern or cultural expectation? These are questions that psychologists attempt to answer, as I’m sure you all know. But sociologists are also engaged in studying, among other things, the patterns of human behavior, especially since these patterns can tell us things about the society as a whole.”

Marilyn Powers, Associate Professor of Sociology at Cal State, Fullerton, slowly circulated the amphitheater, walking up and down the aisles as she initiated her “Intro to Sociology” class. Marilyn, black and fiftyish, was dressed in a long, colorful print dress with a suspended pair of glasses in place of a necklace. Carrying more weight than she should on her five-and-a-half-foot frame, she spoke with a clear powerful voice that needed no amplification though the hall was large and over two hundred students were present.

“We call all behavior which can be studied, measured and analyzed *Social Action*. Let me illustrate for you. If I were to walk back down to my lectern like this...” She did so, rather briskly for a large woman. “...And stand here and begin a lecture on the material for our class tonight, you would probably recognize that my behavior conforms to a familiar pattern. You don’t need to see the results of a study or survey to know that I am behaving normally, or according to a *norm*. Instructors generally lecture from their lecterns. It is, in fact, why we have lecterns in each classroom.

“Likewise, all of you have also behaved predictably by coming in here tonight and finding a seat in the room. But imagine how surprised *I* would have been had I found all of *you* standing down here by the lectern when I arrived.” Marilyn paused as if she expected a laugh or two at this point, but none was heard; the students remained deadpan.

She then continued with her lecture, “The key to determining if behavior can be classified as social action is the question of *intent*. Clearly I had an intent in walking in as I did earlier; as did all of you in coming here this evening. This behavior could therefore be classified as social action.

“What sociologists do then is to identify the patterns or norms of social action and their underlying intent—in other words, their *meaning*. These social scientists attempt to discover any patterns among the factors motivating behavior, and ultimately they draw conclusions. They study factors like diversity, inequality, wealth, poverty, race, and age; and institutions like family, religion, and schools. Through scientific study and analysis of research data, sociologists are then able to explain why people do what they do and the reasons they behave with consistency.”

Julie wrote feverishly in her notebook, trying to capture the important points in Dr. Powers’ lecture. She has attributed her success at pulling A’s in all of her previous classes to her attention to detail and her secretarial habit of taking copious notes in shorthand. *This qualifies as a pattern of social action*, she realized. *I certainly have a specific intent*. Specifically, to get through this class, get her A, and be that much closer to her degree.

She would not have chosen to take a class in sociology except that she needed four credits in a social science and Dr. Powers’ class was conveniently scheduled on Thursday nights this semester. Prior to tonight, she could not have come up with a reasonable definition of sociology if her life had depended on it.

Looking over the lecture hall, she did not see a single person she knew. But all her previous classes started out similarly. After a week or two, she’d probably gravitate to one particular female or another in the class, and thereby make another friend. This was how she met Tracy



Wendell last semester; they were both unlikely members of a biology class, both there for the required credits. Although different from each other in many ways, they hit it off immediately. Opposites tend to attract, and once Julie and Tracy began studying together, the class became more enjoyable for both of them. They had many a laugh over the more interesting aspects of human anatomy.

These evening classes at Cal State Fullerton are generally populated with adult students struggling to keep a full-time job going while steadily, sometimes painfully, marching toward their degrees. Tonight's first meeting of Intro to Sociology appeared to conform nicely to that pattern.

And there were other patterns—age for example. Though Julie probably wasn't the oldest student present tonight, casual surveillance of the room indicated that she was definitely not in the norm. Given her forty years, such a discovery was not statistically noteworthy, but to Julie Predmore it was significant nonetheless since she has recently become intensely conscious of her age. However, as the night wore on, her advanced years actually worked to her advantage. From what she could tell, the subject seemed at least conceptually familiar to her. She was a step or two ahead of the typical young college student confronting subject matter like this for the first time.

Still, Julie was not going to take anything for granted. All evening long she continued taking notes and focusing on the lecture in spite of the fact that the instructor's presentation skills were weak. *Imagine, a whole semester of this!* The thought momentarily paralyzed her.

The night continued to drag on interminably until finally—after another hour or so of mesmerizing drivel on the theories and historical foundations of sociology, through which some of the class members slept blissfully—Dr. Powers came to the homework assignment for the

week. “Using your textbook and at least one other source for your research, write an essay of 600-800 words on the quality of life. Specifically, I would like you to contrast two important society types in your paper—the *gesellschaft* and the *gemeinschaft* models, as described on page 142 of your textbook. Please stress the different effects that these models have on the individuals within society, as well as the behavioral consequences which can be attributed to each model. Then relate your findings to your topic—the *quality of life*. There are written instructions here if you need them.

“I wish you all a good week. See you next Thursday.”

Julie folded up her notebook, slipped on her jacket and headed for the parking lot. For a moment she thought about dropping the class, then realized she was probably just tired. *I can handle this*, she reasoned. *It can't be more difficult than raising two teenagers while taking care of a husband who never matured past twenty-five. After that, I could probably do just about anything. Besides, maybe I'll learn a thing or two I can actually use in real life. At least it's worth a try.*

She found her car, a three year old Mitsubishi Mirage, under the light post where she always parked it. There was a note slid under the driver's side windshield wiper. She snatched it before climbing in. The note read, *Saw your car but couldn't find you. Hope you have a better class than me—South Asian Studies—yuk! Can't wait till tomorrow night. Love, Trace.*

The green numbers of the dashboard clock glowed brightly—9:52. Julie put the car into gear and headed for home to wash up and immediately climb into bed. It had been a long and mentally stressful day and five thirty A.M. always comes early.

## Chapter Three

Fighting a hangover from his stop at Boomer's Bar and Grill after the hockey game, Danny popped the lid on a bottle of aspirin and swallowed two tablets with a mouthful of lukewarm coffee.

It was Friday. He had nearly survived another week. In spite of the gloom, the snow and cold, and his loneliness, he felt okay. This being serious hunkering-down time around the Great Lakes, Danny could only imagine that everyone else was suffering the same malaise—except perhaps for the loneliness. But things could be worse. He could still be stuck in a bad marriage. And since there were undoubtedly millions of other guys enduring marital pain like a prison sentence, he reasoned he didn't have it too terribly bad after all.

True enough, his drinking was getting a bit out of hand lately, but he blamed the season for that as well—the season *and* his hockey buddies, that is. Since hockey was the only physical exercise he got in winter, not to mention his only regular social activity, clearly he could not afford to abstain from hockey. Once spring arrived with its warmer days, he'd get on his bike and ride himself into shape—again. Until then, he'd do his best to keep the alcohol consumption down to two or three beers at a sitting, no more. Apart from Super Bowl Sunday, at least. He'd have to make an exception for that.

As quickly as his thoughts turned back to work, Bill Cook appeared in the doorway, exactly on time for his appointment. Danny shook his head in disbelief.

“I wasn’t expecting you for another ten or fifteen minutes, Bill. What’s with the punctuality thing—another doomed New Year’s resolution or something?”

“No, I wouldn’t want to wreck my reputation. Truth is, Danny, I have nothing else to do. Your recruiting department has practically put me out of business!”

Cook closed the office door and made himself at home in one of the chairs in front of Danny’s desk. He reached underneath the seat and squeezed a handle while lifting his weight, thereby elevating the chair six inches to accommodate his long legs.

As always, Danny offered a comeback. “Well, since *qualified* engineers are in such short supply, maybe we should run down to the rescue mission and pick out a couple of warm bodies. Their skills will probably match your job orders perfectly.”

“So that’s your secret—the rescue mission. How resourceful. Come to think of it, I guess that explains why the last guy you hired couldn’t make it through the client interview.”

Bill Cook was the stereotypical salesman—good looking, articulate, persuasive, able to think well on his feet, with a healthy sense of humor. Though somewhat self-deprecating with clients, when not involved in sales situations he could turn the tables on anyone, like he was doing with Danny at the moment.

“Okay Bill, let’s cut the crap. What have you got for me?”

“This project at Chrysler is big, they’re planning to staff a whole new department of design engineers under R&D. The thing is, they don’t know all the particulars yet. That’s why we only got a preliminary job order. But I know the guy real well who’s in charge—Ed Brady’s his

name—and we're the only company he's told right now. So, if we can get a couple talented people in on the ground floor, we could have an exclusive on the whole project.”

Danny listened while gazing right past Cook and out the window. He has heard stories like this before. “That’s all well and good, Bill. But if you can’t define the skills your customer wants, my recruiters are never going to find *anybody* that will fit, and there goes your exclusive—right up the chute.”

“It’s real simple, Danny. We need a couple of bright designers. Five or more years experience.”

“What about tools; how about methods, application experience? You know, specifics to help us narrow the field a little.” Unintentionally, Danny telegraphed his exasperation at having to prompt the company’s top marketing rep for the basic requirements of any legitimate job order. He also did so somewhat sarcastically.

Cook ignored the insult and tried again to make his point. “Look, Dan, Chrysler is setting up a competitive design team within the company. This team is going to be given *carte blanche* to come up with some breakthrough new concepts and methods for developing an entry level luxury sedan to compete with the Lexus and the BMW 300 series cars. There just isn’t anything else that my friend Ed is looking for at this point except bright people. They’ll figure out what methodologies and tools to use once they get the project underway.”

It sounded wonderful, even to Danny, though he felt relatively certain that Cook’s opportunity was pie-in-the-sky, and consequently, he could see himself being yanked around in a consulting business snipe hunt. “So why don’t you just pick a couple of star performers out of your existing staff and send them down to your friend Ed?”

“There isn’t anybody on the bench. And I can’t spring anybody fast enough to take advantage of this opportunity.” Cook was obviously not making this up or he would not have come here to grovel for a couple new hires in the first place. Danny understood that much.

“All right, let’s say we find these ‘bright people’ Ed says he wants; we hire them; then you send them out to interview at Chrysler and they get rejected for ‘insufficient skills’ or some other reason. What do we do with them then?”

Cook got visibly exasperated himself. “Why should you care? That’s not your problem, is it?”

“No, I don’t suppose it is.” Danny couldn’t wiggle out much further to escape the trap he had carelessly set for himself. But neither did he want to admit outright that his department couldn’t come up with anyone even remotely resembling Cook’s “bright people” right now, at least not at the price Chrysler was willing to pay. Every design engineer with five years’ experience or more was already working somewhere and being paid to stay happy. And, considering Chrysler’s low rate scale, what besides money could Base Line offer in attempts to lure a couple good ones away from their current employers? Obviously not enough or Danny would not be struggling like this. He’s been in the recruiting business long enough to know what it takes to get a couple techies on board.

Danny played his last card. “Well, I’ll tell you what, Bill. It comes down to money. If you’re willing to increase the salary range to say...70k, we can probably find your people.”

“Hell, my grandmother could find them for 70k. And besides, you know Chrysler won’t pay more than fifty bucks an hour.”

“Then, maybe that’s where the problem lies. Bright people don’t come cheap, Bill.”

Upon hearing that declaration of the *obvious* Cook got up and started toward the door. “No, Dan. I think the problem lies with your lame-o recruiters. They wouldn’t know a bright person if

one dropped out of the sky and landed on them. And if they ever did get so lucky—because God knows they aren't going to find a candidate any other way—they couldn't sign him up without a truckload of cash.”

Danny stifled his urge to fire back. “That’s a little harsh Bill; don’t you think?”

“Just let me know if you get lucky. Then we’ll see if it’s harsh or not. And it would be nice if you displayed more of a can-do attitude. I don’t know what’s happened to you Danny. Ever since you took this job you haven’t been the same.”

He left.

Danny shook his head. *This business never used to be so difficult*, he thought. *And the reps never used to be so damned arrogant. Cook must think we just sit around here all day picking our teeth. It’d serve him right if we can’t find anyone for his project. But unfortunately, Cook won’t be the one who gets blamed. That would be me.*

After returning some phone calls and checking his e-mail, Danny caught up on his paperwork for the week. There were weekly reports to complete and submit on the activities of his staff and a work plan for the following week, tasks he always saved for Fridays.

Next thing he knew he was hungry. At eleven thirty he slipped out of his office and headed unaccompanied down the elevator to the cafeteria.

Though Friday was typically a light day for in-house lunching, Danny figured the cafeteria might be crowded with people who preferred not to brave the sub-zero wind chills for the privilege of enjoying a meal in a legitimate restaurant. He had guessed right. At the *Cafe del Giorno* there was a line out the door and into the hall. *Just my luck*, he thought.

But a moment later Danny’s luck changed. The next person to arrive for lunch was a splendidly attractive woman. Danny noticed her legs first, on display as they were below a navy

blue wool jumper just long enough to cover certain essential body parts. Then, as he looked up, he saw the familiar face. It was the face of an angel. But not just any angel—the one he'd helped out of the parking lot last night. *There is a God*, he acknowledged silently.

“Well hello again,” he said as she joined him in the lunch line.

It took her a few seconds to recognize him. “You’re the man who helped me get my car started last night.”

“Yep. That was me. Danny Predmore’s my name.” He put out his hand to shake hers. “I hope you remembered to turn your lights off this morning.”

She smiled and returned the gesture. “This time I double checked. I’m Valerie. Valerie Robinson. My friends call me Val.”

She was truly beautiful. Without her parka, he could see much more of her—youthful figure, cream-colored, silky skin, perfect posture and alluring womanly appurtenances. She had a round face, like a cherub, with prominent cheeks and wide-set dark brown eyes. He wondered how it could be possible that he never noticed her before last night.

“Valerie is such a beautiful name; if you don’t mind I’ll call you Valerie.”

“Sure, that’d be fine, Mr. Predmore.”

“Please, it’s Danny.”

“Okay then—Danny.”

“Have you worked here long, Valerie?” Danny had to satisfy his curiosity.

“No, no. I just started last week at Peninsula Title on the third floor. I’m the new receptionist.”

*That explains it*, Danny thought.



With her right hand she began picking at her curls. Watching her, Danny became particularly aware of her youth and her innocent vivaciousness.

The line moved enough so they were able to step inside the door of the cafeteria. Danny held it open for her before letting it gently close. Deep down inside, he could feel his heart fluttering—like a hummingbird in spring. He mentally ran through what he might say next, where to take the conversation. He believed that, no doubt, he could dominate and manipulate her; he possessed the experience and skill to do so. Perhaps he could even charm her, maybe get her to accept an invitation to join him for lunch one day at Cucina La Michuacan. Young people always go for Mexican food; he couldn't miss with that. But his better judgment told him to try and get to know her a little better first.

“It actually smells pretty good in here today,” he offered. “What do you think you'll have?”

“Oh, probably just a salad; maybe a bowl of soup if they have something vegetarian.”

“Are you a vegetarian?” He was surprised and somewhat incredulous at the thought.

“Sort of, since high school—but I do eat fish and dairy.” Her smile revealed a dimple on one side, very alluring.

“You say that as though it was a thousand years ago,” he replied, hoping to get at her age.

“Well, I'm not *that* young. I got my *Associate's* from OCC in December, after setting the all-time record for most semesters.”

Danny sensed that he had put her on the defensive so he aimed at setting things right. “I didn't mean to imply that you were too young...just out of high school, I mean. You say you got your Associate's degree? That's great! What in?”

“Psychology.”

“Good field. Will you be able to use any of it on your new job?”

“Well, you can use psychology everywhere but I hope to eventually follow a career in the field. See, I had to get the job here because I ran out of money for school, and my parents can’t really afford to send me. But it’s just temporary. I plan to go back and get my bachelor’s even if I have to go to night school.”

When they reached the counter, Danny ordered a kielbasa sandwich with fries, the special of the day. Valerie wrinkled up her nose at the soup—Manhattan Clam Chowder—and stepped ahead to the salad bar. Danny waited for her at the register and insisted on paying for both lunches. “You need to save for college,” he said.

They found an abandoned table along the wall and continued to get acquainted. She asked Danny about his job and then about his personal life. He couldn’t seem to finish a statement—about his kids, his former marriage, how Julie had moved out to the West Coast and totally out of his life, his love for hockey—before Valerie fired off another question, then another, and another. He had been mistaken about dominating and manipulating her. She was too bright, too inquisitive, too charming.

Then she volunteered something he never expected. “My real dad died from an industrial accident when I was young. I always missed having him around to talk to; you know what I mean? I imagined it would have been kind of like we’re talking right now. Anyway, my mom said I needed a father. Actually I think she needed another husband more, so she got remarried. He’s a good guy at least, and he’s always been there for me. But I never felt like I could talk to him like I’m talking to you right now. I’ve never felt that comfortable.”

Deep down inside Danny was crushed. He didn’t want to be a father figure to her. Secretly, he wanted to get her to fall in love with him, to become his girl, his beautiful, adoring, young

maiden. He'd had himself convinced that such a relationship was actually possible, even probable, but apparently it was not.

Unprompted, Valerie began talking about God, whom she said was her *real* father. He'd taken good care of her all these years since her dad died, answered her prayers, taught her how to do the right things, helped her to follow through on commitments and show love for everyone who came into her life. "My mom has always gone to church two or three times a week," she told him. "So, I guess you could say I grew up there. It's really been a good thing for me, kept me out of trouble and all..."

"Nothing wrong with that," Danny commented.

"No, there isn't. But too much of a good thing can be a little tedious, if you know what I mean, so much of the same teaching over and over. I've heard some sermons so many times I could quote them word for word. Which isn't necessarily bad either, except that lately there seems to be less and less meaning in the words for me. And it's hard to relate a lot of it to real life."

"Yeah, that pretty much sums up the reason why I stopped going to church years ago. That and the fact that the priest was always preaching to the people who didn't show up."

"I know what you mean," she said, just before switching tracks again. It was her perceived opinion, she said, that Danny missed his wife. "I don't know quite how it is I know these things; I just do. Call it a woman's intuition or something." She claimed to sense it clearly. She recommended that Danny try to get back in touch with Julie somehow, maybe give her a call. Surely after a year-and-a-half she'd be glad to hear from him.

*Imagine this, he thought. She's giving me advice.*

Of course Danny hadn't told Valerie the real reason Julie divorced him, why she probably would not want to hear from him again. And now, learning of Valerie's beliefs—of her religion or relationship with God as she called it—he was mighty glad he didn't. Such an admission would have knocked him out of contention even as substitute father. Yet, precisely because of that unstated truth concerning his infidelity, he would not be giving his ex-wife a call when he arrived home tonight. And he was certain Julie wasn't expecting to hear from him either.

Valerie suggested they exchange work numbers. Danny happily obliged. As they got on the elevator together they agreed to keep in touch. At the third floor, as Valerie stepped off and walked down the hall toward her office, Danny felt a pain inside. She had taken a little piece of his heart along with her, and it seemed like the same piece he'd lost once before.

On her way home after work on Friday afternoon, Julie mentally replayed the events of the week. Considering the pressure of two new classes at school, deadlines to meet for Spence, and Mike Tattersall's proposition with its implications for her career and personal life, she understandably felt exhausted. Plus, as if all that were not enough to deal with, she also thought she felt a cold coming on. Colds always hit her at times such as this. She'd drive herself beyond the limit of functioning reasonably well, and then—crash! This evening was clearly one of those times. Fatigue was washing over her in waves, each bigger than the last. She needed some rest or the night out with Tracy would be a disaster; she'd be no fun at all. On second thought, maybe she should just call Trace and postpone for another night. In fact, that's exactly what she would do, just as soon as she got home.

“Trace, it's Julie.”

“Julie! Hey! How're you doing? All set for tonight?”

“Well, that’s why I’m calling, actually. I’m crashing from a rough week. I’ll be asleep on my feet tonight. Maybe we should make it for next Friday night or something.”

“Not on your life. You’re not getting off that easy. I got a surprise up my sleeve.”

“What kind of surprise?”

“Let’s just say that it comes with legs and a mustache.”

“Not tonight, Trace, please. I look like crap.”

“Tonight it is. I’ll pick you up at eight. Be ready.”

“I’ll get you for this.”

“No, you’ll *thank* me for it. See you at eight.”

Julie had one free hour. So, after setting her alarm for seven o’clock, she lay down on her bed hoping for a minor recharge to get her through the evening. Almost immediately she fell off to sleep and into a world of dreams.

Normally, she didn’t remember her dreams. But when she awoke again it was with a vivid memory of her childhood. And, though she was certain things could not have happened the way they appeared in the dream, the drama was nonetheless shockingly real. It frightened her awake.

Seeming to be about eleven years old, maybe twelve, she and her mom had just arrived home to their old house on Cherry Street in Fountain Valley, having been out all day at the beach. Her mom drove the old Ford into the driveway and Julie saw her little green stucco house shining in the late day sun. Since it was summer the grass was brown, burnt to a crisp really, and as they walked to the front door, she could practically hear the shrubbery crying out for water.

The sunburn on her back and shoulders stung like a belt lashing. “We’ll get some Noxema on that right away; we shouldn’t have stayed out so long.” Her mother spoke as she unlatched the

door and held it for Julie. They entered through the small living room, passed the two old overstuffed chairs and proceeded down the hall to the bathroom on the left. While she pulled down her swimsuit, her mom opened the vanity doors and looked for the jar of Noxema.

“I must have left it in the bedroom,” she realized and walked off to find it, leaving Julie with the straps of her bathing suit draped over her arms, her pre-adolescent chest exposed. There was a cool breeze blowing through the house. Julie felt the chill of it when suddenly she heard her mother scream.

“You son-of-a-bitch! What do you think you’re doing?”

Julie heard her dad mumble something but she couldn’t make out the words. And then her mom shouted again, “And *you* had better finish getting dressed and get the hell out of my house young lady before I have a mind to get a knife from the kitchen and slice you open from top to bottom—you yellow snake!”

There was some shuffling around and Julie heard the bed squeak. Then she saw Lora (she didn’t know her or her name at the time, but in the dream of course she did). Her silky sable hair was tussled, her cheeks flushed; a look of primal fear was etched into her face. She was carrying her bra and trying to snap a pair of skimpy white shorts closed as she escaped past the bathroom door. Julie had her hands over her own breasts but she couldn’t make herself look away.

Before her mom could return with the cream for her sunburn, she awoke. And though she couldn’t remember anything from the dream after Lora’s flight down the hallway, she swore at some point she had seen a humiliated look on her father’s face.

*He must have been mortified. And poor mom. What had she done to deserve that?*

*And Lora...*

In the past year-and-a-half Julie has come to love Lora like her own flesh and blood. So it was all so strange that she should imagine such a horrid scene.

But in reality this event never actually happened. At least Julie couldn't remember it, nor could she recall ever hearing about anything resembling it from either her mother or her dad. *It's weird how your mind plays tricks on you*, she thought. *What a nightmare. Good thing I don't take naps often.*

At that instant her alarm rang and she reached to turn it off. She lay still for another few moments trying to make sense of the dream but could not. After making a mental note to call both her mom and dad on the weekend to see how they've each been getting along, she got up and went into her own bathroom—the same one from the dream, she realized—and turned on the shower.

“Look at you; you're a sexpot. I never knew that about you,” Tracy said, leering through the bars of Julie's security door.

“I am nothing of the kind. Whatever gives you that idea?”

“The lipstick, the eye make-up, the stretch top—what do you think? You sure don't look like you said you did. Well, don't just stand there; hurry up. I left the car idling in your driveway.”

Julie went back into the house for a moment before emerging with her purse and jacket. She opened and then shut the gate behind her and together they clip-clopped down the walk before climbing into Tracy's Camaro.

“We *are* going dancing, aren't we? I had to dress appropriately,” Julie affirmed in her own defense while fastening her seat belt. “Do you think I look too trappy?”

“No, you look great. Honest. Remy will go nuts.”

“Remy who?” Julie had begun examining her make-up in the vanity mirror but upon hearing this she looked directly at Trace. “Is *he* the big surprise?”

“You got that right. And he’s going to llovvve you.” Tracy glanced over at her friend and smiled before re-fixing her eyes on the road.

“Slow down, what if I’m not interested?”

“Oh you’ll be interested all right. Remy’s a catch.”

“Well, if that’s the case, why are you giving him to me?”

“He’s my cousin, that’s why. Otherwise, forget it, I’d have had my hooks in him years ago.” Again she looked at Julie. “Too bad for me. But it’s your lucky night!”

“I don’t know, Trace. I’m not really looking for a relationship right now. I’ve got to concentrate on getting through school.”

“Just wait till you meet Remy. You’ll change your mind.”

After driving about a mile down the peninsula they pulled off Balboa Boulevard and stopped the car in front of the South Coast Club. They got out with the engine still running. Tracy advised the valet not to put any dings in the doors. Walking toward the entrance Julie draped her waist jacket over her shoulders; Trace carried her red leather coat in the same hand as her purse.

“It’s chilly tonight. Aren’t you cold?” Julie asked.

“No. I’m hot blooded. It’s the French DNA from my mother’s side.”

“I see you actually learned something in Biology class.”

“You’d be surprised what I learned in that class. Some of it comes in very handy, for sure.”

They paid the cover charge and were seated by the hostess in a booth, not far off the dance floor. Tracy told the young woman that they wanted to order something from the kitchen. The hostess said a waitress would be by momentarily.



“I’m famished,” Tracy proclaimed to half the known world while fluffing out her bottle-enhanced, blond straw mane.

“You better hold it down Trace or they’ll think you’re already in the bag.”

“Sorry. I guess I’m a little revved up.”

“A little? You’ve been geeked since you picked me up. Did you start drinking earlier or something?”

“No, of course not. I’m just happy to be out with my best friend. We’re going to have a good time tonight. I can feel it in my bones.”

Julie hadn’t realized that Tracy regarded her so highly. Best friend status wasn’t something she viewed lightly, nor was it a title she could confer upon Trace in reciprocation at this point in their relationship. She liked her of course, probably because Tracy was as wild as a mountain stream and just as refreshing with her cavalier attitude, her quick wit and her bigger-than-life gestures. She was also a lot of fun to be around, but Julie would need more time before she could regard her as a best friend.

She quickly decided to change the subject. “So, when is this Remy guy going to show up?”

“Oh, he’ll be here. Just you wait and see. Look, here comes our waitress. Let’s get some food before I feint dead away.”

Disregarding dietary discipline, they ordered burgers and drinks. Trace even insisted on a plate of fried cheese sticks for an appetizer though Julie protested, saying that she didn’t want to have to run off all the fat and calories. The waitress returned quickly with their drinks—a glass of Chardonnay for Julie, a Rob Roy for Trace.

Tracy went on commenting about this and that, taking the conversation down one path after another but getting nowhere on any one particular topic. She was wound tighter than a Swiss watch.

The band assembled on stage and began tuning their guitars. People poured into the club in groups; it was filling quickly. There were patrons of every stripe, young and not so young—a real eclectic crowd, mainly couples though. Julie noticed only one guy who appeared to be alone. He looked to be about her age. As he took up residence in the booth next to them she wondered if he could be Remy; he was certainly handsome. But he remained totally oblivious to the fact that they were sitting there, nearby. Evidently, he was not the awaited cousin.

The cheese sticks arrived and by then Tracy was ready to order another drink. “Remy is really sweet,” she volunteered calmly, relaxing somewhat, probably from the effects of the alcohol. “I always looked up to him when we were growing up. He’s actually five years older than me. He went into the Navy right out of high school and he’s been all over the world since then. Now, he’s back. He actually retired at the end of December, with over twenty years in. Can you believe that? I haven’t even got started on anything yet and he’s retired. It blows my mind.”

“Was he ever married?” Julie asked.

“Oh, yeah. Who hasn’t been? They had three kids even, but he’s been divorced for a few years now.”

The waitress brought their burgers. While they were eating, the band kicked off its first set with an R&B number. Julie was beginning to feel pretty good herself, no further sign of the cold she felt earlier.

Remy arrived a little after nine, alone. Trace introduced him as her long lost cousin, even though he’d been stationed down the road in San Diego for the past few years. He wore a Navy

P-coat over a denim shirt and dark brown cords that matched his eyes. When he removed the coat, Julie could see why Trace made such a fuss over him. He was muscular—massive really—especially in the upper body. His light brown hair was cut short but brushed over neatly. As promised, he had a mustache, trimmed carefully to compliment his set of full lips. When he smiled, his dark eyes told tales of warmth and experience.

But when she smiled back at him and shook his strong hand, no bells went off inside her head. He couldn't possibly be the one for her.

Remy joined them in the booth on Julie's side and they ordered more drinks. He asked for a beer—anything they had on draught. That struck Julie as odd in this day and age. She wasn't a beer drinker but Danny had been, and even *he* was discriminating about his brand. "Hockey players drink Molson," he would say. *Oh well*, she thought, *to each his own*. But this little insight into Remy's personality made the idea of dating him seem even more remote. *I like a man with convictions and preferences*, she realized.

"Well, I don't see Steve anywhere. Is he coming?" Tracy asked.

"Sorry Trace, he called me around seven to say he couldn't make it. The Chief asked him to work some overtime at the last minute because one of the night shift guys called in sick. It's the life of a fireman, I'm afraid."

"Oh, well. I work better alone anyway. You two get acquainted. I'm gonna go walk the floor for a few minutes." Tracy slipped her leather coat back on, grabbed her drink and her purse and slid out of the booth, heading for the bar.

They watched her waggle her way between the tables and out of sight, neither of them knowing quite how to begin a conversation with the other. For an awkward moment Julie sat

motionless listening to the music and looking around the room, trying to avoid eye contact with her *accidental date*. Finally, Remy broke the ice. “Tracy’s one of a kind, isn’t she?”

“Definitely. I think you call it spunk.”

He ventured further, speaking somewhat loudly so he could be heard over the din. “She’s been like that since she was little. Once, when she was only three or four years old, I remember being with her at a family get-together at our grandparents house. She was always a really cute kid, like a little model, all blond hair and silvery eyes and smiles. Her mom would always dress her up in a lace dress or something just as fancy. You couldn’t stop looking at her—nobody could. She’d tease and flirt with everyone, especially her uncles. Anyway, my father was trying to get her to pose for a picture but she kept refusing. He asked several times, but over and over she would just smile, shake her head and say, ‘no!’ She obviously knew she was amusing everyone. Finally, my dad said, ‘come on Tracy, please, smile for the camera.’ And Trace just came out and said, ‘kiss my butt.’

“The whole place went quiet for a second and then a few of the grown ups snickered, kind of under their breath, you know, but it *was* funny. I was only eight or nine at the time and to me it was hilarious.

“Obviously Tracy didn’t know what the hell she was saying, and who knows where she learned that expression. At any rate, she got a lecture from her mom and had to stand in the corner for a few minutes. But that’s Trace—always doing the unpredictable.”

The band cooked away, now into their dance music repertoire. Nearly a dozen couples had taken the cue, crowding onto the floor. *No sign of Tracy*, Julie observed privately; *she must still be out on the hunt*.

Now, with the opportunity at hand, Julie didn't feel like dancing after all. The glass-and-a-half of wine she consumed had made her sleepy again. But she worried that, if Remy asked her, she might feel obliged to join him on the dance floor. Perhaps she could keep him entertained with conversation.

"Trace said that you have three kids. How old are they?"

"My oldest is fourteen—Amy is her name. Then Skip, he's eleven and Jimmy's nine."

"Do you get to see them often?"

"Not as much as I did before moving up from San Diego. But every other week at least. My 'ex' got custody in the settlement and I'm sure the kids are better off with her; I'm not the stay-at-home type. I miss them growing up though. There's so much that happens that I'm not around for, like when Skipper hit his first Little League home run over the fence. It killed me to miss that."

Julie didn't know quite how to respond. No matter what she said, it would seem like she was unsympathetic to the plight of the divorced man—which she was, of course. She could only imagine what he might have done to deserve the loss of his kids. She caught a glimpse of him staring at her across the table and carefully avoided his eyes. She didn't want to encourage him concerning the possibility that she might find him charming or attractive or, heaven forbid, irresistible. *Maybe I should just tell him the truth—I'm unavailable. But that's not exactly true. Or maybe I should make something up like: I'm still hung-up on my ex-husband, or I've discovered I'm not attracted to men anymore...*

"You've got kids too, don't you?" he asked.

"I do. But they're both in college now back in Michigan."

"That must be hard—to be so far away from them and all."

“In a way it is. But my daughter’s been faithful with e-mail. It’s great. No more waiting three or four days for a letter to get across the country. I don’t know how we ever lived without it.”

She glanced up and noticed that Trace had reappeared. Having parked her slender posterior across from the single guy in the next booth, she was putting the moves on him.

“Would you like to dance?” Remy asked the dreaded question.

She looked directly at him and copped out. “I don’t know, Remy. I’m not really much of a dancer. And the floor is so crowded. I’m afraid I’ll embarrass you.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” he replied. “I generally look like a Neanderthal when I dance, all lethal elbows and clumsy feet. Maybe we should just order a couple more drinks and watch the pros.”

Relieved, she agreed with him, though she certainly didn’t need any more alcohol. She’d have to try to nurse it the rest of the evening.

Trace was looking animated in the adjacent booth, but, with the music and crowd noise, Julie couldn’t hear a word she was saying. The guy she was dealing remained motionless, most probably overwhelmed by her. His back was to Julie so she couldn’t read his thoughts. *Wonder why Trace hasn’t got him on the dance floor yet, she mused. She definitely has the power to make herself irresistible.*

Suddenly there was a noise over by the entrance. She and Remy turned in response. The sea of bodies divided as a group of on-rushing men pushed through the crowd toward Julie’s corner of the room. Fear gripped her as she recognized them as cops dressed in SWAT gear, carrying clubs and firearms. At that very moment the music wound down like a calliope at the end of a carousel ride. Then, out of the corner of her eye, Julie caught sight of her friend; fire was in her eyes and a look of incredulity on her face. The next thing Julie witnessed looked like a

choreographed movie scene. The skinny blond in tight jeans and red leather waist-coat lifted her glass from off the table and threw its contents into the face of the man across from her while shouting at the top of her lungs, “You bastard! You stinking pork-faced bastard!”

Whether the cold liqueur on the face did it or the epithet to the heart, Julie could not be sure, but the man was suitably aroused. He jumped from his seat and grabbed Tracy by the left arm, twisting it behind her back. With his free hand he pulled a set of handcuffs from underneath his jacket and clamped them first onto one restrained wrist and then the other.

Meanwhile, the SWAT team descended like sudden rain on two men at a nearby table, tackling them to the floor with well-rehearsed conviction. One cop grabbed up their coats and personal belongings. Everyone else in the building was frozen, motionless. Except Tracy. She was wriggling and twisting, trying to get loose from the man’s grasp, spewing curses like oil from a derrick.

Julie sat glued into her seat, scared stiff, feeling that she might have wet her pants a little, but everything had happened so suddenly, she couldn’t say for sure. Remy’s watchful eyes had narrowed to two slits and he was studying the scene, swiveling his head slowly side to side.

Within a couple of surreal minutes the police were hauling the two men outside; one cop reciting Miranda rights to them as they exited. A lone SWAT marauder remained behind momentarily to check for anything that might have been overlooked in the scuffle. The man from the adjacent booth, now recognized as a cop in plain clothes, picked up Tracy’s purse with one hand and led her by her shackled wrists with the other, pushing her toward the door. She continued to writhe and drag her feet in protest.

After they had all gone, a large man with a ponytail and beard appeared on stage and moved to the microphone. “Okay folks, the excitement appears to be over. Sorry for the disturbance.

Please enjoy the rest of the evening.” He smiled then nodded to the band and then walked off stage.

The drummer counted a fast four with his sticks and music began again.

“My God,” Julie said, shocked. “What happened?”

“I’m sure it was a drug bust, probably a crack deal or something where the cops had been tipped off. I’m afraid Trace got caught in the middle of it without realizing what was going on.”

“Why do you suppose she flipped out like that?”

“Who knows? She probably had one too many drinks and something the cop said must have set her off. This is Tracy we’re talking about. You’ll never figure out how her mind works.”

“What are we going to do?”

“Don’t worry. I’ve got some friends on the local force; I’ll go down and talk to them. Why don’t you get her car from the valet and drive it to your place. I’ll call you later and let you know what’s up.”

“You’re sure she’ll be all right?”

“Yeah, no problem. She’s been in bigger scrapes than this. Wave the waitress over if you see her, will you? I’ll pay the tab and we can get the hell out of here. Who wanted to come to this place anyway?”

“Tracy.”

“Of course, who else?”



## Chapter Four

At eight twenty-two Saturday morning Danny awoke to the ringing of the telephone.

*Good grief! Who's calling me this early on a Saturday?* For a split-second he toyed with the idea of ignoring it but he picked up the receiver anyway.

"Hello," he said in a gravelly morning voice.

A discordant duet answered with the all-too-familiar strain:

"Happy birthday to you.

Happy birthday to you.

Happy birthday, dear Dan-ny.

Happy birthday to you."

"Geez, mom and dad. You guys don't have to sing to me like that every year. I am forty-two years old, you know."

"Why, of course we do dear," his mom replied. "That's why we called."

"She loves embarrassing people. Let me tell you that," his father said. "I'd sooner save *my* voice to root for the Red Wings."

"What are you doing up so early on a Saturday?"

“Oh, I can’t sleep; you know that. And your father wanted his bacon and eggs early this morning. He gets grouchy if he doesn’t get fed when he’s hungry. Did we wake you up, dear?”

“No, I was awake.” Danny lied.

“Well, how does it feel to be over the hill?” his dad asked.

“I went over the hill two years ago, dad. But, to answer your question, it doesn’t feel any different.”

“Sorry about not getting your card off in time,” his mother said. “Time just gets away from me sometimes, and with all this bad weather...”

“Don’t worry about it mom. And please don’t send me any money this year. You need it more than I do.”

“I don’t believe that. You’ve got two kids in college. And what do we need money for? We never go anywhere.”

“Well you should,” Danny said. Since his dad retired, Danny has tried several times to suggest they spend some time together traveling while they have their health.

“Where would we go, dear? All our friends are right here, and so are Lizzy and the kids.”

“You could go to Florida or Arizona—getaway from the cold for a month or so. You could meet some people out there. You might even enjoy yourselves. Liz and the kids can survive a month without you.”

“Oh, I don’t know. With your father’s back as bad as it is, he needs to sleep on his own bed.”

“I could sleep anywhere,” Danny’s father protested. “When I was in Korea I slept in trees and trenches.”

“Well I’d like to see you try that now at sixty-six,” Betty Predmore snapped. “You wouldn’t last an hour before I’d have to drive you to the doctor. Believe me Danny, he’s not as young as he thinks he is.”

“Look dad, why don’t you just buy the tickets and surprise her? In another couple of weeks the weather will be perfect in Florida.”

“I’m not going, Herb. So don’t waste your time. Besides, there’s an awful lot of work around here to get ready for spring. We can’t fritter away three or four weeks trying to live like the Rockefellers.”

“Okay. Forget I said anything about it.” Danny was exasperated with his predictably vain attempt to get his parents to agree on something—even something good for them. He should have known better. But it wouldn’t matter what issue came up in conversation. They could argue over the price of, say...*cheese*, for example, regardless of their inability to influence it one way or the other.

So went the remainder of the phone call. Danny tried in vain to get something resembling a positive spin going around the nucleus of one topic after another: the idea of a family reunion in early summer—*the last one was a flop so why would they want to try another?* His work—*he still did too much of it*. His hockey team—*what in the world was a forty-two year old man with bad knees doing playing a contact sport on skates?* And his love life—*regardless of how many women he met and dated, as far as his mother was concerned, none of them could ever take Julie’s place so he ought to just drop everything, fly out west and ask her to take him back.*

Danny finally struck a positive note with his dad. They agreed to go down to *Hockeytown* together to see a Red Wings game before the season was over. His mother hated hockey so there

was no chance she'd feel left out. Danny would select the night and buy the tickets. His father's calendar was wide open.

After hanging up he decided not to go back to bed, though he still felt somewhat cheated on the morning side of sleep. After all, how often does one's birthday come on a Saturday? Not often enough for Danny, that was for sure. But there was no use trying to recapture the blissful Saturday morning dream-like state he had attained before his parents called. Additionally, he now felt as though he had a hole in his stomach at roughly the spot where he'd dumped two hot dogs with "the works" last night after the second period of the Vipers' game at the Palace. And the hole (or whatever it was) ached.

He put on his robe and began walking toward the kitchen to make some coffee and finish off a two-day-old tray of cinnamon rolls. But before he could get out of the bedroom he caught sight of himself in the bureau-top mirror. "Yeow," he remarked audibly, thinking that he looked like all of his 42 years had caught up with him in one night. His complexion was as pale as the winter. Seven hours on the pillow had rearranged his hair into a mad tangle. And the ragged shadow of whiskers on his chin didn't help either. Contrary to what the unshaven look does for Don Johnson and Kirk Gibson, Danny's one-day growth just made him look all the more haggard, like Jack Kevoorkian after a long night's work in the back of his van. He appeared hollow-eyed, weary and frightful. *This is ridiculous*, he thought. *I better get away to some place where the sun shines. That's what I'll do! I'll plan a vacation today. It'll be my birthday present to myself. A little sun and I'll be good as new.*

He put on a pot of coffee and went immediately into the basement to dig out his old AAA travel books and maps. He remembered the years when he and Julie got the post-holiday blues. When winter got them down, they'd think up one or two warm travel destinations, then drive to

the Auto Club for travel information. If they could only have afforded it, perhaps they might have taken some of those vacations. As it turned out though, the trips were mere fantasies, except for one year when they drove to Orlando to take the kids to Disney World. Unfortunately, it was during spring break and the place was so crowded that Danny swore he'd never go back. A total waste of time and money, he concluded. He'd had a miserable time.

But now it was only Danny. If he chose to go somewhere to simply lie on the beach and get a tan, no one could object. And this time he could afford to follow through. One round-trip airfare and a week's worth of hotel bills wouldn't break the bank.

So he poured himself some coffee, warmed his supermarket pastry in the microwave and sat down to dream up a winter vacation.

If the weather report was to be believed, today was going to be the last warm day in the Southland for the next week or so. By evening a low pressure area would be forming over the great basin and the circulation around it would bring thickening clouds and moisture off the Pacific. The already horribly over-hyped "El Niño," this winter's unwelcome guest, would probably be blamed. But to Julie it just seemed like a predictable January weather pattern along the coast.

Julie's eyes had opened early. Her body was conditioned to getting up at 5:30 so it made no difference that it was Saturday, that she'd been out late last night, or that Tracy's arrest had caused her a fitful night's sleep. Besides, she was eager to be up and outside in the awakening morning, running on the beach, enjoying the last in a string of remarkable January days. So, she climbed out of bed and was on the pavement before six.

Later, after showering, shaving her legs and eating some breakfast, she began straightening the house. She wanted everything to be neat and tidy when Remy and Trace arrived. It wouldn't be a big job.

After picking up her school knapsack and books which had been lying about the living room since Thursday night and stowing them temporarily in the "guest" room, she collected all her dirty laundry and carried it out there as well, shoving it behind the vinyl curtain. Both her schoolwork and the laundry could wait until tomorrow. Next, she got a cloth and a can of furniture polish and began dusting in her bedroom. She had to move all of her glass owls off the dresser—she had seven of them, each one unique. Though a small collection, it nonetheless held many dear memories for her. Her mom and step-dad had given her the first one for her high school graduation, a clear crystal figurine about eight inches tall with its own "papers" describing its supposed ancestry and defining its value as a collectable. She named it *Hootie*. Then over the years she got the others—one here, one there—mostly as gifts from her kids but always with a name and an accompanying fictitious pedigree. The kids got pretty good at thinking up owl genealogies after the first or second time.

Julie carefully removed each owl, dusted it and set it on the bed. Then she sprayed the dresser top and ran the cloth over it before replacing the collection, one piece at a time, into a completely different arrangement from before. She finished the bedroom and moved to the living room.

She was working in a semi-automatic mode, doing a thorough job of cleaning but thinking of something else entirely. Mainly, she was worried about Trace. Thankfully, Remy had called late last night to say that he'd talked to the arresting officer and Trace was about to be released from police custody. It had merely been a case of mixing oil and water—that, and an overzealous detective. Trace was tired, he said, and he was going to take her home to get some sleep. "She's

in no condition to drive tonight. I'll fill in the details when we come by in the morning to get the Camaro," Remy told her. Julie said she was relieved and would definitely be looking forward to seeing them both.

But she really wasn't—relieved, that is. She couldn't believe Tracy had acted as she did, foolishly allowing herself to get mixed up in a drug bust, practically begging to get arrested and hauled off to police headquarters like a street thug or a prostitute or something. Julie had never suspected her friend to be so brazen, so reckless, so stupid! Maybe it was just the alcohol she had consumed, but if so, that was a problem too.

It was selfish of her, but she couldn't help thinking that now she'd have the responsibility of trying to help Trace overcome the character flaw which had precipitated last night's behavior—not an easy task.

While vacuuming the living room, Julie noticed the pattern of her picture window frame stenciled onto the carpet, outlining a pool of brilliant sunshine that poured in over the front patio wall. The sun had warmed the house quickly and she was starting to sweat. She wished she had gotten the work done *before* taking her shower. As it was, she had things in complete reverse order. This was so unlike her. Must be her mind was so overloaded she wasn't thinking clearly. *Now I've sweated up my blouse, she realized. Perhaps I should have stripped down to my underwear before vacuuming. Or done it in the nude. That would have saved a change of clothes at least. But with my luck, Remy and Trace would show up at the door and there I'd be—naked as a bush woman.*

This thought excited her though she couldn't say exactly why. She felt a sudden arousal in her loins that rose up into her bosom, but just as quickly she shook it off, dragged the vacuum around the bar and finished her cleaning with a quick sweep of the kitchen tile.

Afterward, she started a full pot of fresh coffee using a special blend of Mocha Java with a hint of Chocolate Almond that Trace had given her. Then she pulled off her clothes and took another quick shower.

She told herself she wasn't doing all this for the sake of impressing Remy. On the contrary, she had no desire whatsoever to lead him on. But neither did she want to project an image of herself as slovenly or unkempt. As a child, she'd been well schooled in proper hygiene. She knew how to care for both herself and her things. But once she had kids, it was rarely possible to follow through. Most days when they were small, the house looked a wreck and so did she. Then, after Clarissa got into school and Julie took a secretarial job, it was all she could do to arrive on time for work, get home, quickly cook dinner and continue tending to the children's and Danny's needs. Thinking back on those years, she remembered herself as a harried, frightful-looking working mom, totally lacking in appeal or sensuality.

Presently, things were different though. She was single again and had begun to pay particular attention to her appearance and the image she was projecting to the world. But, for some reason she did not fully understand, she remained naggingly uncomfortable with her new persona. For one thing, she didn't want to appear too anxious with men. In truth, she was scared of another relationship where she might get trapped again, then forced to yield to a dominating, selfish, insensitive man who neither understood nor respected her thoughts and feelings. Moreover, she knew that this reborn, unfettered Julie who cared for herself and always looked good, also had sex appeal. So she had to be careful not to give off the wrong signals. And, even without projecting positive encouraging vibes, she'd seen how easily men could become too friendly with her.



Remy didn't seem like such a man, however. Despite his size, she sensed he was gentle and respectful, with a good heart, the kind of man she *should* be looking for. But she felt no attraction to him and this nagged at her as well. She began thinking, as she frequently did, that she was beyond loving, jaded past the point of romantic attraction. She remembered how, not so long ago, Danny had blamed her for his having to find someone else to fulfill himself sexually. Maybe he was right: she was incapable of love, an ice queen who could only hurt and destroy men from the frozen throne where she held sway.

Just after nine-thirty, revived from her second shower, with a fresh application of makeup on her face, Julie swung open the front door to get some air into the house. She poured herself more coffee and retrieved her sociology book from the back room, hoping to get a jump on her homework before her guests arrived. Plopping down in her favorite chair, now swimming in sun, she turned to page 142 and began to read about the *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* models of societal organization. She secretly hoped the topic wouldn't be as dry and boring as it seemed.

Earlier in the week Danny invited a couple of his friends, Bobby Brooks and Eric Dennison, over for tomorrow afternoon's NFL conference championship games. Eric was the Blizzard's goalie, and the only other single guy on the hockey team. They'd be ordering pizza delivery but Danny realized he was nearly out of beer and snacks. So, around noontime he left the house to pick up groceries. He planned to stop at Subway for lunch on the way back.

The change of scenery was a welcome respite. After bringing his box of travel information and maps up from the basement and emptying its contents onto the kitchen table, he combed through an assortment of memorabilia along with the anticipated AAA literature. There were brochures from up north, camping receipts and trail guides from weekends they'd spent tenting

in Tawas City and along the Au Sable River, and even stuff they'd brought back from Disney World, including a picture of all four of them snapped by the perky but ever-mercenary Disney staff. In this photograph, now about ten or eleven years old, Danny appeared with a full head of hair. And he was thinner. Young Daniel hadn't had his growth spurt yet. He appeared only a millimeter or two taller than his sister Clarissa, though he was standing perfectly erect underneath a Tiger's cap that was slightly askew. Clarrie of course was also a kid, skinny as a flagpole, wearing pigtails and baggy pink shorts with a white Minnie Mouse tank top. Julie, for her part in the picture, could be seen smiling radiantly, one arm around each child. Her ultra-fine fawn-colored hair, shoulder length at the time, windblown as usual, endowed her with a particularly sexy look. Her green eyes sparkled in the Florida sun. As Danny gazed into the picture, seeing how happy they all seemed that day, he flew off on a wave of nostalgia that shook him to the core. He realized that the trip to Florida must have been one of the high points in their marriage, even though he couldn't remember actually enjoying himself down there.

Next, his mind reeled off to seek out other times when the family was together and functioning like one happy unit. They had always enjoyed camping up north when the kids were young, and Tiger games at Michigan and Trumbull, and going down to Joe Louis Arena for Red Wing hockey.

*I wasn't such a bad husband and father, he supposed. What ever happened to ruin everything?*

Was it his preoccupation with his own needs and concerns? That was no small part of the problem, certainly. But it occurred to him that there was something else too—his inability to keep the kids dependent upon him forever. When Daniel and Clarrie were young, they stood in awe of his every word. He had been a demi-god to them—genie, guru, yogi, sensei—the sun that

rose and set over their worldview. Julie, of course, helped create this mystique of fatherhood that Danny wore like a royal robe. She taught the kids to reverence and fear him as head of the house, the hard-working provider, the final word on decisions and discipline. Maybe that was the problem. She'd set him up so high that a fall was inevitable. Then, when the kids began exerting their wills for independence and free thinking, down he came—like Humpty Dumpty, shattered to bits with no hope of restoration. Finally, as his role of father came to an end, there was nothing left of the marriage either. Perhaps, if he and Julie *had* ever cultivated a life of their own before having children, they might have had something to look forward to when the kids grew up. But, there hadn't been time for such a relationship to develop, let alone mature. They were married too quickly, having dated only a short time before Julie got pregnant. Then, with young Daniel on the way, there was no opportunity to simply enjoy each other, to allow their love to deepen. Consequently, they hadn't learned to appreciate each other outside of their roles as mom and dad. It was a shame, Danny thought. For, although they'd been thrown together suddenly—married too young and too soon—he had loved Julie deeply. And she obviously had loved him too. He probably couldn't have picked a better wife and mother if he'd searched for a decade—nor found a more beautiful woman to love and serve him, and most importantly, put up with him as she had for so many years. He'd blown it, thrown away what they had together, and for what?—a little excitement and a few months of clandestine sexual pleasure.

Emerging from the retrospective, he found himself at the kitchen table—their old family gathering place—regretting what he'd done to Julie, and to himself for that matter, feeling lower than he had in over a year and longing for the good old days of his marriage. After all, with the passing of time it is mostly the good memories that survive.

With all these painful thoughts making him uncomfortable on his birthday (of all days), he decided to get out of the house and let the cold weather shock him into thinking about other things. So he left for the grocery store.

He was back within an hour, packing one bottle short of the entire case of Molson into the fridge. He then sat down at the kitchen table to read the Saturday News and Free Press and enjoy his lunch, a twelve inch Italian sub with extra hot peppers—and the remaining bottle of beer. He was into his third bite when the phone rang.

“Hello.”

“Hi, dad, it’s Clarrie, and Daniel’s on too.”

“Happy birthday dad,” said Danny’s twenty-one-year-old namesake.

“Thanks, Dan. Hi, Clar.”

“Isn’t this great. Daniel hooked us up on a three-way from his frat house so we could wish you a happy birthday.”

“What a nice surprise.” Danny pushed away his sandwich for the moment.

“So, how’s everything back home; you still miss us?” his daughter asked.

“You know I do.” And he did, especially over Christmas when he hadn’t seen either of them.

“Well, I can’t speak for Daniel but I miss you too—at least when I’m not completely buried in schoolwork.”

“Come on Clar. I know you’ve got other things to think about besides your old man.”

“She’s pining away dad; it was inevitable. All the loser guys go to State.”

“And all the ugly nerdettes are in Ann Arbor,” Clarrie quipped in return.

“Well, I’m glad to see that some things never change,” Danny said. “The prospects are better on somebody else’s campus and you kids can always elevate a disagreement to the level of an artform.”

“So what’s new, dad?” Daniel asked. “Got anything special planned for your birthday?”

“No, not really. I was just trying to pick out someplace warm to go for a winter vacation.”

Clarrie jumped in. “Wow, that’s great. Where do you think you’ll end up?”

“I don’t know, maybe Aruba. I’ve heard the weather there is fantastic.”

“That’s so cool. Need a traveling companion?”

“Don’t you have school to worry about?”

“I was thinking of mom.”

“Good one, Clarrie,” her brother said without masking his disgust. “It’s dad’s birthday, for crying out loud.”

“No, I’m serious. She’s not seeing anybody. And she never goes anywhere. She can’t afford to with what they pay her at work. Then she’s got school bills, and it can’t be cheap to live a block-and-a-half from the beach.”

“How do you know so much about mom and her personal life?” her brother asked.

“We e-mail each other at least once a week. You ought to try it once in a while yourself. It won’t kill you, you know.”

Danny knew he had to interrupt. “Nice try Clar, but your mom wouldn’t go down the street with me, let alone to Aruba.”

“What’s the harm in asking? Tell her it was my idea. No way she could get mad at you for that.”

“Right. You and your ideas. Remember the time you got lost in the woods up north because you thought if you got to where it was dark enough you could see the northern lights.”

“Yeah,” her brother added, rubbing it in. “I remember that. None of us got any sleep that night and mom was so mad; she blamed *me* for letting you go off by yourself. She swore you were dead, or *dying* out in the woods somewhere. Great idea, sis.”

“Well, just for your information, I did see the Aurora. And I wasn’t exactly lost—just temporarily disoriented.”

“You said it. Only ‘*temporarily*’ is the wrong adverb.”

“Okay, you two. How about a truce?” Danny suggested, although he was enjoying the sibling banter. He knew it was all in good fun; they really loved each other and either of them would give up a vital organ if the other needed it. It was simply the way a brother and sister with fifteen months between them behave toward each other. Some things don’t change. He only wished that they might still come home occasionally and stay a few days but they always managed to justify why they needed to stick around school, even during breaks. They were happier there in their newfound adult lives, he reasoned.

The three of them chatted for another ten minutes. Danny got caught up on all the latest East Lansing campus fads from Clarrie. Daniel told him about his plans to try working for a year or two before applying to grad school. He said he’d had his fill of studying for a while.

Clar asked him if he was seeing anyone, and her father said “not seriously.” He thought how embarrassing it would be to try and explain that he was dating one of her contemporaries, which of course he wasn’t, though he maintained some optimism that Valerie might see things differently in time. Maybe by then he’d think up a way to break the news to his kids that he’d fallen for a girl half his age. He’d heard of men marrying their mothers—metaphorically

speaking, of course—but their daughters? There remained the distinct possibility that he was *sick*—mentally, at least.

Before they hung up, Clarrie made one more appeal for him to consider asking Julie to join him on the trip. “At least you could e-mail her. She’d probably be happy to hear from you,” She told him to get a pen and paper to write down her mom’s Internet address.

“I’ll give it some thought,” Danny replied, though mortified by the idea. What would he say to her? And as far as inviting her to the Caribbean... That was going to be *his* vacation. He didn’t want to spend it trying to right all the wrongs of the past. And besides, Julie would flatly refuse to go. He was sure of it.

After they hung up, Danny returned to his lunch. Only he had lost his appetite and the beer was now warm and undrinkable.

Julie hadn’t made much progress on her sociology paper when she heard a car pull into the driveway. Seconds later the motor quit and the sound of familiar voices drifted in on the ocean breeze. She quickly shut down her notebook computer and shoved it with her textbook underneath the chair. Remy and Trace appeared outside her wrought iron porch door and Julie, seeing them through the bars, thought of making a joke about how the look of vertical iron complimented Tracy’s figure. But she realized it would be in poor taste.

“Well it’s good to have you back,” is what she did say as she stepped out into the porch to unlock the gate.

Trace smiled and shook her head. “Yeah. Thanks to Remy I didn’t have to spend the night in that filthy hole with prostitutes and crack addicts.”

As she walked in, Julie embraced her, holding her for a few moments. Then Julie hugged Remy's muscular frame as well, although less intensely and somewhat uneasily, but she wanted him to know she appreciated what he'd done to get Tracy out of trouble. "Thanks," she said.

"No problem," he replied, shutting the iron door behind him. "She means a lot to me too, even though she gets a little crazy from time to time."

They went inside and Julie suggested they sit at the dining table. She had some bagels and coffee to serve, she said. They were both famished; neither of them had taken time for breakfast.

Trace immediately began telling the tale of her run-in with the police. Already she was wearing the experience like a badge of courage.

Julie asked her to hold back a moment while she set out coffee. She next retrieved a plate from the cupboard and piled it with some bagels and, setting them on the table as well, apologized that they weren't fresh. She then put out some raspberry jam and low-fat cream cheese with a couple of knives and spoons before sitting down to relax and enjoy the company—and listen to Tracy's story.

As it turned out, Trace had made her rounds of the South Coast Club last evening only to discover what Julie had already observed—there was an acute shortage of attractive single guys present. So, she bought another drink and consumed it at the bar, thinking she might give Julie and Remy a few minutes to get to know each other. Before leaving, she had the bartender pour her one more. When she got up, meaning to return to her friend and cousin, she immediately homed-in on the good-looking guy in the adjacent booth who, as they all discovered later, was an undercover narcotics' detective for the Newport Beach PD. (Of course she didn't suspect anything like that at the time.) This morning she called him a "real bad egg."



He hadn't been exactly warm and inviting from the beginning, she admitted, but given his high *hunk* quotient and Tracy's giant self-image (not to mention her level of intoxication), she ignored his negative vibes and pressed forward with her come-on. After introducing herself, she sat down and started making small talk. He acted cordially, most probably (according to Remy's appraisal) because he didn't want to draw any attention to himself and thereby tip off the druggies he'd been observing.

Trace had seen the two long haired men earlier, sitting and talking over beers at a nearby table. She didn't give them a second look though; their appearance alone was a turnoff.

Anyway, she was really working this guy—Lieutenant “Hardass” she called him now—trying to get him to respond, to engage. He seemed preoccupied with something else, but Trace thought perhaps he was just being coy. Really attractive guys can get away with such behavior, she claimed. In her quasi-stupor though, she never made the connection with the drug deal about to go down ten feet away. Nearly numb from three-and-a-half Rob Roys, she just kept turning up the heat on the detective. She asked him to dance; he refused. Of course she could only presume he was there to get picked up, but he wanted her to work for it. Or maybe he was a little shy. Either way she had to continue. She asked him what he was doing there by himself if he didn't want to dance. He said he liked the band and he'd come to hear them. It was obviously a lie; even Tracy in her advanced state of inebriation could see that. She suggested that maybe he could join her and her friends in the next booth. *Surely he didn't want to sit there by himself all night, drinking alone.*

Next thing she knew this guy started talking loudly to himself, or at least that is how it seemed to Trace. She remembered him saying something like, “they're dancing the tango; let's hit the floor.”

Tracy had said, “what the hell are you talking about?”

The detective shot her a look of cold steel and said, “get your ass out of the way, you little tart. There’s something about to go down here.”

Of course Trace didn’t care much for the demeaning epithet. She wanted to know whom he was calling a *tart* saying, “you don’t have enough money in the bank to pay for what I’ve got.” She still hadn’t caught on to what was about to happen with the drug bust.

The Lieutenant responded in kind. “I wouldn’t want it if you were giving it away.” He had more important business to attend to.

At that point SWAT came in the front door and bulldozed through the crowd. When Trace saw them she finally caught on to what was occurring, but by then she was “madder than a half-smashed hornet in the heat of summer,” in her own words. And drunk enough to fight back. So she did.

According to Remy, the lieutenant arrested her for *assault against a police officer*. And, though he probably never intended to get her booked on the charge, he was the type of guy who enjoyed throwing his weight around, which in brass amounted to enough to get a 115 pound female cuffed and carted downtown. It was what he did best, what led him into narcotics to begin with; he loved making busts.

When Remy arrived at the station, they were holding her without a formal charge. He talked to the officer on duty, Duane Perry, with whom he was acquainted. Duane introduced him to the arresting lieutenant and, in a matter of fifteen minutes, Tracy was released.

“It was kind of exciting,” Trace said. “But I wouldn’t necessarily want to do it again. Look what he did to my wrists.” She held them up for Julie to see. They were bruised where the handcuffs had been clamped on.

“That should be a lesson to you,” Remy said. “Some guys are dangerous, even ones who are out there to *serve and protect*.”

“You mean observe and detect, don’t you,” Trace said with heavy sarcasm.

Julie wanted desperately to throw something in about how it was probably Tracy’s drinking that got her into trouble, but she didn’t know quite how to broach the subject.

Remy saved her the effort. “And you better cool it with the alcohol, Trace. It makes you do stupid things.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I should keep it to a couple of drinks, max. Or stick to caffeine; it agrees with me more.”

“I know I’d worry less if you did,” Julie said.

“You’re the best, Jul. I’m sure glad we found each other.” She leaned over to kiss her friend on the cheek. “Sorry I put you through this. I’m going to really watch myself from here on out because it scared me too. For a little while last night I thought I’d have to ask you guys to put up a bond to get me out. Maybe I’d even end up losing my job. Thank God for Remy; that’s all I can say.”

“Well, it’s over now,” Julie said, sensing a little bit of the fright and apprehension that Trace must have experienced last night, while still somewhat incredulous that it could have happened at all—to a friend of hers. And that her “friend” had brought it on herself. She decided to try to lighten the mood. “We’ll probably be laughing about it by next week.”

“Speaking of next week,” Trace said, gladly moving onto another topic, “Remy and I are thinking about going up to LA on Saturday for the anniversary of the Northridge quake. They’re going to have some speakers and music and what not down by the water in Santa Monica. Tell her about your plans, Rem.”

“Well, I’ve been thinking about starting a disaster readiness consulting business. I got plenty of experience working with the Seabees and the Shore Patrol in the Navy, and now I need to find something to do to make a little money and keep myself busy. Most folks don’t realize how bad it is when you’re the victim of a quake or a mudslide or whatever, but a lot of the families that had their homes destroyed in the Northridge quake in ‘94 still don’t have their lives back. I thought if I went up to hear some of their stories, it could help me with the business.”

“Sounds like a good idea then,” Julie said.

Trace added her appeal. “How about going with us, Jul?”

“I don’t know, Trace. I’m not real fond of LA. And besides, I’m already getting behind in school.” This was the truth but not the real reason for her reticence. She didn’t want to start hanging around with Remy, giving him the wrong impression concerning how she felt about him. Of course she couldn’t come out and say as much in their presence.

“We’ll be having a great time,” Trace added. “I’d hate for you to miss out.”

“Thanks, Trace. I appreciate the offer, but I really can’t afford to take a whole day to go up to the city.”

“Okay, I understand—I think,” Trace said unconvincingly. “How about another cup of that Wendell blend?”

Julie rose to get the carafe.

Tracy moved forward with her agenda. “Remy’s got something else he wants to ask you, Jul. Don’t you, Remy?”

“I suppose,” he said, sheepishly. “I know it’s last minute but how would you like to join me for dinner tonight. There’s a new Mexican place down the coast that’s excellent.”

Julie began feeling like the spoilsport that she was, realizing she had to turn down this invitation as well, albeit with a legitimate excuse. “Oh, that sounds wonderful Remy. Unfortunately, I’ve already got plans for this evening. It’s something I can’t break; I’m this close to a promotion at work (she held up her thumb and forefinger about a half-inch apart), and I really need the extra money. Plus, it will get me into a whole new area—marketing communications.”

“Good for you,” Remy said, sounding happy for her but looking disappointed that she turned down his offer. “I hope you get the job.”

“Well this is the first I’ve heard about that,” Tracy said, as if she were deliberately left out of the loop. “What’s with the big secret?”

“It’s something that just came up on Thursday. I really didn’t know they were considering me for it; but I’ll find out the details tonight.” She sat down again and looked at Trace who was staring daggers right back at her. “You know as much about it as I do—honest. I’ll call you tomorrow and let you know if it looks like I’m going to get the job.”

“Well, I hope so,” Trace added. “And I hope you’re not planning on sleeping your way into marketing.”

“Trace!” Remy said, shocked. “What’s gotten into you lately?”

“What? I’m just giving her a little womanly advice, that’s all.”

“Don’t worry,” Julie said. This is going to be strictly business.”

Thus far on his birthday, Danny had fielded calls from his parents, his children and his sister Lizzie, but he hadn’t done a single thing worth remembering, except for making tentative plans to fly to the Caribbean within the month. He decided to sleep on the idea and perhaps call a

travel agent Monday. Fortunately, thoughts of work hadn't crossed his mind all day. He'd temporarily banished his recruiting problems along with the pressure Vic had been ladling on him for the past couple of weeks. Of course, the four beers he drank since lunch helped keep these things submerged, at least for the time being.

But something else *had* surfaced in his stream of consciousness. Since he'd seen her in the photograph earlier, he couldn't stop thinking about Julie. For precisely this reason he had gotten rid of all her pictures soon after the divorce, boxed them up and buried them in the basement. He didn't want to look back, to be reminded of her. Looking back could only lead to non-productive, debilitating melancholia—which, as it happened, was his present state. And to top it off, Valerie's suggestion at lunch yesterday had been haunting him like an apparition. He couldn't seem to shake off the thought she'd put into his head that he missed Julie and should get back in touch with her. Then there was Clarrie and her persistent urging of him to contact her mom, to invite her to Aruba, to send her e-mail.

He looked at the clock to see how much more of this birthday with its painful memories he'd have to endure. It was six ten. The college basketball games had all ended; the pro-am golf tournament in Palm Desert was over; there wouldn't be any hockey on the tube for another couple of hours.

Danny walked to the refrigerator and twisted open another bottle of Molson. He carried it into his son's old bedroom that he converted into a study last year. His computer was there, and sometimes in the evenings he'd get on the Internet to do research for his job. Tonight, however, he had something else in mind. After the *Windows* screen came up, Danny clicked on the e-mail icon and opened a new letter screen. Then he began to type:

Dear Julie...

## Chapter Five

Mike Tattersall had told her late Thursday afternoon that he made the dinner reservation for seven-thirty at Bistro 201, his favorite local haunt. The popular upscale eatery was located just a few doors up the PCH from the SunBurst office building. Since he was well known by the owners and the wait staff there, Mike had no problem getting a table reserved on short notice. Julie, on the other hand, had only been in the swank restaurant once before, with her dad and Lora, just after she moved into her villa over a year ago. It was her first experience with authentic, contemporary California cuisine, and although such fare has become old hat, even anachronistic to some, to a girl who spent her entire adult life in the Mid-West, it seemed like heaven. She loved everything about Bistro 201: food, service, atmosphere, and especially the view of the marina. The entire experience will remain forever painted in her memory, a colorful epilogue to the realization of her dream to return to the coast. Unfortunately, she judged the restaurant as being beyond her meager budget—too expensive to visit again anytime soon. Until tonight of course, but tonight Mike Tattersall would be picking up the check.

Though it was only a few blocks from her house to the restaurant, she drove her car for two reasons: it was well past sunset, and she didn't want Mike driving her home afterward.

There was a queue inside the door. Julie restrained herself from looking around to see if Mike had arrived before her, instead she studied the decor while waiting her turn for the hostess. Two couples had to be seated before her, along with a party of four. It was seven forty-one by her wristwatch when she was shown to a booth along the window-wall overlooking the channel where Mike sat, lingering over a San Pelligrino water with a twist of lime.

Mike rose to greet her, extending his hand. "I'm so glad you agreed to join me this evening," he said, grinning. "I hate dining alone." He was dressed casually, in a colorful silk shirt and tailored slacks. Clean-shaven as usual with his hair gelled and combed artistically, he stood up, and Julie noticed his Euro-cut black loafers, polished to a military shine.

"This is one of my favorite restaurants," she said, trying to steer the conversation toward light and innocuous small talk.

"Mine too," Mike replied. "Do you dine here often?"

"Just once in a while; mostly I eat at home." *That wasn't entirely false*, she thought. Outside the window in the incandescent lamplight, Julie saw a couple gulls swoop low over the channel, diving for some food of their own. Numerous glimmering masts were swaying lazily with the rhythm of the bay. Further east, at the edge of her field of vision, Lido sparkled like a jeweled paradise in the dusky night.

"Drew will be back any moment; what type of wine would you prefer?"

Julie thought for a minute, not sure she wanted to drink any wine. But she didn't want to be rude or unsociable either. "White, I guess, not too sweet," she said, thinking that one glass might be an appropriate compromise.



Mike studied the wine list as though he were reading it for the first time. Julie re-fixed her gaze out the window and watched an elegant sailing craft motor toward its slip in the marina, running lights lit, crew on deck tying down the sails.

“I was thinking about some grilled shrimp for an appetizer; how does that sound to you?” He set aside the wine list.

Julie turned her head toward him to answer. “Great. I love shrimp.” Mike seemed to be studying her so she looked away again, out toward where the sun had set earlier. There was foreboding darkness in the cloud-thickened sky.

Drew arrived as predicted and Mike ordered a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc—and the appetizer.

“You know,” Mike told her, “I’ve always believed that timing is one of the most important factors in determining one’s ability to capitalize on opportunity. And mainly, that is why I wanted to meet and talk with you tonight. Timing could not be better for you than it is right now.”

Julie screwed up her face. “I’m not sure I understand what you mean.”

“I’m sorry; I should have made myself more clear. Concerning your opportunity to make a career move—into marketing, of course.” Mike drank the last of his water. “And to be ultimately successful, it is equally important that every opportunity is met with a corresponding measure of *desire*. But I’m talking too much already. Perhaps you could tell me about what *you’d* like to do with *your* career. What are your goals and ambitions, Julie?”

Julie hadn’t realized that this was going to be a job interview. He’d caught her off-guard and now she felt somewhat nervous and unprepared. She took a stab at an impromptu response. “I guess making a significant contribution with whatever I’m asked to do would be my first goal. Then to...well...follow through, you know, go the extra mile...for the sake of excellence. And, I

suppose that as long as I'm challenged and enjoying my work, I'm not that fussy about what the specific tasks might be."

"I'm very impressed," Mike said. "I don't often hear words like that from the people I talk to these days, including business executives. It's become all too common for employees to demand what *they* want out of a job and how the company needs to cater to *their* needs. This is one reason why turnover is so high among small businesses. Employers can't always do what their employees want exactly when they want it. So, many times, after the company invests time and money into training them, employees quit and take the company's profitability right out the door with them."

Julie wondered if Mike was attempting to impress her or simply trying to control the conversation until he could mentally lock on to the next logical question. In either case she didn't have a response for him so she simply nodded in quasi-affirmation while remaining mute.

In her peripheral vision she saw Drew approaching with the wine. When he arrived at the table, the server held up the bottle for Mike to read the label and waited for the expected approval before twisting in the corkscrew. He caressed the bottle in his left arm and levered out the cork with a deft mastery, easing it ever-so-gently from the neck as though he were making love to it. The bottle responded with a barely audible sigh of relief. Wrapping a white linen cloth around the bottle, the waiter poured a splash of wine into Mike's glass. Mike raised it and went through the ritualistic swirling, sniffing, tasting and chewing—proving that he was no novice—before indicating to Drew that the wine was acceptable. Drew then poured out a measure of the silky-blond liquid into each goblet and walked away.

“Sorry for all the business talk,” Mike said. “We have the entire evening. Perhaps we should take a moment to sip some wine and look at the menus.” He held up his glass. “Here’s to your career.”

Julie remained silent but obliged him with a smile and a lifting of her own glass. The wine was very nice, she thought, not harsh nor woodsy tasting, though she was far from an expert herself. She set down the goblet, opened her menu and studied it for a selection she could eat without looking too Bohemian. That left out pasta—and soup of course. There was a grilled chicken breast served with Pico di Gallo and a side of roasted California red bell and Anaheim chile peppers. That sounded ideal.

When she looked up, Mike was studying her again. “Your eyes are the most intriguing color,” he remarked. “But I suppose I am not the first person to tell you how beautiful they are.”

“I’m flattered you think so,” she said, thinking that he may have meant nothing by the compliment but then again, he might have been trying to soften her up for the conquest. She’d be on the lookout for more sweet talk. But for now she’d change the subject back to business.

“Could you tell me more about the position in marketing you have in mind for me?”

“I suppose I can. Allison Kraft is leaving us; she turned in her resignation earlier this week. You know Allison, don’t you?”

“Sure. I’m shocked that she would leave. She always seemed so happy with her work.”

Mike explained, “well, her husband’s company is transferring him to Denver. She’s quite distressed over having to leave SunBurst, but it’s one of those things. Evidently, her husband is well paid and he doesn’t want to pass up this opportunity. They’ve talked it through and decided that she’d be the one making the sacrifice. His gain, our loss, I guess you could say. Anyway, we need to train someone with the proper career-orientation and the desire to learn how we develop

proposals and corporate presentations. It involves heavy use of PageMaker and PowerPoint software. And, eventually, we may want you to handle some face-to-face situations with the customers. You'd be working with me and a sales rep—you wouldn't have to fly solo."

"So, are you offering me Allison's job?"

"If you want it, and if we can count on you to make a career commitment."

"Wow, that's really exciting. But what exactly do you mean by a career commitment?"

Mike sipped some wine then shifted his eyes back to hers, seemingly looking right through them into her soul. She hoped that it was murky enough down there to obscure her real thoughts.

"It's like I was saying earlier, Julie. If we invest the time and effort into training you for this position, we hope you'll stay with us for quite some time and be a productive addition to the marketing team. We're not big enough to be able to withstand too much turnover in key positions like this."

Julie swallowed hard before asking the other question that has been on her mind since Thursday. "Will there be a raise involved?"

"Spence and I are prepared to move you from thirty-five to forty immediately. Then we'll look at things again in six months."

*Not bad, she thought. Five grand will certainly help.* "What else do you need me to do?" she asked.

"Just say yes or no. And if it's yes, we can start talking about the Williams Industries project."

"It's yes."

At first Danny struggled. Nothing he typed seemed right. He didn't want to come across as maudlin or desperate. But he knew he owed her an apology; he had to come clean with that

first—clear the air so to speak—if he truly wanted Julie to respond, and he did. He couldn't remember ever writing her a letter before, not even when they were young lovers. Writing wasn't his forte, not then at least. Over the years though, he has improved his skills, mainly for the sake of business correspondence. But a personal letter to his ex-wife whom he jilted two years ago was something else entirely.

He wrote and deleted and re-wrote and edited and...

Three hours later he saved a draft of the file, got up for a glass of water and returned to read it through. As he read, butterflies fluttered deep inside him. For the first time in his life he had actually put his inner feelings into words. There was none of the usual cynicism, no carefully couched setups, no craftily constructed half-truths, no innuendo, no machismo, no bluster, just Danny as he knew himself in his heart to be. And he wondered why he hadn't previously discovered he could be true to himself with something as simple as a letter.

Still, he wavered in his determination to actually send this letter over the Internet to his ex-wife. What might she think of him when she read his words? He was making himself vulnerable, laying his heart open to her as he had never done in their twenty years of marriage. On the other hand, he knew there was very little to lose. She couldn't get much further away than she already was.

Danny gulped down the rest of his water and weighed the possibilities one more time. *Perhaps I should sleep on it, he reasoned. When I am more alert in the morning, I'll be better able to make this decision...and then I'll probably forget the whole idea.*

In his mind's eye he had been trying to picture Julie all evening. He kept getting stuck on the image of her from the Disney World photograph, taken over a decade ago. His alternate view was the way he remembered her from the afternoon in the law offices when they negotiated the

divorce settlement. That day she looked older, tired, angry and aloof. He wondered how the past eighteen months might have altered her appearance. He feared that she would read his letter and then write him back saying she didn't want to be reminded of the past—of how he'd hurt her—suggesting that he find someone else to be sincere with, if he really thought he could be sincere...or understanding, or loving, or caring. She knew better.

He'd had his chance with her, a long run, and on the day she moved out there wasn't a single spark of energy left in their relationship. Now he was going to try to rekindle a fire from dust and ashes. It was improbable at best, and to her, maybe even unthinkable.

Then, upon further consideration, he realized that sending this letter was a risky proposition for another reason as well—*he knew her*. She could be loving and warm one day, heartless and cold the next, as though a switch were thrown in the night. And where he was concerned, that switch may have been thrown irreversibly, two years previous.

But then he thought about her warm body that had lain next to him so many nights, and how he'd taken both it and her for granted. Now, although he believed himself to be beyond such feelings, dead to her for at least a year-and-a-half, suddenly he longed to touch her again. Certainly, these thoughts and emotions could have come bubbling up from the alcohol he consumed earlier, but for a moment he swore he could actually feel her next to him again, strands of silky hair brushing against his chest, slender, strong legs interlaced with his.

*Why not?* he thought. *Why the hell not?*

Julie was feeling better than she had in months, perhaps years, giddy with a sense of accomplishment, of upward mobility. She'd always longed to be recognized as a valuable contributor, one who could be trusted with significant responsibility. Now, albeit in a small way,

she'd done it: worked hard, proved herself, secured a promotion and a raise. Of all the candidates Mike could have considered, he had picked her. And Spence must have agreed. Nice of Spence not to insist on holding her back out of a sense of possessiveness. These were good men, she thought: progressive, intelligent, successful. And Mike was turning out to be pretty good company as well.

He entertained her all evening, telling her tales of the trade, how so many small business owners get in over their heads. "Truth is," he proclaimed, "when it comes to running a business, most entrepreneurs don't have a clue."

It was becoming clear to Julie why SunBurst did so well. Mike and Spence could provide the business expertise and savvy that most small business owners and managers lacked. Certainly, entrepreneurs who built up their businesses beyond the start-up stage and developed a core clientele knew their particular trades well enough. But soon after surviving the first test and making a little money, these *tradespeople* often find themselves in the throes of difficulty. Facing possible bankruptcy or extinction, they call SunBurst. Then, if things aren't too far gone, Spence and Mike, using their proven methods, can almost always prevent a premature crash landing, helping the companies organize, implement pre-tested processes, handle their debt judiciously, make sound growth decisions, and avoid stupid mistakes. SunBurst performs a valuable and needed service, and now Julie Baker Predmore was destined to be an integral part of its sales and delivery mechanism as Marketing Communications Specialist. She was pumped!

And she was also a little bit tipsy. In her excitement over the promotion she had ignored her own admonition to herself—to stop at one glass of wine. Mike kept pouring and, together, they finished off the bottle of Sauvignon Blanc. Then, he insisted they cap off their dinner with a glass of the house's best tawny port. Although light-headed, she didn't want to disappoint him by

refusing. Now, having sipped away half a glass of the sweet fragrant nectar, she was half-bombed—but positively euphoric.

And Mike had her nearly rolling on the floor with humorous anecdotes from his work in the fertile field of family-owned companies. She was still giggling about his reference to one son-of-the-owner-cum-“senior vice-president,” whom Mike referred to as a *doofus*, whose only qualification was his share in the family gene pool, and the shallow end at that.

Then he changed the subject. “I hope you don’t feel too bad that we didn’t make much progress on the Williams Industries project tonight.”

“It’s okay. You said that Allison will be able to start training me on Monday; maybe she can bring me up to date with what she already knows.”

“I’m sure she can. But I’d like you to have the advantage of our perspective, Spence’s and mine, I mean. This is going to be your first project so I want you to get off on the right foot.”

“Can Spence fill me in?”

“Partly, but you know Spence, he’s brilliant but he lacks the marketing angle.”

“Maybe we can schedule some time to meet during the week,” she suggested.”

“Ordinarily, that would be fine. But next week is going to be a bear for me. I’m out of the office until Friday with consulting work I can’t juggle. Then, I’ll be catching up on paperwork all day Friday. How about dinner after that?”

Julie’s head was spinning but not loosened to the point where she didn’t recognize how smoothly he just asked her for another date. To agree would be a clear violation of her rule. Nevertheless, he had been the perfect gentleman tonight.

“I don’t know Mike. Don’t get me wrong, I really have enjoyed myself this evening, but I don’t want to make a habit of this. It’s too much like a date.”



“I see,” Mike said. “For the sake of discussion, let’s presume that it is a date. What would be wrong with that?”

“Well, to you, maybe nothing, but to me, everything. It’s like I told you, I have a policy not to date people I work with. In my opinion, that can only lead to trouble—or hard feelings. I don’t think either of us wants that.”

“You’re right; we don’t. But, what if I promised to keep it on the level of business? Like tonight. Surely that’d be okay, wouldn’t it?”

She thought for a moment, eyeing him, trying to read his body language. But he was motionless, with only a hint of a smile, and unfortunately his bright blue eyes didn’t reveal much beyond the obvious—he hoped she’d say yes. Her mind reeled through the possibilities, and in the split second she had to decide, she could not think of another plausible reason to refuse him.

“I guess so,” she replied. Then she added, “but I must be able to trust you to respect my policy. It’s like you said, we want my new position to get off on the right foot. Do we have a deal?”

“We do,” Mike said.

After he paid the bill they walked together out into the sea-dampened night. It had turned considerably colder, chilly with a knife-edged on-shore breeze. Julie shivered in her blazer.

“Boy, it’s getting nasty out here,” Mike remarked. “Probably’ll rain before morning. Where did you park?”

“Over there,” Julie pointed.

“Let me walk you to your car. Are you cold?”

“A little.”

“Here, put this around you.” Mike quickly slipped off his suede jacket and draped it over her shoulders.

When they arrived at her car, she keyed the lock and then pulled off Mike’s coat before opening the door. As she handed it back to him she said, “thanks for dinner and everything; I really appreciate it.”

“My pleasure. I’m glad you came along when you did. SunBurst wouldn’t be the same without you. And I like your companionship, too.” He bent down slightly and kissed her cheek. “Congratulations, Julie. Welcome to marketing.”

When she got into her car she was shaking, partly from the cold and partly from Mike’s parting gesture. She wanted to be mad at him, but he’d made the kiss seem so innocent, coupling it to his congratulatory remark. And besides, she’d felt a rush inside when his lips touched her.

She fired up the Mirage and watched him walk to his own car, his jacket over one arm. *He looks especially great from behind, she thought, but he’s two years younger than I am. And then there’s my rule.* She put the car in gear and headed out of the parking lot and onto the Pacific Coast Highway.

*Why is life always so damn complicated?*

## Chapter Six

With bad weather on the way Julie had decided to take Sunday off her morning run schedule. So before her head hit the pillow Saturday night, she programmed herself to sleep in. No doubt her plan would have succeeded too, except for the unsettling sound of wind-driven rain against her bedroom window, a constant *ping-ping-pinging* that rattled her out of dreamland.

Once awake, she became immediately aware that she had failed to turn up the thermostat after yesterday's seventy-two degree afternoon. Overnight, with the change in the weather, the temperature in the house had dropped significantly. Hastily, she jumped out of bed, dialed up the control on her bedroom wall and padded stocking-footed into the kitchen to start a pot of coffee. She then quickly returned to bed and wrapped herself in the covers again. It was six forty-seven on a dreary, cold Sunday morning. With nothing pressing her, Julie decided to daydream away the next hour or so in the serene solace of her queen-sized bed.

Pulling the sheet and quilt over her head, she began thinking about last night, about her promotion and about Mike Tattersall. She felt exhilarated about moving up and out of her dead-end secretarial career. Executive or otherwise, "secretary" has been her only career title, one she believed to be carved ignominiously low on the totem pole of life. But last night she suddenly began an upward climb. In a matter of days she knew she could demonstrate some real career

potential with this promotion. Moreover, she'd also be acquiring valuable technical skills that could further boost her status and increase her worth. And, by entering the realm of marketing-communications, she would be breathing the rarefied air of "sales." It was a genuine stroke of good fortune, something she could not have imagined just seventy-two hours ago. But here she was today—promoted. Her hard work had finally paid off.

As she rolled over and hugged her pillow, it occurred to her that Spence must have recommended her for the marketing job. She made a mental note to thank him first thing tomorrow morning. He would no longer be her direct supervisor, she realized. From here on out she'd be working for Mike and he had a distinctively different management style from his partner. Unlike Spence's non-confrontational, self-effacing manner, Mike was downright assertive. In fact, he even made her uncomfortable at times, especially lately as he seemed to be taking such a personal interest in her. But that wasn't such a bad thing, she realized; it would help guarantee her success with the new job, though she had no serious doubts about her potential to succeed. On the contrary, as a dedicated and efficient employee, she felt extremely confident about her future performance as a marketing specialist. Looking out a month or so, she could easily see herself exceeding the productivity Mike was accustomed to getting from Allison Kraft and her counterpart, Sheryll Green. It was even possible, within a year perhaps, that she could take over the responsibility for all of the company's marketing. But she mustn't get ahead of herself. Better to simply continue her steady hard-working pace and let things go along their natural course.

These thoughts led her to the question that has been troubling her since last night—specifically, how was she going to handle things with Mike? First of all, she was uncertain of his motives. Reading him was proving more difficult than she had previously imagined. On one

hand, he might simply be acting out of his personal, experiential comfort zone—a touchy-feely guy, treating her no differently than he treats everyone else. This was a plausible theory and it fit well with her image of salespeople. She knew that, in essence, Mike was a salesman—and a tactile one at that.

But there remained the possibility that he has singled her out because he harbors romantic aspirations for her. This struck her as strange though, because she could not imagine why he might pick her out from among all the other women he could quite easily have. After all, she was slightly older, of lesser social standing, unsophisticated, and *used merchandise*. Meanwhile, he—a single, never-been-married, rich, and drop-dead handsome man—would surely be a great catch for her.

Still, she could not think of a single thing they had in common, personally speaking at least, and therefore a relationship with Mike might never succeed over the long haul. He'd make his conquest (which of course she'd never allow, but she was willing to consider the possibility in order to carry her reasoning to its ultimate conclusion), and then he'd realize what she at this present moment already suspected—that the two of them were entirely incompatible. Then he'd dump her like a bankrupt customer.

The chances were extremely slim of her somehow defying the odds and making a relationship with Mike work. But she might still be willing to give it a try—he was, after all, *exactly* what she believed she was looking for in a man—except for the undeniable fact that she worked with him and therefore would have to break her rule to do it. Hell, she worked *for* him! And for that reason alone, she hoped with everything in her heart that things were not at all as they seemed, that she was reading far too much into his manner, his words, the way he looked at her and especially, last evening's congratulatory *kiss*.

*Damn him*, she thought. *I'm not going to let him screw up my future.* But at the same time she was imagining herself living in his gorgeous home up on Long Butte Drive (she'd never actually seen his house, only heard the other women at the office talk about it), just she and Mike, watching the golf carts roll by in the evenings and on weekends, listening to West Coast jazz, sipping white wine and occasionally making love on silk sheets. She could picture his tall tan body without any of the usual expensive clothes to conceal it. She rolled over again, clutched the pillow even tighter to her breast, imagined everything, only wondering whether a guy who looked that good actually *was* that good. In her imagination at least, she assumed he was.

Julie knew she could fantasize about such things all day if she chose. There was nothing else pressing her. But her mind probably wasn't going to change about how to actually handle the situation. She was too practical a person, too driven and too smart. Mike was off limits and that was that.

The weather outside hadn't improved in the past ten minutes, but thanks to her stream of romantic consciousness and the new heat pump in her villa, she was no longer cold.

She thought of Tracy and made a mental note to call her later. Trace worried her. There was so much about her friend's past that she did not know. Somehow this street-smart young woman had grown up to the age of thirty-four, got married and divorced, but refused to grow up in so many ways.

Years ago, having encountered a similar personality disorder with Danny, Julie came to the conclusion that he possessed no real desire to mature, especially where relating to her was concerned. He was comfortable being a kid so he acted like a kid: playing with the boys, shrinking from household responsibilities, recklessly disregarding her feelings with both his words and his actions. He saw no need to change and he never did. Evidently, he acted

differently on the job, always managing to be professional, to do admirable work and to impress his superiors. But at home and with regard to her he was emotionally challenged. And from what she had observed recently, Tracy occupied quite the same, regrettable state.

Since in twenty years she couldn't "fix" Danny, she now realized that there was little hope where Tracy was concerned either. But she couldn't abandon her; that would be cruel. In fact, she would never have abandoned Danny to this day had he not done so first, sneaking around with that little tramp, Lisa. It's amazing that he didn't pick up some kind of disease from her, and for all Julie knew, he might have. That girl had certainly been around, so Mary Catherine Brooks had reported anyway, before the divorce was final. M.C. had wiggled Lisa's tawdry bio out of her husband Bobby, Danny's no-account best friend, though he was probably clueless as to why his wife wanted to know.

But, getting her train of thought back on track, it suddenly occurred to Julie that perhaps Danny and Trace might both seem helpless and irredeemable because of some flaw in *her* character, some involuntary signal which she sends out, making all those close to her dependent and emotionally crippled. This hypothesis did not set level with her though; she couldn't accept it without some kind of proof. And she wasn't content to view herself as the flame that attracted poor unsuspecting moths inexorably to their deaths. Nor was she about to accept any of that co-dependency blather. No, the coincidence of her ex-husband and new friend behaving in similar immature ways was probably just that—a coincidence. Or maybe she simply had the misfortune of picking handicapped lovers and friends out of the crowd.

Nevertheless, whatever Danny was doing these days, she wished him well. At least he had been a good family man and a tireless provider—and occasionally even a fun partner. He was just a couple feet short of being able to understand her emotionally, in the place where she truly

lived her life. And for all she knew it was her frustration with him, her pent-up emotion of nearly twenty years, that most likely served as a pretext to their final undoing.

Her hostility toward him had been all but palpable that fall after Clarrie left for school; she'd acted so unlike herself, frequently nettlesome and openly antagonistic. Although aware of her destructive behavior at the time, something restrained her and kept her powerless to change. She seemed incapable of snapping back to the person she believed herself to be: loving, giving, long-suffering and pleasant to be around. And, though she truly believed herself in possession of those qualities, they must have withered over time until even she could not recognize them in herself—or manifest them in her daily life. She could only imagine how she had appeared to Danny. But that was then.

Now, since the divorce and her move to the coast, she has put forth great effort to cultivate her core virtues anew and afresh, gaining command of them once again. She, in her opinion at least, was totally renewed, different in so many ways, and consequently capable of managing a relationship with kindness and objectivity.

This morning however, as she lay alone in her warm bed reflecting upon the waning days of her marriage, it seemed clear to her for the first time that she had been equally at fault, that her behavior had probably served to push Danny out the door and directly into young Lisa's waiting arms.

Not to mention Lisa's more-than-amply-sized chest.

There have always been a couple of areas where Julie could not compete; one of them was measured in inches. She would never be more than a 32-B; that was her entire endowment, though she always perceived that Danny felt cheated because of it.



And she was no nymphomaniac either. Her strengths lay in other areas: she was faithful, hard working, considerate and kind, healthy and strong, a good conversationalist, and if she did say so herself—smart. And, given the proper mood and preparation, she could also be pretty good in bed, although she only ever had Danny to prove it with. Having been brought up to save herself for marriage, she had done the next best thing—married the man she'd saved herself for, the same one who had gotten her pregnant. But she discovered a little over a year later that pregnancy came easily for her—too easily, actually. She was as fertile as Mississippi bottom land. Something had to be done, and they eventually agreed that Danny would go in for the operation. Two kids weren't necessarily too much but they were definitely *enough* for Danny and Julie Predmore.

Still, Danny had been her first and only sex partner. And since finding out about his affair two years ago, no man has come close to “oneness” with her again. Not willing to compromise her principles where sex was concerned, she planned to wait until she fell hopelessly in love with the right man—if that ever happened again.

Just the same, she hated what she had become prior to the divorce when she had allowed negative emotions to rule her, decree her words and command her actions. Thank God all that was behind her now. And, as she thought about her marriage and divorce for the first time in weeks, she felt certain she had been relieved of the nagging burden of them, except for a fresh recognition of her own culpability. Which was now suddenly evident to her, visible through the cold gray light of this winter morning, illuminated in a way which forces one to see things introspectively, convincingly, and with the bite of steel.

Then another sad reality lit up before her mind's eye. Over the years, the love she had once had for Danny had slowly faded and fallen away, like the leaves of a tree in autumn, until she

had become barren and wan. And in that wizened unattractive state she'd been incapable of anything more than the tragic behavior she had displayed in the end.

So she vowed to herself never to become cantankerous again, no matter what kind of stress was applied to her life. She would find a way to bear everything cheerfully. She liked herself much better that way.

The lead article on page one of the Sunday *Detroit News and Free Press* described the deadly severe weather which had a stranglehold on New England and Quebec. Sweeping suddenly down from the Canadian plains, a frigid air mass met with a classic Nor'easter along the Atlantic coast and the resulting storm had coated forest and city alike with ice as thick as bank window Lexan. Blame for all this was being attributed to none other than El Niño, the misbehaving cyclical weather-maker out in the Pacific. This, the latest of El Niño's incarnations, had claimed eight lives in the past three days. Livestock were dying on the hoof in frozen fields; hundreds of miles of roads had been rendered impassable and millions of citizens were shivering in their homes without power, heat or fresh water.

And now, another blast of winter was headed east. With the jet stream continuing to whip up moisture from the Gulf, and more arctic air blowing in from Canada, a major winter storm was bearing down on Michigan with a full head of steam. Forecasters were promising six to twelve inches of snow for Detroit with wind chills below zero. It was little consolation to Danny that others had it much worse—central Maine for example, where the mercury had dropped to minus eleven Fahrenheit with wind chills of thirty to forty below, and where nearly half of the trees were snapping under the burden of more than an inch of ice.

Yesterday he believed he needed a vacation; today he was considering a move to a warmer climate. Naturally, he'd had similar thoughts before but had never actually come close to moving, always managing to stick it out till spring arrived. He would, of course, welcome the prospect of milder winters, but not as a tradeoff for the delightful summers that Michigan consistently delivered year after year. Except for that one year when the volcano in the Philippines screwed up everything and the entire summer was like one extra-long and damp April. And last year too, when winter ran clear through to the end of May. But then September and October turned out *near perfect*, providing Michigan with the finest autumn weather in decades. By then, everyone had forgotten about how cold it had been in May.

He reviewed his options: sultry Florida was out, along with most of the sweltering Sunbelt.

Virginia and North Carolina have occasionally appealed to him but Danny believed that northern transplants don't ever feel completely at ease in the South—and his nasal twang would certainly give him away.

Texas is another state of mind altogether and most of the habitable parts of the Lone Star State get their share of nasty weather as well; so forget Texas—and its crusty and dusty neighbors to the north for that matter.

The heartland has never appealed to him. And apart from the plentiful sunshine, since he's not a skier or a jetsetter, the Rockies don't buy him much of anything at all.

Ditto for the Northeast.

He briefly considered the Desert, (nah); the Pacific Northwest, (he's not *that* fond of rain); and California, (which sounds ideal until you examine the cost of living and the probability of being victimized by the elements or the underclass). Besides, in the past he always resisted Julie's promptings to consider moving to her home state on the grounds that it was too far from

everyone and everything he knew and loved, too expensive, and no place to raise a family—arguments that were partly specious but he stood by them anyway. Now of course, *she* was there. So unless they reconciled, he couldn't consider California as a viable destination for living out the rest of his life. Moving there would make him look both weak and hypocritical, and he was neither. Plus, there were all those predictions about this year's El Niño performing many of his nefarious tricks right there in the Golden State. Where else? The place was a veritable circus of devastating natural phenomena, a showcase for human tragedy.

Then again, who was he to divine the future, especially where his own fate was concerned? It did occur to him however that, having sent her that letter, perhaps Julie might consider taking him back. If she did so, it might tend to mollify the harsh reality of moving someplace where the earth moved regularly under your feet and you wouldn't consider leaving the house without a trunk full of survival gear and emergency foodstuffs. He could probably find a job there in recruiting, and the kids were no longer a controlling factor holding him in the Wolverine State.

Still, it was better not to pin any hopes on a favorable reaction from his ex-wife. When he last saw her, she had cut him a departing look with her stone cold eyes, a look that could have started the next ice age. And then there were her words: "Good-bye Danny, have a nice life. It's too bad, just too bad..."

Realizing suddenly how unproductive these thoughts were, he tried drawing a curtain on them in his mind, hoping to get his day to play out more positively.

At least he had slept off his melancholia and come to his senses somewhat. That was positive. But then he remembered what he wrote to Julie in last night's letter and a feeling of embarrassment washed over him like a wave of tropical water. It was so unlike him to express himself emotionally, yet, oddly enough, he did not regret doing it. And now, in trying to sort out

his feelings on the matter, he hoped that he had not actually gone *soft* as it were. Because, of all the adjectives he might use to describe himself, *soft* was not among them.

Where the letter was concerned however, he wanted to believe he was honestly communicating his true feelings. And that was a positive thing. It was indicative of progress being made, at least where relationships were concerned. Besides, he would not necessarily change a single word if he had to write it over again. Those words needed to be said and it was long past time for him to say them. Therefore, he concluded that it was very much “in character” for him to do what he did. He could only hope that Julie would find his words believable and that she might respond in kind.

But he wasn't really expecting to get his wish. On the contrary, he was prepared for the worst. After all, he probably still had at least one more insult coming before time ran out in the game of life, and he was certain that Julie was capable of hurling a big, nasty one his way, despite the two thousand miles between them and the eighteen months since they last spoke. Good thing that, as a recruiter, he had learned long ago how to deal with rejection.

Besides, there were plenty other fish in the sea. He wasn't going to lose sleep over one that might have gotten away.

Julie quickly discovered that she was living in a *gesellschaft* type of society as defined over a century ago by the sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies. In fact, the entire modern western world is characteristic of the *gesellschaft* model, one of complex social constructs and primarily economic interdependencies.

By contrast, the *gemeinschaft* model suggests a much more simple and homogeneous society where people are apt to be closely related in values, activities and customs. The predominant

structure in these, mostly agrarian societies is the family unit, and *gemeinschaft* families tend to be self-sufficient. They tend to provide for their own basic necessities, with members often functioning as “teacher” and “employer” to other members while fulfilling their unique role in the reproductive and emotional support of the species.

Engrossed in her study of this material, Julie discovered an unfortunate truth about modern western societies, America being the consummate example. In contradistinction to agrarian societies, here in America, the contribution of the family has steadily decreased to the point where it is today, a point far down on the scale of influence over the lives of individual family members themselves. In America at the close of the second millennium AD, large, impersonal, and disinterested entities such as the government, schools, companies, and religious organizations eclipse the role of families and supplant them as the central focus of our lives, dominating us individually and collectively more than ever before. In our highly complex contemporary world there is not much of a role left for the family to fill beyond procreation and a modicum of personal relational interplay. Even child rearing is performed more and more by non-family specialists, either in child care centers outside the home or within the home by sitters, nannies and au pairs.

Having evolved over the last century to a position well beyond family-centric provincialism, modern America has become a nation of individuals, each consumed by the desire to get ahead financially and equipped to tap the resources of the modern technological world for best personal advantage. And for the secondary purpose of pushing everyone else aside and every other priority down the list. Like automatons, Americans function according to the *gesellschaft*'s mass-prescription for personal and financial success, living increasingly empty, depersonalized and meaningless lives, piling up more and more personal wealth but having fewer and fewer people

to love and share their possessions with. All the while, Americans internally resent the way society has poured them into its mold. Then they react by striking out in support of one cause or another, searching diligently for the meaning in life everywhere but in perhaps the only place it can be found—the home.

As Julie wrote the first draft of her paper on the quality of life she found herself fighting back tears. She understood the truth of Tönnies' observations and theories first hand. She had already been victimized by the inhumanity of modern society and by a husband who had become caught up in it. Try as she did to hold the family unit together, to make it a fountainhead of love and understanding and the cornerstone of all their lives, the outside pressures eventually won out, shattering the world she had built. And what did she have left to show for her life today? She possessed neither financial wealth nor a family life. She had failed to gain any prize whatsoever for her efforts; she had struck out within society and family alike. Regretfully, she could only think of two things that distinguished her life today: her independence and her job. The appraisal of her near-bankrupt state saddened her. But being an optimist at heart, she managed to encourage herself in spite of how things looked. She could and *would* start over today; it was not too late to make something significant and valuable out of her life. And fortunately for her, a brand new job awaited her, a fresh new vantage point carved out of the mountain of life from which she could view the world and society. And this time she knew what she was looking for.

Upon finishing the draft, Julie got up to pour herself some hot coffee and make a tuna sandwich for lunch, setting her laptop computer down temporarily on the snack bar. She refilled her coffee mug and sat down again to enjoy her lunch, thinking she should log on to the Internet to check her mail—she hadn't done so since mid-week. Hoping to find a letter from her daughter, she clicked on the mail box icon. There was e-mail awaiting her, but not from Clarrie.

The sender's address read: *dpredmore@mercurynet.com*. Clarrie must have finally convinced her brother to write—what a pleasant surprise! She highlighted the address and pressed *Enter*.

And there it was:

*Dear Julie,*

*I suppose the last thing you expected today was a letter from me. Remember me, Danny, your husband of almost twenty years. I wouldn't blame you for trying to forget. I have tried to get beyond those years myself, but what we had together is still so much a part of me, I just can't forget. I suppose the reason is that I left out one important thing from our last meeting and that's why I'm finally writing to you—to apologize. Seems I never actually said I was sorry for spoiling things between us, and I know it was primarily my fault. You didn't deserve what you got in return for pouring your whole life into our marriage and family. I guess I was just screwed up in the head and couldn't see anything but my own problems at the time. So, before I go on, let me say for the record, "I'm sorry and I hope you will be able to find it in your heart to forgive me."*

*So, how are you doing? I think about you quite a lot, wondering how you're making out, how your job is going and all. Clarrie says they're not paying you enough. She also said your rent is high, but that you live real close to the beach. I sometimes wish that was my situation as well; it's been pretty cold around here. We've got about six inches of snow on the ground and we're supposed to get another major storm by tomorrow night. Remember those bad winters when the kids were little? We had so much snow piled up along the driveway that I could barely lift the shovel high enough to empty it. Dan and Clarrie loved it though. They built forts and igloos and made at least a dozen snowmen. Those were good years, don't you think?*



*Earlier today I found the picture we had taken at Disney World. Remember that trip we took? The kids looked so young in the photo. It's hard to believe it was just a decade ago; they're so grown up now. They don't seem to need us much anymore, or at least they don't need me. But I miss having them around. It's sometimes lonely here without them, and without you too. I'd be lying if I tried to pretend otherwise. Right now, I wish I could see you, talk with you, help you understand how I really feel, see some forgiveness in your eyes, hear you say it's okay, that you don't hate me. But then I think that perhaps it is too late, that you may never be able to forgive me for being unfaithful to you, that you don't desire to ever see me again.*

*I'm not asking you for more than what your heart will let you do but I would love to hear from you, Jul. Everybody likes to get mail, so I hope you're not sorry you got this letter from me. I'm sorry it took me so long to write it, but I won't bother you again if you prefer not to hear from me.*

*Love,*

*Danny*

Tears ran off her face and fell onto the snack bar. She had only eaten a couple of bites out of her sandwich but she didn't have the stomach to go back to it. Danny's letter was a surprise, and no, she was not upset that he wrote to her. But neither was she ready to pick up the phone and call him. Still, something about the letter had stirred her to tears, releasing a flood of emotion that has been bottled up in her for two years. It was not as though she hadn't cried about the loss of her marriage until today. More than one box of Kleenex had been necessary to soak up her feelings on the matter. But she'd never had Danny's apology before; that was one thing. And she'd never seen this softer side of Danny; that was something else.

She remembered how, just this morning, she had finally acknowledged her own culpability in the matter of their break-up. And here was Danny taking all the blame. So, maybe healing was right around the corner and they could get on with their lives after all. She decided to write him back and grant the absolution that he seemed to need so desperately. Then, if he truly had begun to mature and change, they could at least be friends, confidants across the miles, perhaps. Knowing his personality, his strengths and weaknesses, she was at least reasonably comfortable with him in that role.

She dried her eyes with her napkin and felt the edges of her mouth suddenly turn up into a smile. It seemed as though the stars in her universe were finally beginning to align in some kind of long-awaited harmonic convergence.

## Chapter Seven

Another six inches of snow fell overnight—a fine powdery snow, the kind that blows about easily and piles rapidly into drifts. But it was not enough to stop the city. In fact, there were very few school closings despite the severity and timing of the storm and the extremely cold temperatures. Unfortunately for Danny though, traffic was going to be snarled miserably for the second time in five days. He thought about skipping work altogether but couldn't come up with a suitable excuse, especially since the storm had already passed over Michigan and pushed off to the east, setting its sights on Cleveland and Buffalo. So instead of sleeping in, Danny showered, dressed and prepared for another long drive to the office.

After giving his car a moment to warm up, he drove out of the garage onto the thick blanket of white, packing it down under his tires. He couldn't afford the time to shovel; that job would have to keep until evening. Another mandatory inconvenience, he thought.

He imagined that somewhere it wasn't snowing. Somewhere there was a warm beach with a gentle breeze and a blazing sun. He thought again of California and of Julie.

On the freeway, the heavy overnight accumulation had been scraped, salted and compacted down to an icy glaze. Overall, it took Danny an hour-and-a-half to get to work—a seventeen mile drive from his home, thirty-five minutes on a normal day. Luckily though, he arrived at Base

Line on time, having only considered the use of a hand gesture twice in response to moronic driving by other storm-frantic commuters.

Monday was the day for his weekly staff meeting. A year ago, immediately upon notifying him of his promotion, Vic DeSalvo suggested that Danny develop the habit of meeting with his people first thing on Monday mornings. People needed to get their marching orders for the week, he said. Owing to three years in the U.S.M.C., Vic could find a military analogy to fit every circumstance and situation. “How goes the war?” was one of his favorites. Danny would usually respond with something like, “I think we’re winning, just don’t look at the carnage.” Like any other Marine, Vic would not be upset by the use of the word *carnage*. Carnage is a necessary by-product of any military campaign, and a clear indication that progress is being made. Anyway, it did not take Danny long to realize that Vic’s suggestions were not really suggestions at all; they were more like orders. If they were left unheeded, Vic would turn sullen and hypercritical. But once Danny carried out the “suggestion,” Vic would revert to his old back slapping self.

So, for a year now, every Monday morning at eight-thirty the Base Line Technologies recruiting team would gather in the sixth floor conference room with a pot of fresh coffee and a box of doughnuts, ostensibly to put together a battle plan for the week. And, in spite of the snow, they were all present this morning: Randy Stone, Gillian Newell, Steve Pettis, Carly Franklin and of course, Danny Predmore, the manager—though none of them looked very happy about it.

The conversation propelled itself immediately toward the exchange of horror stories about the morning drive. Danny listened tacitly for a few minutes before interjecting his own remarks. His primary aim was to shift the focus toward *his* small talk topic of the day—the outcome of yesterday’s NFL Conference Championship games. Randy and Steve were quick to offer commentary but Gillian and Carly remained mute on the subject, seemingly annoyed with sports

gibberish, with football specifically and especially with all the end-of-the-season hype. The upcoming Super Bowl served as the perfect case in point—a huge, overblown contest involving steroid-pumped titans that never seemed to live up to expectations or predictions.

“Sure, I watch the Super Bowl,” Carly said finally, in response to a loaded question from Steve, “but just for the commercials.”

“Yeah,” Gillian agreed, laughing, “and the half time show.”

“See, there’s something for everyone,” Steve commented. “It’s a real family affair.”

While munching a honey stick, Danny switched over to the meeting agenda, beginning with a run down of the *Open Orders Report* he had generated on Friday.

“These orders are really beginning to pile up,” he said ascetically. “And with the current demand for resources, we had better come up with some creative new ways to find candidates or we’re going to miss our plan by a mile. It’s obvious what we’ve been doing isn’t enough.”

There was a momentary pause as each of the recruiters mulled over Danny’s admonition and wondered whether the lecture would continue.

Randy spoke first. “What about that national recruiting seminar I told you about a few weeks ago? Maybe a couple of us should go.”

“I guess I’m willing to consider it. But Vic will never spring for sending two of us out of town with so many openings to fill, though he might possibly agree to airfare and accommodations for one. Where did you say the seminar was being held, Randy?”

“Let’s see, I have the flyer here someplace...” He rifled through a small stack of papers. “Here it is. It’s in Anaheim. It begins two weeks from today.”

“Let me have a look at that,” Danny said.

“Just for the record, I volunteer,” Steve said.

“Me too,” Randy added.

“I’ll check with Vic first,” Danny said, still perusing the brochure. “But I think I might want to do this one myself.”

The meeting proceeded along the usual format. The team discussed the job orders one at a time, reviewing them for merit and viability and then comparing them to the candidates in the recruiters’ hiring queue. As it stood, there were twenty-seven open orders, at least fifteen of which Danny judged as legitimate. Correspondingly, they had about twenty candidates in their queue, but only about a dozen of them looked like they could be Base Line material.

One of the new candidates had been screened and interviewed by Steve Pettis. Her skills were light and she had only a little more than a year’s experience. Steve put her on his hire list anyway. When challenged by Danny as to why Base Line should hire another “lightweight,” Steve said, “trust me, she’ll be able to get through any interview.”

“Meaning what?” Gillian quipped.

“Meaning she has *heavy* sex appeal, I’m sure,” Carly said with pointed disgust, then adding, “we all know what sells in this business.”

“Look,” Steve replied, “I’m not trying to start a war between the sexes. But we’d be foolish to pass this one up.”

“Okay,” Danny said. “Bring her on board. That will be six for the month so far.”

“So then, if I want my career to take off, I guess I should go out and buy some sweaters and tight skirts,” Gillian remarked ruefully.

“I’m for *that* idea,” Randy said.

“Me too,” Steve added.

“All right, that’s enough of that,” Danny said. “We all know what this business is about. There’s no point in denying the obvious or trying to convince our customers to hire bridge trolls and the like. We’re going to keep hiring candidates that sell technically *and* otherwise.”

“Even if it sets back the cause of women thirty years,” Carly said.

Danny shot her a look.

“Just kidding,” she said.

They continued grinding through their weekly tasks. As for matching candidates’ skills against the open orders, well, if the team managed to get a 100% offer-to-hire ratio this week (which never happened, of course; 60% was a more realistic number), they would still only be able to fill five of their current orders. Vic would not be happy. In fact, if this were the Marine Corps, Danny might be facing a court martial for dereliction of duty.

After they disbanded, Danny immediately called the company’s outside travel agency to inquire about flights and accommodations for the Anaheim seminar. He had more than one reason for wanting to attend.

Judy Brown at the agency asked Danny to hang on while she checked her system. Danny pressed the *speaker* button on his phone and began reading the lead article in the morning paper headlined: *Winter Woes Continue*. Judy clicked away audibly, punching up flight information on her computer terminal.

“If I send you out on Sunday night with a return on Thursday morning the fare will be \$745 with a connection in Chicago, but if you go out a day earlier, on Saturday, I can put you on a non-stop for \$438, but that’s the best I’ve got with the Super Bowl in San Diego and all.”

The article on the weather got Danny to thinking. “What if I decided to stay a few extra days and return on the following Saturday or Sunday?”

“Let’s look at that...(clickety click, click)...well, the fare won’t change but...yup, there are seats available on both days.”

“Tell you what,” Danny said. “Put me on the Saturday flight, returning on Sunday the following weekend. If you can hold that until this afternoon, I’ll call you back with a confirmation.”

“Sure thing. I can hold the seats for twenty- four hours.”

“That’ll be perfect. Thanks Judy. I’ll call you later.”

Danny put together a profile of costs and wrote up a couple of paragraphs to justify his attendance at the seminar. Actually the title of the conference said it all: *Creative Recruiting in Today’s Tough Skills Market*—Annual Conference of the National Association of Professional Recruiters (NAPR). Vic would probably not even give this request a second thought before signing it, especially since Danny was saving the company almost \$350 on the airfare. He would put in for a couple days vacation for the Thursday and Friday following the seminar and see about enjoying himself in Southern California. The weather was bound to be better there than here. Not Aruba exactly, but several degrees warmer than the Motor City.

He wondered whether he should let Julie know he was coming or surprise her by just showing up. But then he realized he was getting a little ahead of himself.

He picked up the phone and called downstairs to Peninsula Title.

“Hello, is Valerie in?”

“A storm system churning over the Great Basin will continue to draw Pacific moisture inland for the next couple of days, pulling one cold front through the Southland today and another on Tuesday. Mostly cloudy, cool and breezy conditions will prevail today with a good possibility of



rain, especially along the coast. Highs will be in the fifties, the low around forty. Currently, it is forty-eight and cloudy in Los Angeles, forty-six and raining in Long Beach..”

Julie snapped off the radio and climbed out of bed. She put on the coffee and then started into her stretching routine. Today she would dress in her weatherproof jogging outfit and brave the elements. Running in the rain was not something she relished. But she had come to realize that very little about adult life was fun and games. To get what she wanted out of life she would have to continue working hard and sacrificing, pushing her pleasure-seeking impulse down every time she felt it bubbling up and attempting to control her.

The week ahead would be tough; she would be learning her new job in marketing. No doubt there would be some resentment from the other two girls who were passed over for Allison’s position. Jenna and Christy had seniority over her but they were both young and somewhat immature, and in Julie’s opinion, not as dedicated as she. She also had to finish her “quality of life” paper for Thursday’s sociology class and had about a hundred pages to read in her business ethics textbook before tomorrow night.

As she bounced out the back door and began her run, her thoughts turned immediately toward Danny. The reflection was bittersweet. In spite of the fact that her own pride prevented her from accepting alimony from him, he was still to blame for her having to struggle financially at a time in life when money woes should be far behind her. But rather ironically, he was also the reason why she was doing well on several other fronts. Were it not for the divorce, she may never have been inspired to enroll in school or get herself back into top physical condition. And, if she were still in Michigan, still married to Danny, she would probably not have a similar career opportunity blossoming before her like the one at SunBurst. And certainly, she would not be back here in her beloved California homeland. Rain or no rain, this was still heaven to her, and

she was finally free from the oppressive winters of the Mid-West. Twenty-five years there taught her how to appreciate a January day with the temperature in the forties. Consequently, winter in the Southland did not faze her one little bit.

Julie ran onto the beach and directly into an east wind. The cold, steady drizzle stung her face and she squinted to protect her eyes. Droplets cascaded down into her mouth as she breathed in and out with the rhythm of her pace. Exhaling, she sprayed the water out in front of her again. There wasn't another soul on the beach as far down the coast as she could see. Not the kind of morning which drew the natives out of their warm beds to comb the sand for shells or to cast a fishing line into the on-coming tide. Even the ubiquitous beach boys slept-in on days like this. But Julie was enjoying herself. She had command of her habits; she'd become the master of the routine.

Gulls stood motionless in the surf as she ran by. Lights from the fishing wharf twinkled in her rain-dampened vision. Julie etched it all into her memory.

Before retiring last night she sent Danny a return e-mail. Having read his letter earlier, she wondered whether to respond immediately or to sleep on the idea and better formulate her thoughts before writing him back. But, after spending the remainder of the afternoon unable to get both him and his words off her mind, the decision came easily.

Now, she wondered if Danny would be surprised to hear back from her so soon, and whether he had already opened his mail and read her note. It was nine o'clock back east; his workday would have begun by now.

Then she thought about Mike Tattersall. He said he would not be in the office until Friday. By then she hoped to be able to impress him with how quickly she was adapting to her new job. Being honest with herself, she realized how desperately she wanted to impress Mike. He was,

after all, her boss. But she also feared that the more she succeeded in impressing him, the more he might want from her, especially in areas where she felt at once vulnerable and reticent. This paradox put her into a state of internal conflict, the product of which she envisioned as an emotional tug-of-war with her boss. He should not find it necessary to draw upon her emotions at all, she realized, pitying herself for the entanglements she could see one week into the future. Things between them should be kept strictly on a professional level; anything else could be construed as manipulation or harassment. She believed that being the business guru he was, Mike must know as much. So, why was she worrying? Why did she keep thinking that he had already crept over the line with that kiss on the cheek in the Bistro 201 parking lot?

It was her nature; that's why. She was a worrier—always had been. But the solution to these worries was simple, or so she theorized. No matter what Mike said or did, she would simply remind him of his promise to keep things on a business level. *She'd control him* if she had to—something she was quite capable of. And this morning, dripping from the liquid California winter, she strengthened her resolve to do just that.

Valerie had promised to meet Danny at the main building entrance at noon. She had said on the phone that it was *nice to hear from him* and, *no, she didn't have lunch plans*. It was two minutes past twelve when she walked off the elevator, none too soon either because Danny was beginning to feel a little anxious standing around, waiting for a girl half his age to join him for lunch, his stomach churning at least as much over seeing her again as from a case of noontime hunger.

“Hi Danny.” She greeted him with a handshake, then continued bundling herself to keep out the cold. Visible below the hem of her coat were charcoal-colored slacks and ankle-length boots.

Her hair was exquisite, just as Danny had remembered. He wished he could touch it without upsetting her or putting her off their budding friendship.

“Good to see you again,” he said, smiling at her.

“Thanks. You too.”

They walked to his car, making small talk across the frozen parking lot. Danny opened the passenger door for her, waited while she adjusted herself on the seat and then closed the door gently. As he rounded the vehicle he was thinking about how he had already elevated Valerie onto some sort of “goddess” pedestal, a place he normally reserved for women he felt obliged to impress. After firing up the engine, he drove off in the direction of the nearby Chinese restaurant where he was certain Valerie could get a good vegetarian lunch.

They ordered their meals and Danny admitted to taking Valerie’s advice from last week.

“You’ll be glad to hear that I sent an e-mail to Julie over the weekend.”

“Really? That’s great. What’d you say to her, or is that too nosy of me to ask?”

“No, I don’t mind. For some reason I feel like I can trust you.”

“Well...?”

“I don’t know...I guess the main thing was that I told her I was sorry for the way things turned out and that maybe we could be friends again.” He hoped he hadn’t tipped his hand too much.

“Good for you, Danny. I believe confession and forgiveness are two of the keys to success in life. You’ll be glad you did what you did; just wait and see.”

Fortunately for him, she left it there.

Danny changed the subject. “So what did *you* do for the weekend?”

“Nothing much, really. I started a new book called: *Marriage—the Ultimate Sacrifice*. It’s all about losing one’s unique, personal identity through the marriage union in return for becoming a

part of a whole new being. The implication is that men and women aren't complete until they're joined together as couples."

"Well, that sounds pretty deep to me—and strictly theoretical. I'm here to tell you from experience that it's not as simple as all that." Danny didn't mean to challenge her beliefs but he felt inspired to express his own opinion on the topic of marriage. After all, he was the one with the painful experience of having made the "ultimate sacrifice."

Unmoved by his remark, she displayed a comforting smile and replied, "Well, you would know better, I'm sure. But one thing I am beginning to understand is that, as a woman, I am not the complete expression of the species. I think God meant for man and woman to be married so that we humans could be a more complete representation of Him. See, I believe He is both male and female, the best of both genders."

Danny pursed his lips and wrinkled up his brow as he considered Valerie's theory. After a moment's thought he responded. "Well, I've never looked at it that way before, but I suppose it makes sense. Still, how do you explain all the bad marriages and the rising divorce rate? I mean, if you judge by the current state of affairs, God's nature, as you describe it, is not being represented very well."

"No it's not, and that's a real shame. But you can't blame God for *our* failures. It's really our fault, see, the fault of our evil natures. We are all so self-centered and that's why there are so many bad marriages and divorces—so this book says anyway."

Their lunches arrived and Danny secretly welcomed the interruption. Valerie's remarks, however theoretical or academically derived, had begun hitting him a little too close to home. He sliced into his egg roll and left it to cool. Valerie began sampling veggies from her plate, one at a

time. Danny poured two little cups of tea from a stainless steel pot the waitress left for them and then started in on his lunch.

Valerie broke the silence. "So, what did *you* do all weekend, besides writing e-mail, that is?"

"Well, Saturday was my birthday."

"Really? Happy birthday, then. Which one was it, or shouldn't I ask that?"

"No, it's okay," Danny replied, realizing that he'd have to tell her his age sometime, and this seemed as good a time as any. "It was my forty-second."

"What did you do to celebrate?"

"Nothing really. I'm getting too old to celebrate birthdays. You'll know what I mean in a few year's time."

"Come on; you're not so old. What is age anyway? To me it's not a very good measure of a person."

"I'm glad you feel that way," Danny said, once again amazed at the maturity displayed by his young friend. This was an opportune moment, he realized. "So you're not embarrassed to be seen with me then?"

"No. Why should I be?"

"You shouldn't, of course. But our age difference...you know..."

"Well, it's not like we're dating or anything, so I don't see the big deal. It doesn't bother you; does it?"

"No," he replied, smiling. "I'm definitely not bothered. You can be seen with me anytime."

But deep down inside, Danny's heart sank. Valerie obviously lacked the desire to move their relationship beyond the realm of friendship. This realization, painful as it was, startled him back to reality. However difficult, considering the female-shaped void in his present thought life,

Danny now knew he had to stop fantasizing about Valerie Robinson and what role she could potentially play in his life. He also sensed something that should have been self-evident when they first met last week—desiring Valerie could only serve to frustrate him beyond his current state of exasperation where relationships, love and sex were concerned.

He drank some tea before continuing with the conversation. Having settled in his mind that Valerie would not be a future conquest, Danny suddenly felt at ease with her. For the remainder of the lunch he spoke openly, revealing much more about himself than he had with anyone else in recent memory. Then, as they headed back to their separate jobs, he felt like a load had been lifted from his shoulders. Valerie had become his confidant and he liked her especially well in that role.





## Chapter Eight

With the drop in barometric pressure, moods all across the Southland turned sullen. There was none of the usual morning gaiety on display as the recently emboldened Julie Baker Predmore, Marketing Communications Specialist, walked into the office, dressed in her pin-striped charcoal suit and white blouse.

“Good morning, Jenna,” Julie said with a lilt in her voice.

“What’s good about it?”

Julie refused to be put off. “Well, we’re living, for one thing. And it’s a good day to be alive.”

“Maybe for you, but my sinuses are acting up and the heater in my house is broken so I’ve been freezing my ass off since yesterday.”

Jenna had always held Julie at arm’s length, regarding her as a rival in the manner all-too-common among female co-workers. But Julie, upon hearing of Jenna’s plight, immediately felt a sense of compassion for her. “I’m sorry about that, Jenna. When will you be able to get it fixed?”

“The repair guy said he’d come out this afternoon so I’m going to have to take the afternoon off to go home and wait for him.”

Looking at her more directly, Julie noticed that Jenna’s face wore a mask of distress. She was only twenty-nine. But, beneath her makeup and monthly peroxide application, the visible effects

of age and a careless diet lurked. Today, the telltale signs of neglect were making a public statement. Julie decided then and there not to say anything about her impending move into Allison Kraft's position.

"Well I hope you get it fixed and get your heat going before tonight. If there's anything I can do to help, give me a call. Okay?"

"Thanks, Julie. That's nice of you."

"No problem. Take care Jenna."

"I'll try."

Julie walked to her workstation and dropped her purse on the desk. She stretched her neck and peeked into Spence's office to see if he looked interruptible. He was sitting at his desk reading the Wall Street Journal, one of his regular morning activities.

She stepped closer, framed herself in the doorway and knocked to get his attention.

"Yes?... Oh, hello, Julie."

"Hi, Spence. Do you have a minute?"

"Sure, come in; sit down. I was just reading the latest installment in the continuing saga over the year 2000 time bomb. Can you believe this? Here it is January 1998, and one-third of all U.S. companies haven't done one single thing to head-off the potential problems that could very well put them out of business two years from now. It's unconscionable."

"Do you think that means more business for us?"

"I don't know about *more* business. It definitely increases the challenge to succeed with the business we have. There just isn't enough time left to fix up all the systems out there that will eventually break when they begin to process dates beyond 1999. For some companies at this late date we have no answers, no way to keep them afloat. It's a damn shame."

As has happened so many times before, Julie, hoping to discuss a particular topic with her boss, suddenly found herself unavoidably derailed and switched onto Spence's intellectual track *du jour*. She wondered whether to continue to engage in a conversation that was passing over her head with a full head of steam, or to change the subject. She decided on the latter.

"I wanted to stop by and thank you for putting in a good word on my behalf with Mike. As I'm sure you know, he offered me Allison's position in marketing."

"Right. No problem; glad to do it, although I'll miss having you around to keep me on the ball."

"I'll just be down the corridor, Spence. And I'll be happy to help you out from time to time. Mike won't mind, I'm sure." This seemed right even though she had no idea how much freedom she'd have to tailor her work load with the new position.

"Good. For starters maybe you could suggest a replacement for yourself. You know what the job demands more than anyone." Spence threw this suggestion out casually but Julie could tell that he felt pangs of desperation over having to find another administrator who would both cater to his needs and put up with his aloof cerebral style. She thought a moment.

"How about Christy? She could do a good job for you."

"Do you think so? I don't know her very well. She seems nice enough, though."

"Oh, yeah. She's a good one."

Julie didn't know Christy Blankenship all that well either, but Christy stood out in her mind as the best choice from the current SunBurst employee roster. Still, she felt a reservation over this recommendation that could not be comfortably expressed. Spence was late-forties, conservative, with a Ph.D., while Christy was a "gen-X" blond with a high school diploma and abdominal definition. There was a slight possibility of disconnect. But she imagined Christy

would want to please Spence for the sake of her own career. So, oddly enough, it might work. Anyway, it was Spence's decision, not hers. Her work here was done.

"Hope you don't mind if I start spending time learning the ropes in marketing before Allison leaves."

"No, go ahead. Learn all you can. If I know you, you'll be running this company one day."

That was a gratuitous exaggeration, but Julie liked having her ego stroked as much as the next person. "I suspect it will be a while before that happens," she acknowledged.

"Well, good luck anyway. And get that marketing department organized while you're at it."

"I'll do my best."

"I'm sure you will."

At one-fifteen Danny decided to check his e-mail. He punched up the program with a double-click of his mouse. *Ding.*

*YOU HAVE 2 NEW MESSAGES.*

Danny pressed ENTER and the screen changed. On top of the list of messages in his mailbox he saw Julie's Internet address. It made him momentarily weak. The message bore the title, "Notes from the Coast." *With a title like that it must be a friendly letter,* he reasoned, and after clicking it open, he anxiously began to read:

*Dear Danny,*

*It was nice of you to write. And no, I haven't forgotten either. I guess you could say that I've been busy—getting on with my life. For a while I was mad at you, really mad. But I'm over that now. The divorce turned out for the best, I suppose. Neither of us had been happy for years and*

*there's nothing worse than a marriage that has lost all its meaning. So, your apology is accepted and I thank you for giving me back the freedom I lost when we were still so young, too young really for marriage and family. Oh, well...*

*As for how things are going out here—I'm back in school and currently I have two night classes for my BA program: Sociology and Business Ethics. I'm reading and writing my tail off. Also, I've been employed for over a year at a company called SunBurst. It's a small but successful management consulting firm. I've been an executive administrative assistant but I just got a promotion and a raise to join the marketing department. The extra money will help. Everything is so much more expensive out here. But it's worth it—for me anyway. I love being back here on the coast. Orange County has the most perfect climate on earth and here at the beach it's like heaven!*

*I started running again. I'm down to 120 lbs. I feel great about that. My social life is somewhat limited because of school and work—and taking care of my little house. (More about that later.) I have a friend named Tracy whom I met at school. She works for a coffee products wholesaler and keeps me supplied with good coffee and good times. I try to keep her from getting into too much trouble. She has a bit of a wild streak, I'm afraid. Just this past Friday evening we were out at a local place called the South Coast Club (something I never do), and Tracy (she's also divorced) put the moves on a guy who turned out to be an undercover cop. He was alone in a booth, watching and waiting for an opportunity to make a bust on a couple of druggies. Naturally, she didn't know about his "mission" until later. Anyway, it all happened real fast. He called in a S.W.A.T. team to arrest the dealers and Tracy ended up getting mixed up in the whole affair. Glad to say that her cousin Remy was there and he got everything straightened out. Remy is retired from the Navy and he has a lot of friends around here: firemen, policemen, et al.*

*Actually Remy is starting his own business on disaster readiness to help people get prepared for the BIG ONE. But I ramble...*

*I just wanted to let you know that I'm okay. I've bounced back, and for the first time in my life, I feel good about myself. Up till now, there's always been something pulling at me, making me uneasy. I'm not blaming you, Danny. It's just the way life goes, I guess. We spend most of our years doing what other people want and need us to do and we get very little time to make ourselves happy. We did okay, you and I. Our kids turned out great. You were a big part of their growing up; thanks for all you did for them. But, I'm getting too nostalgic...*

*My house is cute—tiny, but cute. It's a duplex villa, 1½ blocks from the beach. I got a good deal on the lease because summer was over and the landlord was happy to get a year-round tenant. I can walk to work if I want to. It's amazing though, hardly anyone walks out here. They drive everywhere—unless they're out for recreation, that is. Lots of people rollerblade for exercise, not just the kids, and there's a lot of bikers too.*

*Sorry the weather's so bad back in Detroit. I thought El Niño was supposed to mean warmer weather for the Great Lakes. Oh, well—so much for the science of meteorology.*

*I do remember some of those awful winters we had though, and you're right—the kids didn't mind; they loved the snow. Sometimes I miss not having little ones around. Then I wise up and realize that I'm much better off now that they're grown up. But I digress...*

*With the winter weather here most of the natives will be hiding out for a couple of months—except for a few of us. I for one am going to keep up my morning runs—rain or shine! By spring I'll be ready for a marathon. (just kidding!)*

*Well, this is a rather long letter, but it's been a long time since we shared anything at all about ourselves. I'm happy that both of us have been able to come back from that ugly state we were in at the divorce. I do forgive you, Danny and I truly hope we can be friends.*

*I love e-mail, so please write me back. I'll see you in cyberspace (I always wanted to say that—I hope you don't think I'm silly). Kiss the kids for me when you see them.*

*Best of luck always,*

*Julie*

After reading her salutation, Danny continued staring at the screen, transfixed, the focus rapidly draining from his eyes. He didn't know quite what to make of her letter. She seemed to be at once completely over him and a totally different Julie. It occurred to him that, if this was the *real* Julie, her whole life with him had been a sham, a lie of grand proportion. Perhaps her move to California caused her to recall her past life as different than it actually was. Or maybe the salt air out there has warped her mind and turned her into some sort of late-blooming teenager. His head shook involuntarily; he simply couldn't fathom the change in her.

He felt a sadness too, and a sense of jealous anger. Sadness because there was no indication of love for him in her words. Anger because she seemed to be having more success than he in the dating scene. *And what about her new friends?* Danny could only imagine that a retired Navy guy with time on his hands was doing everything he could to get Julie into the sack, if he hadn't actually done so already. Suddenly he felt even more passion and angst about flying out there and witnessing first-hand the goings on which, presently, he could only imagine to be the worst sort of unhealthy promiscuous debauchery. He nevertheless hoped that his own mind was racing

ahead of reality, that Julie was still the pure, innocent, under-sexed girl he had married those decades ago. But who knew? She might have fallen into the wrong crowd. And if these two characters were any indication, that is precisely what has happened. What kind of a name is Remy anyway? It sounded French to Danny and this realization did nothing to allay his fears.

There was a knock on the door.

“Come in,” Danny said while simultaneously pointing and clicking the cursor on his *in box* icon to hide Julie’s letter from whomever might be entering his office. It was Vic DeSalvo.

“Danny, have you got a minute?” Vic entered the office trailing a cloud of stale cigar odor. He must have indulged himself at lunch.

“Sure, Vic. Make yourself comfortable.”

Danny’s guest chair let out a creaking sigh as Vic lowered his large frame onto the seat. “How’s the hiring scene looking, Dan?” Vic asked this as though he was about to offer some help or, at the least, express some empathy for the difficulties Danny and his staff were encountering of late.

“We’re making some progress. Three offers going out this week so far and it’s only Monday.”

“Don’t BS me Danny. I read your reports.” Vic turned suddenly antagonistic, which, Danny realized, was his real reason for dropping by. “Sales has more open job orders going wanting than ever before. The only conclusion I can draw is that your department is not pulling its weight. Take that opening of Cook’s over at Chrysler we discussed last week for example. All they’re asking for is some basic skills and a couple, three years experience. I expected you’d have one or two prospects on the hook for that one by now, especially since there’s a ton of business hinging on these first placements. Plus, you’ve known about this for almost a month but Bill tells me that, when he met with you on the subject last week, you blew him off. You made it



seem like he didn't know what he was talking about. He's our top salesman, Danny. If anybody knows his customers' needs, Cook does."

Winded and visibly agitated, Vic paused his delivery so he could take a few audible breaths. Danny seized the opportunity to launch an impromptu defense. "We'll have Cook's people hired before the end of next week. And, I'm sorry Bill got the impression that he did, but I was just trying to clear up the ambiguity in his orders when we met last week. He shouldn't take things so personally."

Taking stock of what had just come out of his mouth, Danny realized he had committed his team to something they had only the slightest chance of pulling off. But it couldn't have been helped. He knew Vic; nothing less would have been satisfactory. As for Cook, the *slimeball* must have left here and gone immediately whining to Vic so as to enlist the overfed VP in his personal crusade to blame recruiting for everything—including his own incompetence. Such behavior had no doubt helped him earn his number one salesman distinction.

"Talk is still the cheapest commodity in town, Dan-boy. I want to see results. So, I'm going to hold you to your word. By the end of next week I expect to see two engineers slated for the Chrysler project."

"No problem, you'll have them."

"If I don't, I'm going to write up a formal evaluation on this whole affair. You understand that?"

"Got it," Danny said, though he felt like he'd just been railroaded. Plus, he didn't have a clue where the two engineers would actually come from, or how he'd get them hired by next week. Then, strangely, he sensed that, since he was already in trouble, why not bring up the seminar as well?

“By the way Vic, did you see the travel request I dropped off earlier?”

“I saw it.”

Danny had hoped for more from his probe. “Well, shall I go ahead and firm up reservations?”

“These seminars are a waste of time if you ask me,” Vic said, without hesitation.

“Well, the employment market has changed considerably over the past eighteen months Vic, as I’m sure you know. We could really benefit from this nationwide get-together. If I only pick up one or two tips, it could make a difference in getting more good people on board every month.” Listening to himself rationalize, Danny realized that he too could sell.

“Okay, here’s the deal then: You get the Chrysler hires and you can go.”

“The tickets are non-refundable, Vic. And I have to commit now to get the good fares.”

Danny appealed to Vic’s sense of fiscal conservancy.

“All right, all right. Go to the damn seminar. But it better be worth it.”

“I’m sure it will.” If not, Danny felt he could always consider moving over to sales. *Nah*, he thought. *That would be beneath me.*

A moment after Vic left, Danny’s phone rang. It was Michele Sullivan. She sounded as sweet as ever over the line.

“How’d your birthday go, Danny. I still owe you a present.”

“It was just another day, really. And how was To-lee-do?” Danny asked, making his disdain for the Ohio port city on the muddy Maumee a little too obvious.

“Great. Marylou and I caught up on old times. We saw a movie and went out to her favorite club by the marina. But I was thinking of you the whole time, Danny. I’m sorry I couldn’t be here to make your birthday special. I’ll make it up to you this weekend—promise!”

Danny should have been pleased to hear all this, but he had quite the opposite reaction. In view of Michele's enthusiastic pledge, he immediately foresaw great difficulty for himself. He wondered how he might break the news to her that he didn't share her feelings.

"It's okay, I don't celebrate birthdays anymore, anyway. I'm getting too old for that."

"Nonsense," she said, girlishly. "After dinner this Friday we'll come back to my place. I'll bake you a cake and we'll...celebrate."

"All right," Danny replied, trying to mask his reluctance. "I'll look forward to it." But he didn't. He was imagining Michele going over-the-top on his behalf, showing off her homemaking skills—and more. The way she made it sound he might find candlelight and scented sheets awaiting him at her apartment on Friday evening, and her son Jason pawned off on his grandparents. And it could turn out to be an even greater challenge than he initially feared.

"Uh-oh, here comes my boss. Gotta go," she said. "Call me."

"Okay. Bye." Danny hung up, simultaneously attempting to erase from his mind's eye an image of Michele beckoning him from her bed while reclining in a state of pent-up desire and advanced undress.

Partly to help him put such thoughts behind him and partly for another reason, he clicked the spacebar on his keyboard and the star field vanished revealing the e-mail from his ex-wife. He reread it.

Now the trip was definite. In two weeks he'd be there. He'd see his Julie again. But how might she react to him? Would she be glad to see him, maybe give him a second chance? He couldn't understand exactly why he had these feelings for her again, but he realized that, after putting her on the shelf in order to pursue his own selfish ambitions, he now deeply regretted his past behavior and wished she were still there for him to dust off and take back down again. But

he did not want her simply as a friend. That would never do. He wanted all of her. And his combined sense of loss and desire made him ache deeply, as if he were a teenager once more, hormones raging, starry-eyed and frustrated in love. But time was short. He had less than two weeks to begin turning everything around. He'd have to come up with a plan—and fast. And it would have to work. His whole life depended on it. He had to have her back.

## **PART II**

### **DELUSIONS**



## Chapter Nine

After work, Danny drove home and changed his clothes. His first order of business was to shovel last night's snow off his driveway and walk. A faint sliver of light remained in the southwestern sky. The wind had calmed and the temperature had settled back down to zero from the day's high of nine, registered several hours ago. It was particularly quiet, a phenomenon that tends to accompany the aftermath of a snowfall.

Snow crunched under Danny's feet as he stepped out of the garage. He began shoveling in front of the overhead door where the powder had drifted into a foot-thick knoll. *Shhook, shhook.*

In a matter of moments the moisture in his nostrils froze and the air tickled him as he breathed in. He was laboring hard, having to throw the snow a distance of about seven or eight feet in order to get it completely off the drive. Then the work got easier as he cleared his way across the asphalt toward the yard. There were small piles from the earlier snowfall, now freshly whitened, outlining his work area.

Thus far, winter has been fickle—freezing and thawing with uncharacteristically frequent changes in wind direction and the flow of arctic air. In normal years the deep freeze would have settled in around the first of December and by now it would be time to expect the annual rise in temperature Michiganders refer to as the “January thaw.”

When he was a kid, Danny and his buddies anticipated the thaw because it would allow the ice on the local pond to partially melt. By this time in January they would have shoveled snow off their hockey rink several times and still there would not be any smooth ice, just ruts and bumps and powdery areas where the puck would hang up; you couldn't make a good pass or take a decent shot on goal. But after the thaw, when the ice re-froze, it would be smooth again, almost as if it had been resurfaced with a Zamboni.

They were quite a team back then, Danny and his school chums—good skaters and puck handlers. These qualities made them almost unbeatable. Although there was no organized league, they arranged to play against kids from rival schools, weather and ice conditions permitting. Usually the games were wild and unruly with lots of stick usage, generally played on Danny's home pond because he and his friends had built regulation-size goals, nets and all. To contain the puck they set up some 2x4's along both ends of the rink. This, they discovered, was both a blessing and a curse. A blessing to them because they were accustomed to the boards being there, but to visiting teams, well, aside from stopping an errant puck, if the kids were not paying attention, the boards could trip them up and drive them face-first into the snow-covered ice just outside the makeshift rink. But everywhere else Danny and his friends played, conditions were worse: shovels and snow boots marking the goals; nothing to stop the puck once you shot it by the goalie; even worse ice conditions; and lots of kids out just skating around, getting in your way. Danny's rink was strictly for hockey; they did not put up with kids who wanted to learn to skate but who invariably only succeeded in hacking up the ice.

Danny was piling snow thigh-high now in some areas. It reminded him of when his son Daniel was about six years old and he wanted to help shovel. He tried lifting the snow up high enough to dump onto one of the piles, but it all just fell back onto the driveway before he could



properly empty his shovel. He was not to be deterred however, laboring in similar fashion for almost half an hour before he lost interest. Then he went inside to tell Julie how he had helped his daddy get the work done. “I shoveled too, mama. Just like daddy.”

Clarrie never took an interest in shoveling snow. Perhaps she saw such labor as “men’s work.” Just as likely, her mind was on other things in winter, like sledding and, eventually, skiing. They were different as night and day, Danny’s two children. But both have seemingly turned out just fine. Julie was right. As parents, they must have done something right to produce such splendid offspring.

He could at least be proud of how *they* turned out, *and* that his marriage stayed together long enough to get them through the child-rearing years—through all those phases that kids experience: the tiffs and scrapes and disappointments, through pimples and proms and driver-training, through summer camp and piano lessons and all those winters—and to deliver them safely and securely onto the threshold of their adult lives. Danny considered patting himself on the back but he was bundled too heavily, and besides, he wasn’t as flexible as he used to be. But he relished the sense of being pleased with himself, nonetheless. At least where his kids were concerned, he had managed to do one or two things right over the past twenty-two years. Not every man could boast of that.

His work was nearly done. As he stopped to admire it, the wind suddenly sprung up, whipping some fine snowflakes around in eddy-like choreography. Seeing this, Danny wondered why things seemed to be working out so well for his kids and now apparently for Julie too, while his life seemed muddled, like a journey without a destination. He was going round and round in circles, in the same meaningless fashion, getting nowhere. Lately he had to derive satisfaction

out of menial accomplishments like cleaning his driveway and walk, but in the overall scheme of life, how much did those things actually matter?

What he really needed to do was get those engineers hired for the opportunity at Chrysler. Then, maybe Vic would ease up a little. Earlier, he spoke with Randy Stone, trying to communicate the gravity of the situation without confessing that Vic had blown up this one job order larger than life into some kind of monumental career milestone that could ultimately mean either the furtherance or the end of Danny's job as manager of recruiting. Fortunately, Randy got the message, saying he'd *bust his butt and come up with something*.

Wanting to further mitigate risk, Danny also sent an urgent voice mail to his other recruiters asking them to make this order for Chrysler their first priority as well. "We absolutely must get two prospects lined up and hired by the end of next week. I want everybody working on this..."

Inside the house finally, Danny hung up his coat and removed his boots. He thought about preparing something special to eat but, as usual, he decided instead to microwave a frozen dinner. If it were not just him, he might find cooking worthwhile and rewarding, but it hardly ever seemed worth the effort to fix something for himself, alone. Besides, there was always the cleanup afterward—too much of a hassle.

He wondered if Julie still cooked now that she was living by herself. Surely, she didn't prepare a meal every night like she used to when they were a family. Or did she? Admittedly, he missed her dinners.

She was not always a great cook. In fact, the first time she made a meal for Danny, everything went wrong. They'd been dating for about a month or so when she invited him to her parents' house for dinner. She had promised him some Mexican food like she remembered from back in California. Unfortunately, the avocados were out-of-season so the guacamole tasted like soap,

and she had the stove too hot for the *frijoles refritos* so they burned. The taco shells were stale and rubbery and, by the time she got everything to the table, the meat was cold. Danny was gracious however. He really didn't care about the food; his mind was on her. He could have sat there just staring into her eyes the whole evening and skipped the meal altogether, but, with her parents hanging around, he had to act like a proper well-mannered young man, one who didn't ogle too much when the girl of the house bounced by in her apron carrying a tray of tacos looking like she belonged on the cover of *Better Homes and Gardens* or featured in a teenage cooking article in *Seventeen*.

Those were the days, he realized—no worries. She was finishing up her last year of high school in Rochester; Danny was a freshman at Oakland U., commuting to school from his parents' home in Warren. They met one day at the local District Court. Danny was in attendance to settle a traffic violation; Julie, to observe the proceedings as a requirement for her government class. When his case was called, Danny got lucky. The arresting officer failed to make an appearance so the judge dismissed the ticket. Immediately afterward, His Honor called a recess for lunch. As Danny was leaving he worked up the nerve to ask this young beauty if she knew a good place downtown where one could grab a sandwich. Seizing her fate out of the spring air, Julie suggested they walk together to the local diner.

Danny smiled to himself as he remembered those early days of their relationship. She had been giddy with love for him, the older and wiser college frosh. He had worshipped the ground she walked on, though all-the-time struggling to keep his composure, not wanting her to know the true depth of his feelings for her. All she had to do was smile at him and the sparkle in her eyes tore him apart from the inside out. He knew he could not live his life without her. It seemed so ironic at the time because marriage had been the furthest thing from his mind before they met.

And then suddenly, as if a spell had been cast over him, he began to think about how he might ask her “the question.” Would he do it in the car, over dinner one night, with or without a ring, down on one knee, in the heat of a passionate moment? They had many such moments, lots of kissing and touching with one another whenever and wherever possible. There had been more than enough passion then, he realized. Where did it all go? Had it all drained out on the road of life? Or perhaps, after they poured all their love into their offspring, their own feelings just shriveled up like blossoms left too long on the vine.

Then it dawned on him that Julie must still have some spark of excitement left within her. Her letter said as much.

And though at present he could only imagine how she might look (the Julie of today had undoubtedly lost some of her youthful beauty) he nonetheless longed for her. With merely twelve days until his departure for the coast, he felt as though he would not last the week. And now, again at his weakest, he decided to write her back, determined this time to choose his words more carefully.

By the end of the workday Julie was feeling her age. Not so long ago, learning new skills would have been no big deal for her. And so it had seemed earlier today. Working with Allison Kraft, getting oriented to the job in marketing, drawing from that inner strength which has always been there for her, she felt no lack; she had seemingly lost nothing over the years. Until five o’clock came anyway, when suddenly she was near the point of collapse.

By the time she got home her energy was completely spent. It was as though she had been out all day on her dad’s boat on rough seas under a blazing sun, fighting the wind and waves.

She needed a nap. But instead, she made a pot of coffee.

There was her paper to finish for sociology, a thirty-page chapter to read for business ethics, and she was hungry. She decided to take a cool shower, straightaway. That would revive her.

A second after shutting off the shower water, she heard the phone. Dripping wet, she hurtled the tub wall, grabbed her towel and hurried to her bedroom hoping she wasn't too late.

"Hello?"

"Julie, it's Trace. How ya doin?"

"Okay. Just a little wet and cold. You caught me getting out of the shower."

"Whoops, sorry. I'll make it short then. How about meeting me at Denny's tomorrow before class? We can have salads together."

Julie thought for a moment. "Sure, I can do that. Maybe around quarter to six?"

"Perfect. I'll look forward to it. Better let you go and get dried off. We can talk tomorrow. See you then."

"Bye, Trace. Thanks for the invitation."

"No problem. What are friends for?"

That was good of her, Julie thought. And she immediately wished she had more friends like Tracy.

Trace had her shortcomings of course, but keeping in touch was not one of them. She worked hard at their friendship, and Julie felt a little bit guilty for not always reciprocating. *It drives home the point*, Julie thought, *that in order to have and keep friends, you really have to be one yourself!* And at that instant she resolved to do more in this area of her life, to stop being so self-centered, to cultivate more friendships like the one she had with Tracy, and to hold up her part of the deal as never before. After all, there were only a few people she could really call her friends, most of whom were back in Michigan and no longer a part of her life.

Then there was Danny. She had only yesterday committed to herself that she would be *his* friend, suggesting as much in her e-mail to him. And he, with his letter, seemed to indicate that he was also ready for such a relationship. It occurred to her that the best way to get started on her new resolution might be with someone she already knew, though it remained to be seen if an ex-husband living over two thousand miles away could be classified as a friend. *Well, time will tell*, she thought.

After dinner and two cups of coffee, she spent about an hour putting the finishing touches on her paper for sociology class. She was pleased with the way it turned out but depressed for the second time over her realization that *quality of life* in modern societies gets measured primarily in material terms. It further disturbed her that, in the rush toward technological utopia, we have managed to loosen the bonds between parents, partners and siblings to the degree that families have been practically rendered useless, their value diffused almost to the vanishing point. She, herself, was a perfect example of this grim reality.

Yet, upon further deliberation, she remained resolutely content with the person she had become, and especially with her present life. Things could be worse, she reasoned.

In fact, they have been worse. And in spite of her twinge of concern for all other Americans, no one individual could begin to reverse the headlong charge of modern society, the steady march toward dehumanization that has been occurring for over a hundred years. Loving and caring parents have barely managed to slow this inevitable deterioration of relationships and values, in spite of their earnest efforts and the good examples they set. Truth is, most people seem to choose success and money over happy family units regardless of what they say they want out of life. Such choices are plainly evident all across this vast nation, as is the conspicuous absence of family cohesion. Where in America, for example, can a person go today to find even

one archetypal pre-modern family? Maybe within the Amish communities or those of other similar religious sects. But then, who wants that kind of confining ascetic life? It comes with too much baggage. We have enough weighing us down already, namely the good and bad remnants of history along with everything the former generations have stood for and fought to either preserve or change. We have beliefs, principles and patterns of living, passed on to us by our forebears—though they were mostly unaware of what was being wrought by their lives as they crept along in the manner of all humankind, not really seeing the big picture. And so it is today as we cross the threshold of the twenty-first century AD. We have little more than a single indeterminate clue as to how or why, with each tick of the clock, society is slowly crumbling in our wake.

But, then again, Julie wondered how any one person could actually be blamed for the sad state Americans presently occupy? Is there anyone actually at fault or are we all victims?—suspended at the mercy of some grander scheme, for a measure of time far greater than anyone can fathom, the purpose of which is to teach us all that none of us is as wise or powerful as we think ourselves to be. And, if that is the case, it becomes obvious why everyone is living for today, getting all they can for themselves and trying to find the meaning of life by searching introspectively, guided predominantly by their own selfish desires.

It was there that she left her existential musings however, turning her attention to the assigned reading for Business Ethics, only to meet up with another perplexing topic: *Sexual harassment in the workplace*.

She read the entire chapter then closed the book and thought a moment, staring blindly out her picture window into the cloud-ridden night sky. It bothered her that, as she read the assignment, she couldn't stop thinking in reference to her own workplace, and specifically to Mike Tattersall.

She tried rationalizing these troubling thoughts away by imagining that she was simply attempting to relate to the topic by using familiar signposts, overlaying the new material onto the map of her experience. But she feared that there was another, more accurate reason. Her intuition was telling her something she had already sensed several times before—that Mike was a potential harasser, and she, his likely victim.

She remembered her conversation with Allison Kraft from earlier. Allison related how Mike flirted with her frequently though he had never really stepped over the line, at least in Allison's opinion. She claimed he was harmless—just a guy who believes he is God's gift to women—and perhaps he was. It had never really crossed Julie's mind to be concerned until recently. Sure, Mike has always been generous with his comments about how she and the other women at SunBurst look, how they dress and the like. And occasionally, there would be some innuendo in his remarks, although he always used it tastefully—and humorously. But Julie had never felt threatened by him—until last week, that is. She told Allison as much too, naturally leaving off the details about her "date" with Mike and how he kissed her on the cheek in the restaurant parking lot. Then Allison offered her own commentary, basically suggesting that Julie was paranoid, that she was just being overly sensitive because Mike gave her the new job and all, and that such feelings were most likely a result of Julie's own paranoia.

"He never laid a hand on me," she stated flatly.

"But you're married," Julie protested.

"Guys who harass women don't care if you're married or not," Allison said. "Besides, Mike has worked with me nearly every day for over three years. If he were the kind of person you're describing, he would have tried something by now, don't you think?"



*She may be right*, Julie thought. Allison, after all, was both younger and prettier, and she possessed a more alluring and provocative wardrobe.

But, Allison's opinions aside, what really bothered Julie was that she could not read Mike's thoughts. And she was torn. One part of her actually desired to be pursued by Mike Tattersall, especially if she didn't work for him—which of course was not the case. But, hypothetically speaking, she might not mind being his mistress. He could lavish things on her. She would be a "kept" woman, something she had always aspired to, where a man would put her on a pedestal and take care of her completely, especially a man as attractive as Mike, and with a similar net worth. If she could only see the future and know that he would not be merely using her—treating her like a princess only until his conquest was finally made, then dumping her out of the window of his BMW like fifty kilos of forty-year-old garbage onto the diamond lane of the *freeway to hell*, and leaving her to crawl the rest of the way to woe-begotten damnation in the hot California sun.

Then again, maybe he was her long-awaited reward for giving up her youth so early and becoming the best wife and mother she could be. She had, after all, raised two kids almost single-handedly while at the beck and call of a rather insensitive self-absorbed husband for twenty long years. If that didn't qualify her for some kind of reward, what did? So, perhaps Mike had been reserved just for her and, now that she was finally ready, their lives could be knit together as one—happy and sweet!

Better judgment suggested however that, with such smarmy meditation, she was confusing infatuation with love and fantasy with good sense, but it couldn't be helped. With each day that passed she was getting older, and besides, keeping herself up was so damn much hard work. Plus, she couldn't bear the thought that she was doing it all in vain, that it was all for herself

alone and nobody else cared. She might never in this lifetime realize her dream of achieving true happiness and satisfaction in love, not to mention in sexual ways. Nonetheless, she was certain that, eventually, she would discover Mike's true motives and thereby determine whether she should risk her heart even in the smallest sort of way. For if he turned out to be *the one*, she hoped she would not be too dense to recognize him as such. And though she wouldn't exactly throw herself at him, she did not want to play games like *hard-to-get* either. At some point, when conditions were ripe, she might even be prepared to jettison her "rule." But she was jumping way ahead of herself and she knew it.

It was getting late, nine-thirty on her VCR clock. But with coffee still coursing through her system, she couldn't imagine going to bed anytime soon. She decided to check her e-mail on the off chance that there might be a letter there from Clarrie, or perhaps Danny, though the latter struck her as unlikely. She had only written him last evening.

She propped the notebook on her lap and went through the log-on procedure. To her amazement, there in her in-box was an entry followed by Danny's now familiar Internet address. It was captioned: *Notes from Siberia*. She opened it and read:

*Dear Julie,*

*I was very happy to get your letter and pleased to know that you are willing to put the past behind us. You always were quick to forgive and forget, never stubborn like me. So, thanks for being you; I know this time it must have been especially difficult.*

*Sounds like things are going great for you out there. I only wonder how you find time for everything. But I'm sure the climate helps—there's energy in the sunshine. I, on the other hand, am stuck here in Siberia and in need of a vacation. There's precious little sunshine here this time*

*of year, as I'm sure you remember. In fact, I just finished shoveling last night's snow off the drive. We got another half a foot of powder, good for skiing. Clarrie will be happy at least.*

*Speaking of Clarrie, when I last talked to her she said I should invite you to go with me to the Caribbean for a holiday of sun and fun. She said your boss is working you too hard and not paying you enough so you just might consider the offer. Maybe she thinks there's a future for the two of us, one that begins on an island paradise. Imagine that, just you and me, alone. Sort of like old times, huh?—before the kids, when we were nuts about each other. Remember that? I guess Clarrie's always been a romantic. I wonder which of us she got that from. Anyway, I told her that there was probably no way you'd go anywhere with me, let alone to a remote island for a week. I, on the other hand, have given some thought to the possibility. Who knows? If this friendship thing works out between us, the sky's the limit, I suppose.*

*Speaking of friendship, I don't have a problem with that sort of relationship except that I don't know how we can truly be friends if we don't see each other from time to time. Perhaps if you lived close by I could just drop in on you like friends sometimes do. Then, we could have a drink together, just the two of us. Or go for a walk. We could get a conversation going, get caught up on everything, laugh a little and then promise to do it again someday. I know this sounds kind of ridiculous, especially coming from me, but I do miss you Julie. All those years when I was taking you for granted, I didn't realize that you had become my best friend. You were the one person I could rely on and be myself with. Now it seems like I have to pretend to be something different with every person I'm around—something I'm not and really don't wish to be, like a kid who's main interest is playing hockey, or a business manager climbing the corporate ladder, or a guy who wants to start all over again and make a relationship work with*

*someone who maybe wants another child, or wants one for the first time, or who already has one and that kid likes things just the way they are—yeeow!*

*With you I could just be myself. And you might be surprised to see what that is these days—at least I hope you would. Well, that's what I'd do if you lived a little closer. And that's how I'd like to see our friendship go. Oh, one other thing: I'd probably be able to warn you about all those other guys out there, what they might be up to and all. Not that I'd want to run your life or anything, but I wouldn't want to see you taken advantage of either. You had enough of that with me, or the me I used to be for twenty years, that is.*

*Well, it's getting late so I'm going to close and say good-bye for now. Best wishes to my old and new best friend. Sweet dreams...*

*Love,*

*Danny*

## Chapter Ten

*Just what I need*, Julie thought, *another best friend—and a presumptuous one at that!*

Still, this letter made her wonder all the more about her ex-husband. Had he really changed or was he *up to something*? Possibly, she was seeing the results of some heavy psychotherapy. Some shrink could have easily put him up to this. Or maybe he went in to see old Dr. Griswald with a headache and was told he only had six months to live. Dreadful news such as that could have shaken him up, split his hard head open and snapped him into a brand new frame of reference where suddenly everything appeared different, as though seen for the first time, like a brand new reality.

She knew one thing for certain though. However pleasant it was to imagine, Danny could not have arrived at this point on his own, especially considering where he was when she left him eighteen months ago. Or, could it be that, at long last, he finally jumped the last hurdle into adulthood, like the slowest man on the team, the one everybody waits for so the next race can start, and the coach only keeps on the roster because this guy's parents are prominent in the community. Otherwise, he'd have been cut long before the season got underway.

It would be nice to think that he *has* changed though, however illogical and remote that possibility might seem. But, unfortunately, people just don't change that easily, or that fast. She

could, however, easily imagine him caught up in a whirlwind of nostalgia, pining for his youth again, trying to recreate the past even though it was nothing at all like he presently recollects, his mind and the years having overlaid it with a whitewash of pleasant fantasies, obscuring the truth of how things actually were. All the more likely, she realized, that he hasn't changed. He probably just thinks he has.

Stirred now by a combination of curiosity and caffeine, she decided to respond immediately. As she clicked on the *reply* button, she thought about how the men in her life had suddenly become so complicated. It never used to be this difficult, especially with Danny.

But she had figured him out once before and would again. Of that she was certain. And since she wanted to see where all this was leading, she wrote:

*Dear Danny,*

*So you want to take me with you to the Caribbean. What on earth would we do there, just the two of us? Do you really think you could be alone with me for a week and not get bored or distracted or upset over one thing or another?*

*I'm not saying it couldn't work, but, unfortunately, I still remember how you felt for so many years. It was as though you'd put me on a shelf. I was just the old homemaker, mom to your kids, getting thick around the middle. You hardly ever made love to me. Now, you say you've changed. So what I'm wondering is: what will be different? After all, a week on a small island is a long time. I wouldn't want you to discover that after a day or two you didn't care to look at me anymore.*

She stopped for a moment and read what she had written. The words had poured out like rain from a storm cloud. Now, in an attempt to be objective, she sensed the hostility there, the taunting. Maybe she wasn't completely over the hurt; maybe she still desired some retribution for all the years he took from her. What was she subconsciously trying to do: whip him with e-mail, challenge him to step up to a mature relationship, end their new found friendship before it got started?

It was the truth though, every word of it. And if they were to have a friendship she wanted it to be based on truth—and honesty! That's what friends were for, at least according to her way of thinking. So she decided to keep what she had and continued:

*Don't get me wrong, Danny. I'm not trying to make you mad. I just want us to be honest with one another. That's what friends are for. As far as whether I'd actually go with you on a week's vacation, that would depend on you (and my work schedule, of course). But, if you believed that you could treat me like an equal, and that we could do things together which we both enjoyed, I wouldn't rule it out. And there's one more thing as well. We'd have to go as friends, nothing more. We tried love and marriage once and, unfortunately, it didn't work out too well over the long haul. I'm not interested in going through all that again. So our relationship will have to be purely platonic. Okay?*

Once again Julie appraised her writing. Now, it seemed she was adding injury to insult. But she wanted Danny to know unmistakably where she stood. She didn't want him getting the idea that he could seduce her again, especially since he seemed to be leading up to something distinctly sexual with his last letter.

Over their years of marriage she could always tell when he wanted to get her into the sack. He'd start by being uncharacteristically nice and considerate, all lovey-dovey, and then, wham! He'd be pulling her clothes off.

It wasn't that she didn't have feelings for him, or might still. After all, he'd been her only partner. All her carnal knowledge, all her experiences of intimacy, were connected to him. And tonight, sitting alone in her house two thousand miles away from him, just thinking about their times together, she felt aroused. The involuntary stimulation struck her as peculiar since the love she once had for him had gone stone cold when she learned of his philandering, and she was definitely not of a mood to forget that and allow herself to be snared again by her own desires.

But there were many times when they'd had a good roll in the hay. Danny eventually learned how to turn her on and occasionally he spent the effort to take her to some new sensual height. But mostly he was just a selfish, sexually-driven, unromantic man. And as such, he was exactly what she wasn't looking for in her next relationship. So he was going to have to come to grips with *her* feelings on the subject of sex. There wouldn't be any! Unlike on that moonless night in June of '75, just after she'd graduated from high school, the next time he confessed his undying love for her, her pants would stay on.

*Well, I hope I haven't scared you off, but I wanted to get that straight. And I do hope we can be friends. At least we know each other well enough to be honest, and we have the kids in common. Perhaps there are some other things we can share. I'd love to be able to talk to you about what I'm learning in Sociology class. It's fascinating. And in Business Ethics we're studying about work-related problems. You'd be a tremendous help to me on that subject, for sure.*



*By the way, I like my friends to be healthy and trim so I hope you're not just sitting around all winter drinking beer. You know what that does to your waistline. If you were out here I'd have you running on the beach at 5:45 with me. You'd be in shape before you knew what hit you.*

*Speaking of 5:45, it comes mighty early. So, I'll close for now. Hope you don't get too much snow, and as far as your dreams are concerned, may you only remember the good ones.*

*Your friend,*

*Julie*

She reread the letter, spell-checked it and sent it. She'd been somewhat hard on him, but it was necessary. Time would tell if Danny could be *man* enough to deal with it. She'd see what kind of a friend he could be. Then, if he could rise to her expectations, he'd be welcome to, as he suggested, "drop by" anytime. Just like Trace.

Tuesday began in darkness for Danny, like every other January morning. But he couldn't help noticing the immense ivory moon, hung like a Christmas ball in the misty indigo sky. With visible assurance that the clear skies predicted had truly arrived, Danny felt a burst of new energy.

Once at work, he got his day organized on paper while sipping his first cup of coffee. Mostly he was thinking about his impending trip to California and seeing Julie again. In forty-two years he'd never been further west than St. Louis so he really didn't know what to expect.

He consciously recognized that his image of California had been crafted artistically by Hollywood and the television studios. But at the same time it was like an unfinished painting. He

assumed that the *Southland*, as Julie liked to call it, was something like Florida, except that she claimed the climate out west to be even more pleasant and the palm trees taller. He could envision the ocean, of course. But he'd also heard about the crime in LA, the gangs, the overcrowding, the traffic and the smog. These factors taken together were somewhat unsettling. As was the very real possibility of a mudslide or an earthquake, although he might actually look forward to experiencing a little tremor, just to see what it might feel like to have the earth move and the buildings sway, but not too severely of course. What were the chances of the so-called "big one" happening while he was out there anyway? He wasn't really worried.

He was also trying to picture his ex-wife as she now must be—thinner and happier than he'd seen her in a good long time. Her letter seemed to indicate that she was adapting well to her new environment, maybe a little too well when it came to relationships, especially with the opposite sex. She had also become one part, career woman and another, college student. And now, being honest about his feelings, Danny recognized that he was slightly envious of her for her lifestyle and for the fact that she had goals which were being accomplished. He, on the other hand, had neither goals nor a sense of accomplishment, and this sad realization made him wonder if lack of ambition had been his problem all along. Still, he wasn't *totally* lacking in ambition, at least where his job was concerned. He always managed to remain focused on work, and on his responsibilities as an employee of Baseline Technologies. All in all, he'd accomplished quite a few things over the years, doing pretty well for himself career-wise. *What was more important than that?*

This flush of self-congratulation did nothing to allay his regret over the failure of his marriage, however. He wished he knew what made him so callous toward Julie when they were married. Somehow, he'd gotten so wrapped up in his own problems at work that nothing she did

seemed very important to him. If only he had those years to live over again. Knowing what he now knew about his tragic tendencies, he'd surely behave differently. He'd treat her in the way she needed and wanted him to. No doubt he was capable of pulling that off.

And now, oddly enough, considering all the bad karma of their last few years, he *wanted to* again with Julie. Also, he was convinced that this time he would go about things differently. He'd persuade her of his love. He'd prove his sincerity. After all, he *was* sincere, and he believed with all his heart that they could fall in love again. But there was still the dilemma of the two-thousand-mile distance between them. He had no answer for that. Fortunately, he believed love capable of solving a multitude of problems.

Danny left off daydreaming for a few moments and made the rounds of his staff. Minutes later, satisfied that all four of them were hard at work in the business of recruiting, he returned to his office and punched up his e-mail, half-hoping there might be a note from Julie though not setting his expectations so high as to believe she might have responded overnight.

But sure enough, there was a note in his in-box from her and it was entitled: *What are friends for...*

It looked promising; she started right off taking the bait. Danny read eagerly. But as he got further into the body of the letter, his countenance fell. Then his heart began to ache. *Wow*, he thought, *she must be after revenge. What she's suggesting would be a fate worse than death—being locked away in a beach hotel somewhere in the tropics for a whole week with no hope of having sex. I would never agree to something like that, and she knows it. Maybe she just wants to torture me. What kind of relationship is it if you can't get physical from time to time? This is nuts!*

He despaired. Then he wondered how he was going to respond to her letter without blowing off the whole friendship before it got beyond a couple of inconsequential e-mails.

After a moment's consideration he decided to call Valerie. He hated to think that she was his only hope, but it was only Valerie that came to his mind as someone he could trust, someone who wouldn't laugh it off and tell him to "get a life," someone who could actually give him concrete advice. His buddies on the other hand...well, they wouldn't even have a clue.

Another day was underway for Julie and, although she hadn't felt much like getting up when her clock radio switched on, she somehow found the inner strength to stick with her discipline. For the second day in a row she ran her morning circuit in a cold Pacific drizzle. But she still managed to break a sweat.

Later, once at work, she broke a different kind of sweat as she tried her hand at *PageMaker*. She wanted to get about a half-hour's worth of practice with the software prior to Allison's arrival. But it was over an hour before her blond mentor showed up wearing grunge clothing and her usual thick layer of eye makeup.

Clearly, Allison had already mentally checked out of her job responsibilities at SunBurst. When Julie asked her about the new look, she simply said she needed to pack her things and didn't want to ruin any of her good office clothes. "But then why should I care," she added. "I'll probably just let Jerry knock me up once we get to Colorado so I can turn into a mountain mama, barefoot and pregnant, just like all those Mormon women. It's probably time to get started on the baby thing anyway. Jerry's been bugging me for over a year now, and it's true; I'm not getting any younger."

Julie wondered what kind of mother Allison might make. But she realized that all mothers were something else first. She herself had been a teenager when she missed her first period. Expectant motherhood has a way of administering a suitable dose of reality.

Mike Tattersall called from Ventura County around nine-fifteen, anxious to learn how Julie was doing on her new job. He stated proudly that, with the way things were going on the road, it looked like they'd have at least two more proposals to write for opportunities in Fullerton and Garden Grove. There was also a presentation to prepare for a building contractor up in Thousand Oaks. Julie asked him if that wasn't a little bit far away for SunBurst to have a client, but Mike said the opportunity was so perfect he couldn't pass it up. He added that he hoped she was a quick study because he wanted to bring her along for the appointment next Thursday. He ended the conversation by promising to check with her later in the week and saying that she could get him caught-up with the office "goings on" when they met for dinner on Friday. Julie said she hoped to be fully trained by then but, with all she had to do, there wasn't time to keep tabs on everything and everybody else. Mike responded with surprise and a little disappointment. After what Spence had told him, he thought sure he'd hired "Wonderwoman." She elected not to challenge him further but did say that "those are some pretty big boots to fill." And she was thinking, privately of course, that she couldn't fill the "D" cups either. Not even close.

On her morning break she phoned her dad down in Laguna, figuring that with all the bad weather he'd be moping around the condo and getting on Lora's nerves. She was right. Lora answered the phone. She seemed glad to have someone to tell her troubles to. Jack Baker had been stricken with cabin fever Sunday evening, before the first cold and rainy day had ended. "You know your father," Lora said. "He goes out on that boat in just about any weather. But it's been so windy and cold. He's been on the couch channel surfing for three days now."

Lora invited Julie down for Sunday dinner and Julie accepted saying, “that sounds great. I’ll bring along a bottle of wine.”

When she went into the break room for some coffee, Julie glanced at the LA paper, spread haphazardly on the table there. There was a front-page story on the Northridge quake of ‘94, the first article in a series titled: “Remembering Northridge,” in advance of the disaster’s anniversary date later this month. With a magnitude of 6.8, the ’94 temblor had been the second major quake to damage the San Fernando Valley in recent memory. Twenty-three years previous, a 6.5 magnitude tremor jolted the sleepy communities northwest of LA on an otherwise quiet February morning, causing widespread destruction to roads, rails, hospitals and homes. And this historical fact may have given some residents of the Valley a false sense of security as they reasoned that, like lightening, disasters such as this don’t strike the same place twice. But that theory proved false when the Northridge hit, shattering the early morning peace in the Valley once again. It was four years ago this coming Saturday.

Julie marveled. *What were the chances of that happening?*

Back at her desk again, she buried herself in the proposal for Williams Industries. With Allison already a thousand miles off in the Colorado high country, musing over her fertility quotient and how she might look with forty extra pounds around the middle, the presentation for Williams, due Thursday, would be Julie’s problem alone.

Her thoughts drifted to Danny and she wondered whether he’d read her note. *I hope I wasn’t too hard on him, she thought. No doubt, that was the wrong approach. Now he probably thinks nothing’s changed— “She’s still the old ice queen she used to be. You need a blow torch just to get close to her.”* But she didn’t want to lead him on either. That would be an even worse

strategy for trying to cultivate friendship. *Oh well, what's done is done. We'll just have to see what happens. If he wants this relationship, it will have to be on my terms.*

“Julie, have you seen my nail file?” It was Allison, experiencing another personal crisis, at least her third one this morning.

*She's beginning to get on my nerves,* Julie thought before responding. “Sorry Allison, I haven't.”

Danny and Valerie sat facing each other at a coffee table inside the Barnes and Noble bookstore. He called her early in the day and, trying not to seem too desperate, told her he had heard from Julie but needed a woman's perspective to sort things out before responding.

He hadn't thought beforehand how to present his dilemma, and now that they were together, he felt a bit embarrassed and somewhat at a loss for words.

“So...what exactly *did* she say?” Valerie was grinning, egging him on.

“I'm getting to that. Hold your horses. You said you weren't in a hurry.”

“But a girl wants to know these things.” She sat up a little in her chair and sipped her cappuccino. As she removed the mug from her mouth, a thin arc of white foam remained on her upper lip. She gently blotted it away with her napkin. “Well, are you just going to sit there and watch me make a slob out of myself or are you going to clue me in? You know what the Chinese chef said, don't you?”

“What was that?”

“No talkee, no wokee.” She giggled. “I heard that on a Chinese cooking show once. It's funny; don't you think?”

“Hilarious,” he replied, sardonically. “It’s chopping me up on the inside.” Then he smiled at her and added, “just don’t let one of those Chinese chefs wok your dog. It could be the last time you see him in one piece.”

She laughed out loud at this, as did Danny, although he was laughing mainly at the kick she got from the double entendre. He realized how much he liked this girl. She was so guileless, so much fun to be around.

“Well,” she said, after calming down, “getting back to the subject of your wife...”

“That’s just it, she’s not my wife any more, and she seems to have gotten totally beyond our marriage.”

“And how do you feel about that?”

“I don’t know...I guess it’s a combination of jealousy and frustration.”

“Is there some other guy she likes?”

“It’s hard to say for sure. She mentioned another guy in her letter, but he may be just a friend. And that’s what she kept saying she wanted from me—just friendship.”

“Well, that’s a good thing,” Valerie proclaimed. “I wouldn’t be frustrated over that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, to me, any relationship that’s going to last has to start with friendship. So it sounds like you two are headed in the right direction.”

Danny remained quiet, thinking this over. Valerie slurped more of her drink. She reached over and took his hand. “You know, I think I understand how you feel.”

“You do?” He was motionless, though stimulated from her touch.



“Yeah. You’re feeling sorry for the way things didn’t work out, blaming yourself for the divorce and all. Now you wish you could wave a wand and make everything all right again, but it’s more complicated than that. Most of all, you’re afraid there’s no chance of getting her back.”

She took another sip. “How am I doing so far?”

“How’d you get all that from what I said?”

“It’s written all over your face.” She released his hand and gave it a couple of gentle pats.

“And I’m a woman, just like her. So I can imagine just where her head’s at.”

“Where’s that?”

“It’s really pretty simple. She’s still hurting from your breakup and she doesn’t know if she can trust you again. So she wants to take it slow, build a friendship, figure out what you’re up to.”

“You really think it’s that simple?”

“Yes and no. She’s probably going to say and do some unpredictable things as well, you know, to try and test you, to see if she can get you to slip up or if you’re just faking it.”

“Do you think I could be trapped that easily?”

“Look, Danny, you’re a man, aren’t you? What you have to realize is that all men can be trapped. But the real problem is that she will most likely be acting on impulse, out of her defense mechanisms. So, half the time she won’t even be conscious of what she’s doing to you, or how difficult she’s making things. The question is—how bad do you want her back? Because if you aren’t one hundred percent convinced, she’ll have your head on a plate.”

“Let’s say I *am* convinced, what do I do to avoid the traps?”

“I’m going to bill you for this you know.”

“Don’t worry, I’m good for the money.”

“Okay, let’s see... First, you have to respect her feelings—don’t make light of them. Then, remember that a woman needs constant reassurance of your love and dedication. You can’t tell her enough. Next, don’t rush things; take it slow; make the friendship work. Be a good listener. And remember that she’ll probably need some time before she lets you get close to her in certain ways, if you know what I mean.”

“You mean sexually.”

“Right. Boy, I can’t believe I’m telling you all this stuff. These are women’s secrets, you know.”

“I knew there was a reason I liked you so much.”

“One other thing. You’re going to have to be patient. If you don’t wait for her to be ready, she’ll convince herself that you’re only interested in one thing. And then you’ll be back to square one.”

Danny didn’t respond immediately. She had hit him dead center, as if she had been aiming. He was sure she didn’t mean to be offensive with her advice, but he still felt wounded somehow.

Finally, he spoke. “What kind of degree did you say you had?”

“It’s just an Associate’s. But I read a lot. And I’ve worked on the marriage counseling team at my church for the past year-and-a-half. You’d be surprised at how many people have the same problems in their relationships.”

“Well, you’ve certainly given me a few things to think about. And it’s not like I never heard any of this before. I guess I’ve never really looked at it from a woman’s perspective until now. Thanks.”

“Oh, you’re not getting off that easy, Danny. Now it’s my turn to ask you for something—a little quid pro quo.”

“Name it.”

“Well this is going to sound strange coming from me but...here goes. A week from this coming Friday is my twenty-first birthday.”

“Happy birthday. You want me to bake a cake?”

“No, don’t be silly. Maybe I should give you a little background first.”

“Go ahead. I’ll practice my listening skills.” Beginning to relax now, he raised his cup to his lips but the coffee was cold so he set it back down. Valerie simply waited, watching him until he stilled himself and caught her eyes. They were a mysterious, deep brown.

“I’ve been raised in a Christian family; you know that, right?”

“So you’ve said.”

“Church three times a week, twelve years of Christian school, no drinking, smoking, swearing, the whole schmeer. I’ve lived in the same house with my parents all my life. My friends and all I’ve ever known are connected to the church. But it’s like living in a fish bowl. Everybody in my world knows everything about me, or so they think anyway. They figure I’m just like them; we’ve all been programmed the same way.” She paused to drink the last of her cappuccino.

“Now, this may sound crazy, but you’re one of only a few people I’ve met who I feel wouldn’t judge me for expressing something that wasn’t exactly biblical, if you know what I mean. It’s almost as though I’m not allowed to think for myself, at least not out loud, anyway. You following all this?”

“Loud and clear.”

“Well, I have been feeling stifled for over a year now. I’d like to experience something else out of life but at the same time I don’t want to mess things up just to have a little fun. And

there's really nobody else I can trust not to betray me. Isn't that amazing? But the truth is that anything I do will be common knowledge in the church before next Sunday. So here's where you come in. To pay off your debt for this counseling session I want you to take me out for my twenty-first birthday and buy me a drink or two. I want to have some fun without worrying who might say what to whom and without being afraid that, with one night on the town, I might be digging myself halfway down to my own personal hell. What do you think?"

"I only have one condition."

"What's that?"

"If your conscience bothers you afterward, you won't blame me or tell me we can't be friends anymore."

"I promise."

"Then you have a deal. You said next Friday, right?"

"Right. Next Friday."

"I've got just the place. It's in my neck-of-the-woods so there's not much chance that anybody there will know you."

"What's the name of the place?"

"No, no. It's going to be a surprise. You don't have to dress up though. Office clothing will be just fine. In fact, we can leave right from the office if you want, and I'll throw in dinner. Deal?"

"Deal."

Danny knew the next ten days were going to sail by. He had some things to look forward to. He had goals. First, there was the night out with Valerie; he'd make that special for her. Then, the very next afternoon, he'd be leaving for the West Coast. In between, there were only two things

to worry about: meeting the hiring deadline for the Chrysler project, and surviving his date with Michelle, during which he hoped to put their ill-suited relationship behind him. He would spend the majority of his free time getting ready for the trip. There was still a lot of work to do.

With his confidence lifted higher than it had been in months, Danny marveled at the reason why. Sweet little Valerie, dime store Freud that she was, had told him what he needed to hear—all was not lost with Julie. If he simply continued to build his friendship with her again, he might be able to win her back. Okay, it wasn't exactly a *lock*, but with some effort it could happen. Unlike his state of mind prior to their meeting, he now understood both himself and his game plan. It was just like hockey. He was going up against a team he'd faced before—and defeated. His instincts told him that winning was within his grasp.

With regard to Valerie and her desire to have a little common ordinary fun, he was more than happy to oblige. But he swore to himself that he wouldn't take advantage of her; she meant too much to him. There'd be no indulging of his passions with her. He'd come a long way from when he first laid eyes on her last week. Oddly enough, he now saw her as he did his very own daughter; only with Valerie he felt free to talk about things he wouldn't dare share with Clarrie. He was equally protective of her though. *The gall of those so-called Christian people, painting her into a tiny little corner of life*, he thought. *She is not just some kind of robot that can be programmed and controlled according to someone else's rules!* To him, Valerie was like a cool breeze in August, a diamond in a rock pile. One day, some young man would find her and see himself as the luckiest man on earth. And he'd probably be right.



## Chapter Eleven

The traffic heading up to Fullerton was horrendous. It took Julie nearly an hour to get to Denny's from her house on the peninsula. Once inside though, she immediately found Tracy, already seated in a corner booth and obviously anticipating their planned rendezvous.

They greeted, ordered coffee, and made small talk for a few minutes. Trace told her everything had been put to rest with the police. The whole incident was now ancient history. And she hadn't touched a drop of alcohol since. "Nothing permanent," she added, "just a little breather until I'm sure I've got my head on straight about it. I'm going for moderation from here on out, though. That's for sure."

Julie encouraged her, adding that perhaps her episode at the South Coast Club might turn out for good.

"Wouldn't that be a hoot," Trace proclaimed.

When the waitress returned with their coffee, they each ordered a grilled chicken salad. Tracy took a sip of her brew and sighed. "This is revolting. It tastes like sewage."

"You're surprised?" Julie asked. "Denny's is not exactly known for gourmet coffee."

"I should try to get them for an account, help them move their image up a few notches on the scale."

“You should. One account like Denny’s and you’d be set for life.”

“No kidding. I’d sit home and watch the commission checks roll in.”

“No you wouldn’t either,” Julie protested. “I can’t see you taking it easy; it’s not your style.”

“The hell it isn’t. I’d like nothing more than to have everything handled, financially at least. I’d even consider marriage if the guy was rich enough. Then, I could spend my time decorating some mansion down in Laguna Hills or someplace like that. Or I’d go shopping, or maybe just lounge around my own private beach, reading trashy romance novels—when I wasn’t practicing some of my moves on hubby, that is.”

“And what about kids?” Julie asked. “What if hubby wanted a couple of perfect little heirs, you know, some fruit from the womb, so to speak?”

“I wouldn’t rule that out...with the right guy of course. But he better hurry up, because the old womb ain’t getting any younger.” She laughed. “Come to think of it, maybe I should be freezing some eggs.”

Julie saw Tracy’s eyes flash like quicksilver and remembered how Remy had described her in her youth, “...all blond hair and silvery eyes and smiles.”

“You had some. How’d you like the experience?”

“What’s that?” Julie asked, having been distracted by her thoughts.

“Having kids. What are we talking about here?”

“Oh yeah. Sorry. I was just remembering something Remy said about when *you* were a kid.”

“Was he telling you stories? That guy can’t be trusted.”

“It was nothing, really. Just that you were a beautiful little girl, and none of the relatives could stop looking at you, the men anyway.”



“That’s not really a good thing, you know. I mean you don’t exactly want to attract dirty old men who also happen to be close relatives.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, Trace. I’m sure you’ve left quite a few *young* men smitten in your wake as well. What I’d like to know is why one hasn’t managed to hang on for the lifetime trip.”

“Jul, you should have told me this was going to be *true confessions*. I would have prepared a script.”

“I’m not trying to pry, Trace. But when I look at you and me, I see two girls who took different journeys to the same destination. Let’s face it; here we both are—single, bottom-of-the-ladder career women, no money, no education, no real prospects, having salads in a cheap chain restaurant when we’d both prefer burgers and fries but we can’t afford the fat on our waistlines.” She said all this not because she actually saw herself in the same boat with Trace, quite the contrary, actually. But she wanted to connect with her friend, to allow Trace to believe she was just like her.

“Yeah, that about sums it up, doesn’t it. It would be funny if it weren’t so damn pitiful.” They both laughed.

Their salads arrived.

After a few silent moments spent sampling their meals, Tracy spoke again. “So, how’d things go with your boss, what’s his name?”

“You mean Mike?”

“Yeah, him.” She shoveled a forkful of iceberg lettuce into her mouth, capped with a small chunk of chicken, drenched in honey-mustard dressing.

“Well, you’re not going to believe this.”

“Try me.”

“He gave me a new job in Marketing Communications and a decent raise.”

“That’s fantastic.” Trace seemed genuinely congratulatory.

“It’s a lot more work, but I think it could definitely lead to something bigger.”

“Something bigger? What kind of something bigger?” She snickered.

“Let’s try and keep our minds on business, Trace. I meant something more significant at SunBurst, maybe even management of the department.”

“Did he promise you that?”

“Well, not exactly.”

“And this is the guy with the fifty dollar haircuts and the baby blue eyes, right?”

“That’s right...so what?”

“Julie, are you sure you know what you’re doing? It’s been a while for you. I mean you haven’t had to handle any of these major league studs before, have you?”

“Come on Trace, what kind of a rube do you take me for?”

“Okay. I won’t press the issue. But if you ever need any advice...you know who to call.”

They both went back to eating but Julie felt regretful because she’d not been entirely forthcoming with Trace. The truth was complicated though. So she wasn’t sure she should try and tell her friend *everything*. But then, she remembered how she had lectured Danny in her last e-mail with the “what are friends for” theme. She decided to give it a try.

“Trace, what would you think if I told you I just might be interested in Mike.”

“I’d say you’re playing with fire.”

“Okay. Fair enough. But, think about it. He’s single, successful, rich, handsome, and...did I say rich? He’s like everything you or I are looking for, and I think he might be coming on to me.”

“Oh, puh-leeze. You’re not falling for that, are you?”

“Well, I’m being more cautious than a cat. He has no idea at all I might be interested.”

“Well, if you ask me you should keep it that way. He’s nothing but trouble, Jul. He’ll break your heart.”

“How can you be so sure? You’ve never even met the guy.”

“From what you’ve told me, I can guarantee he’s not your type.”

“Whose type is he then?”

“Look, Jul, if all you’re looking for is to get it on with a guy, go for it. But he probably won’t even be any good in bed either. His kind never are.”

“Jeez, Trace, I never realized you were so cynical.”

“Hey, I’ve been knocked around by guys like him, screwed until I almost went blind. And look where it got me. It’s just like you said—here we are in *loserville*. But I’ve learned a thing or two along the way. Like you can’t rise too far above your station. So don’t lie to yourself Jul. I like you too much to see you get hurt by some rich egomaniac *pretty boy*. If you want my advice, you better shut him down now, before things get out of hand.”

“Well, I appreciate your concern, but I think you’re overreacting. He’s been extremely polite and gentlemanly. I wish you could see him from where I’m at. And the thing is: what if he *is* sincere and I blow him off? I just might be passing up the opportunity of a lifetime.”

“Go for it, then. But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“Think about it,” Julie said, still trying to sell Trace her point of view. “How many guys like him are going to come my way? I’m not exactly young and stunning, you know.”

Tracy shook her head and smiled. “It’s no use. You’re ass is cooked. He’s already got you roped and skewered and spinning around on his spit. Next thing you know, you’ll be dinner. But

I'm not going to say another thing about it. I'll just hope for the best. Maybe you're right—he's Prince Charming."

Eventually, Tracy asked Julie how things were going with her kids. Julie responded by practically quoting her daughter's last letter in which Clarrie described her holiday break, spent in northern Michigan skiing with her friends, and how much she loved her life at MSU. Julie acknowledged that Daniel and Clarrie were both adults now. Her job as a mother was pretty much done.

"What about the old man; what's he up to?" Tracy asked. "Ever hear from him at all?"

"Well, it's funny you should ask about Danny. He sent me e-mail last Saturday and we've exchanged a couple notes since. He wants bygones to be bygones. And since I'm not one to hold grudges, maybe we can keep in touch and be civil to one another—for the kid's sake if nothing else."

"Man oh man. You *have* been busy," Tracy exclaimed. "It's no wonder you haven't found the time to call. You've got hot and cold running men in your life."

"Don't read too much into it, Trace. He just wants to make amends, that's all."

"We'll see about that, won't we?" She glanced at her watch. "Hey, look at the time. We better save this conversation for another night. I'll get the check. You leave a tip. Okay?"

"You don't have to buy my dinner, Trace."

"Don't mention it. Besides, you're worth it. Next one's on you."

And off they went to their separate classes, better friends than ever, at least in Julie's opinion. She was making real progress on her resolution.

\* \* \*

After saying good-bye to Valerie in front of the bookstore and promising that he'd be in touch before the end of the week, Danny drove home. He felt renewed.

His spirits were still soaring when he entered the house so he decided to postpone dinner in favor of a workout. Digging out his old exercise bike out from behind some other stored “junk” in the basement, he removed the plastic sheet he'd placed over it about four years ago, climbed on and started to pedal. Before long he was sweating like a warthog in heat. But it felt good. He rode, and rode—for a full thirty minutes. And when he dismounted, he could barely stand up.

*That must have done me some good, he thought. Ten more workouts like that and I'll drop fifteen pounds.*

After showering, Danny warmed up some chicken noodle soup for his dinner and complimented it with a couple raw carrots. It was the healthiest meal he could conjure up from what was in the house. Then, at almost eight-thirty, he started up his computer, intent on escalating his campaign to win back the affections of his ex-wife.

*Dear Julie,*

*I must admit, at first reading your letter seemed a little bit harsh. But after thinking about what you said and trying to put myself in your shoes, I really think you're right—we definitely have to be honest with each other from here on out. And you have a right to question my motives, too. You saw me at my worst those last few years. Looking back on it now, I realize how selfish and callous I was. I'm amazed that you put up with me for so long.*

*There's just one thing I'd like to clarify though. I didn't shut you out sexually because of not finding you attractive or desirable. On the contrary, I always wanted you. But deep down I was unhappy with myself and with the way our relationship had gone sour. Of course I didn't realize*

*all this at the time. Had I recognized then how patient and dedicated you were, how hard you worked to put up with me, raise the kids and keep everything together, I would have behaved differently. Unfortunately, that picture cleared up a little too late.*

*But you can rest assured that I'd never make that mistake again. So, should we ever find ourselves out on that Caribbean island for a week, I think we'd have a lot of fun together, and I wouldn't get one bit bored, especially not from looking at you.*

*Now, I'd also like to say that although love and marriage didn't work out for us in the past (as you've stated), we can't predict what the future holds either. I agree that we should be friends first. Now's our chance to do it right. So I'll agree to keep things platonic. But I'm not willing to throw all potential for love and (dare I say it) SEX totally out the window. All I ask is that you keep an open mind. Let the future be everything it can for both our sakes. And for my part, I'll respect your feelings.*

*So, for now, we'll have a friendship—nothing more.*

*Sorry I can't be around to share all your new experiences with you: the coast, your job, your classes, your running (actually, I'm not so sure I could walk at 5:45 in the morning, let alone run). But who knows, maybe someday we'll be able to get caught up face to face. And I'll get to see those beautiful eyes again, and your lovely smile. Until then, I'll keep writing, as I hope you will.*

*Love,*

*Danny*

## Chapter Twelve

In her Tuesday evening sociology class, Julie learned all about *socialization*. Professor Powers' lecture was further subdivided to include *behaviorism*, *social learning*, the *psychoanalytical view*, and *developmental theory*. Some of these concepts were familiar; she recognized the idea of *positive vs. negative reinforcers*, for example. Freud's personality components: the *id*, *ego*, and *superego* also struck chords of familiarity. But the one thing that particularly impressed her she'd never heard before—that being Freud's notion about how society can only succeed in direct proportion to the repression of individual instincts. When followed to its inevitable conclusion, this theory suggests that individuals and societies are diametrically opposed to each other, and the price of civilization is the discontentment of civilized people. Sadly, Julie found it hard to disagree with the great psychologist. From her point of view at least, in this, the world's richest and most highly civilized country, there was one whole heck-of-a-lot of unhappy and frustrated individuals.

Moreover, this phenomenon can also manifest itself as a displacement of drives and ambitions, such that people end up doing what they do for all the wrong reasons. Consequently, if by some chance we manage to succeed at our endeavors, we are no more satisfied in the end than we were at the start.

Julie wondered why nobody seemed to be doing anything to prevent or undo this effect, if that were possible. Considering all the money and energy spent on studies and programs in America, shouldn't the most basic human problems get examined and addressed, or at least discussed? The real shame of it was, she reasoned, that regardless of the personal sacrifices made and the price paid by individuals, society was not improving. And few people were better off.

But Julie encouraged herself nevertheless. She wasn't planning to suffer along with the rest of society; she'd already *been there and done that*. After experiencing decades of dissatisfaction, she had finally locked onto what she wanted out of life and how to go about getting it. Things were definitely looking up for Julie Baker Predmore.

After another long and exhausting day, sleep came easily. But at twelve forty-two she awoke suddenly from a dream. As she replayed the episode in her mind, she felt a strange combination of happiness and distress. She and Danny were together, making love—not in their house back in Michigan however, nor here in her bed where she presently lay. In fact, she could not precisely identify where they were. But they were definitely enjoying themselves, and the lovemaking went on seemingly for hours.

The distressing part was that, try as he did, Danny could not bring her to fulfillment, though he remained patient and unruffled, (quite uncharacteristic of him, she thought). Then suddenly she realized that Danny was gone and she was left alone.

Wrapped in the bed linen, she felt great joy from their lovemaking, as though she'd been in total ecstasy and beyond. But oddly, she found herself weeping and in despair. And, though she longed to tell Danny he'd done all right, that she was completely satisfied, he was gone. And there was no way to bring him back again. Then she awoke.



She got up to use the toilet and get herself a glass of water. She was sure the dream wasn't indicative of anything in real life, just her sub-conscious mind working through the past, confusing the facts, mixing up feelings and desires into some kind of quasi-fantasy. But, unlike most other dreams that fade away the moment consciousness returns, this one remained—in all its glorious detail. As did the feelings of desire she felt deep within herself, both psychological and sexual, an ache in her heart and a burning in her loins.

She climbed into bed once again, covered up and closed her eyes. Immediately, her mind went wandering back through the dream, trying to reclaim more of it, especially the good parts, like when they were joined together in love. Feeling the exhilaration again, she sighed half-audibly and smiled and then fell comfortably back to sleep.

Wednesday brought the end to four days of showers along the coast. By afternoon the skies would be clearing and the temperature climbing into the sixties. The winds were predicted to increase however, turning easterly and bringing in desert air in balmy gusts.

Julie worked hard on the Williams proposal and had a draft completed by lunch. She found herself daydreaming at her new desk while finishing the lunch she'd packed for herself earlier. She mentally sorted through some options on what to wear Friday while out to dinner with Mike. Not wanting to appear too provocative, she settled on black slacks and a beige safari shirt. Perhaps she'd put on the onyx necklace that Danny had given her for her birthday about a hundred years ago. Fortunately, gold and semi-precious stones don't age.

With her remaining break time she decided to check her e-mail. Once logged-on, she found the letter which Danny had written last evening. It was captioned—*Friendship and the Future...*

She read with eagerness, once again amazed at how Danny appeared so different, so suddenly communicative. By the end of the letter she was feeling warm on the inside. His words were positive and hopeful and, though he did restate his hope for a sexual relationship, she felt none of the anger and resistance that had welled up before. She couldn't argue one single point he'd made. *Imagine that, she mused, maybe we're finally seeing eye-to-eye.*

But then she thought, *no; that can't be. He couldn't have changed that much. It's got to be the therapy, or maybe he's being coached. This is just not the way Danny thinks. I should know; I was married to him for twenty years. Sensitive, open-minded, conciliatory... Uh-uh. That ain't him!*

But how was she going to call his bluff?

What a difference a day makes. Everything was suddenly looking up for Danny Predmore, all the way around. After driving to work into a brilliant and blinding January sunrise, he found a parking place just a stone's throw from the building entrance. Then, by ten o'clock, he learned that two of his recruiters, Gillian and Randy, had each identified a candidate for the Chrysler project. Carly Franklin also put out a job offer to a three-year experienced CAD operator they could use at Ford.

Next, he found a note in his e-mail:

*Dear Danny,*

*Hope you're having a good day. Thanks for the cappuccino. I really enjoyed the conversation too. I'm praying that everything works out for you with Julie. By the way, does she know you're coming or are you planning to surprise her?*

*See you soon!*

*Valerie*

Just before noon his airline ticket to California arrived in the mail. *Things are going so good maybe I should play the lottery*, he thought. But instead he bought a newspaper and combed through the personal ads. He wanted to find out what romantically inclined women have on their minds. He was going to fashion himself into the perfect middle-aged divorced man.

Before he drove home, he dropped by Barnes and Noble again. This time, however, he didn't go in for the coffee. Rather, he went straight for the *Self Help* section and picked out two books: *How to Love a Woman* and *The Consummate Marriage*. Further up the road, he stopped at a supermarket to purchase a load of groceries, enough to last him until the trip. He carefully avoided the junk food aisles. He was home before seven.

After thirty minutes on the bike, a shower and a meal consisting of deli-prepared chicken salad over lettuce greens with some low-cal Italian dressing, he sat down to read about relationships.

Danny's letter bothered her all afternoon. It was as though she were back in the early weeks of last semester's algebra class and the instructor had given her an equation to solve containing multiple variables, too many for her rusty math skills. She knew there was a method to get the

answer but it wouldn't come to her. All she could do was stare at the integers and unknowns and rack her brain, but she was no closer to a solution.

And so it was with Danny. Try as she might, she couldn't come up with a plan to get to the bottom of his motives, test his meddle, find out if he truly had changed or if it was all just a ploy of sorts. And yet, even if that were the case, why was he bothering? What could he possibly want from her, and how was he planning to get it? Nothing she hypothesized made any sense. Maybe she was just tired; perhaps the answer would dawn on her tomorrow, like a sunrise in June.

Not knowing how to reply, she decided to let it ride for a day. There was no urgent need to write him back anyway. But she was still bothered because, while she didn't want to appear too hopeful or anxious, she also didn't want him feeling that she was displeased about his new outlook on life, especially as it pertained to their friendship. Something told her that she should be encouraging him, complimenting him. But instead she opened up her textbook and began to study about socialization.

As she read the material she projected both herself and Danny into the theories, attempting to relate what she was learning to her present life. She did not perform this reality test intentionally, but Danny's words were still weighing so heavily upon her that she could think of practically nothing else. Fortunately, less than a half-hour into her study time, the kernel of an explanation emerged. It came out of a section in the text entitled, *Symbolic Interactionism*, as theorized by George Herbert Mead:

*When a person becomes capable of seeing himself or herself from another's point of view, they are practicing "role taking." For example, when we compose a letter to another individual,*

*upon re-reading the text we automatically assume the other person's point of view. If we feel that the message isn't properly communicated, we go back and revise the letter.*

*All of us practice role taking every day of our lives and we are successful in communication and socialization to the extent that we succeed in looking at ourselves from the other person's perspective.*

*So that explains it, Julie thought. He's just had the advantage of weighing his words carefully and being selective about what he says. He's writing unchallenged, and he has plenty of time to consider what he wants to say.*

But even this didn't account for his sudden interest in her again. Moreover, it was definitely out of character for Danny to work at developing a friendship without ulterior motives, unconcerned about what was in it for him. And precisely because there were still so many unanswered questions leading to the heart of the matter, to what was motivating him, she decided to answer his note after all:

*Dear Danny,*

*You really surprised me with your note. I thought sure my last letter would have gone unanswered. But, it looks like from what you've said that we just might have a "future" as you put it. And, though it isn't much of a relationship to simply write notes back and forth, it's better than nothing I suppose.*

*There's one thing I have to ask you though. Do you really believe that you and I could be "best friends?" That means we'd want to always please each other, be together all the time and have similar interests and goals in life, not to mention that we'd really like each other—a lot! If we lived close by each other, are you convinced we'd be drawn together again? I wish I could say that I feel that way, but unfortunately I can't. Not yet, anyway. I do remember the times when we were young and in love though. I think we were best friends then. What happened?*

*In any event, here's what my life is all about. I'm taking a big risk here, being really honest with you and all, but the truth is that these things are important to me.*

*I want to get beyond the superficial stuff, past the idle chitchat and the cheap talk to what is really, really real. And I want you to do the same. After all, you said you wanted honesty in our relationship and I imagine you were aware it has to cut both ways. So here goes:*

*My life is not going to be wasted anymore. I'm not going to let myself get dragged into empty, meaningless relationships, void of mutual respect and companionship. It's my top priority to finish my education, and I also want to find personal and professional satisfaction on my job. I want to stay healthy and fit and live out the rest of my life without unnecessary physical debilitation. I want to develop and keep friendships based upon honesty and emotional oneness. And maybe someday I'll be financially comfortable as well.*

Julie stopped to review what she'd written. As a result of her newfound understanding of the concept of role taking, she tried to project herself into Danny's mind so as to gauge his reaction to her words. With this frame of reference she recognized something in herself she had never seen quite so plainly until now—she might be equally as narcissistic as Danny has always

seemed to be. Nearly everything she had written in the letter was about *her*—her feelings, her desires, her goals.

*What would he think if I sent this? I haven't written one thing that might make him feel good. Why would he even want me as a friend?* She thought a moment about her previous letters to him and came to the conclusion that they had been written in the same vainglorious manner.

Then she wondered if she had always been this way with him. It struck her that perhaps *her* selfishness had contributed to their undoing. Maybe it wasn't just Danny. This realization left her feeling cold and heartless, and, for the first time, she felt a sickening remorse over the past, as though everything that happened between them could have been prevented—the gradual falling out of love, the estrangement, his unfaithfulness—but instead, she had just gone on blindly and callously, blaming him. Had she only seen herself in this present light, she surely would have changed, treated him differently, made him want her more. But even that would have been selfish. She would have been doing it mainly to preserve her own sense of well being, not necessarily his.

As the sense of loss deepened, she began weeping, silently at first, then loudly, uncontrollably. She shuffled into her bedroom for some tissues and lay on the bed, still crying, heaving deeply from the chest. Angry with herself, she pounded a fist into her pillow. *It's no wonder I don't fit-in anywhere. I've never learned how to put other people first. It's always been me, me, me! Thank you Sigmund Freud and George Herbert Mead. Thanks to you brainiacs and your ilk we're all unhappy and obsessed with sex. And since you were so damn smart in figuring out what's wrong with everybody, why the hell couldn't you also come up with some solutions.* She blew her nose and wiped her eyes.

One thing was clear. There was no way she could send Danny this letter. Nor was she in the proper state of mind to write another, more civilized version. Furthermore, she had no idea what she was going to say now, or how she could be both honest and unselfish at the same time. The honest truth was, she realized, that she was not unselfish at all; she never had been, at least not where love and relationships were concerned. This revelation made her wonder how Danny managed to put up with her for as long as he did, and why on earth he would still care.

She would not.



## Chapter Thirteen

Thursday faded into winter dusk and Danny had no return e-mail from Julie. *She's got a busy schedule*, he thought, sloughing it off. *There are dozens of reasons why she might not have written.*

Late in the afternoon, after some serious consideration, he called his friend Bobby Brooks and begged off from their regular hockey night. He claimed he had too much to do. In reality, he didn't want to get into discussions about Michele, Valerie or Julie with his buddies, and he knew it was inevitable that Bobby would want an update on his love life. Instead, he headed home to read and carry on with his exercise regimen.

Michele had called him at work in the morning wanting to know if he was still alive. He apologized for neglecting her. He wished he had the courage to simply end things between them over the phone, but instead he lied to her, saying that he too was looking forward to tomorrow night.

He spoke briefly with Valerie, also by phone, telling her about the success his recruiters were having and thanking her for helping him to adopt a positive frame of mind.

Before bed he read another several chapters in *The Consummate Marriage*. The relationship picture was beginning to clear up for him. He could now see that *interdependence* was the key,

and this concept was based upon the blending of two personalities, where two sets of needs, goals and ambitions become united as one, such that each person is swallowed up into the other. He could not say exactly why, but he knew this was what he wanted out of life. Gone were his dreams to be his own man, the master of his own fate. He had tried that and found it hollow and unrewarding. Now he wanted to be lost in the heart and life of someone else, someone who also wanted to be lost in him. And, though it did not make much sense for him to choose Julie again as his partner, he couldn't imagine losing himself in anyone else. The truth was, he loved her; he had never stopped. Only now he had an uphill battle to get her back. Now he had to prove himself to her all over again.

He met Michele Sullivan at her home in Clawson at seven o'clock Friday evening. She kissed him on the cheek and invited him in. Her blue eyes sparkled; her auburn hair bounced like a bushy mane.

"What do you say we have a drink before going to the restaurant?" she asked, helping him with his coat. "Unless you made an early reservation, that is."

"No. I was going to play it by ear, see what you were in the mood for."

"Well, I'm in the mood for a drink. Jason's father picked him up for the weekend about a half-hour ago and I'm a nervous wreck after talking with him for just five minutes. This is the first time since Christmas he's taken any time for the poor kid. Anyway, tonight I'm footloose and fancy-free. So what'll ya have?"

"Just a Molson if you have one."

"Coming right up. Why don't you take off your boots and get comfy." She disappeared into the kitchen.

Danny did as she suggested, unlacing his Timberlands and placing them on a plastic mat by the door. Michele's living room was neat and clean, with a floral couch and matching recliner of a nondescript modern style in off-white, pink and mint green. There was a blond rattan and glass coffee table set with a green vase containing a silk flower arrangement. Prominently splayed out from among variegated leaves were two lacquered cattails, some marble-sized red berries and a stemmed seed pod like a small round waffle. A mirror, also framed with the familiar blond rattan, and two cheap prints of pastel beach scenes in imitation wood frames decorated the walls. Danny hated the whole look, right down to the frosted pink carpet. But, of course, he would never tell Michele that he thought her taste was insipid.

He plopped onto the couch and tried to look comfortable.

Michele returned carrying an open bottle of beer in each hand. She set them on the coffee table and perched her compact frame on the recliner. She was wearing a cream-colored, v-neck sweater and brown corduroy skirt that rode up to mid-thigh when she sat down.

"You look a little beat," she said. "How was your week, tiring?"

"A little. You know what a grind work can be, especially this time of year."

"Why don't you relax a little; I'll give you a back rub."

Danny had mixed feelings about the suggestion. "You don't have to..."

"Sure I do. Just call it 'part one' of your birthday present."

"Okay, then. But remember, I don't celebrate those anymore."

"We'll see about that. Sit here on the floor in front of me," she suggested.

He obeyed. She spread her legs apart so he could lean up against the chair. He felt the brush of her nylons through the sleeves of his flannel shirt and her warmth against the middle of his

back. Her petite hands were surprisingly strong as she bore down on his shoulders, massaging both trapezious muscles at once.

“You’re a little tight.”

She squeezed harder. “How’s that feel? I’m not hurting you; am I?”

“No, no. It feels good.”

She moved to the neck and massaged him there with both of her thumbs. “We’ve got to get some of these knots out.”

After a couple of minutes on the neck, she worked the upper part of his back that was within her reach. Then she moved to his temples. A moment or two later, while rubbing his head with both hands, she slid down off the couch and around him, landing on his lap, whereupon she sat, straddling him with her legs, her skirt bunched up around her waist. Danny could feel himself getting aroused and he was sure she could as well. He began to worry about losing his objectivity and disregarding his plan to ease out of their relationship before the evening ended.

Meanwhile, Michele slipped her hands down behind his head, drew his lips to her own and kissed him passionately.

After a near eternity in which Danny could feel nearly every muscle in his body go slack, she separated from him with a lick of his lips. She pierced his eyes with her own. “Happy birthday,” she said, smiling. And here’s one for good luck.”

Danny responded with greater abandon this time though he knew he was digging a pit for himself, one he would have to climb out from later this evening.

After the second kiss she pushed herself up using his shoulders, filling his nose with a bouquet of wonderful fragrances. She smoothed down her skirt and stepped aside. “Here,” she said, handing him his Molson. “You better drink up before the beer gets warm.”

They spent most of the trip to the restaurant making small talk. Danny was simultaneously worrying about what he might do if she decided to make another move on him—and pondering what had possessed her all of a sudden. Curiously, if they had been together one week ago like he had hoped, there would not have been a question in his mind as to how he might respond. Now, he felt he would be taking advantage, leading her on, all for the purpose of a little sexual gratification. He wished he knew why relationships were always so damned complicated.

They ate in the Sushi Room at the Japanese steak house (her choice). Danny knew all about the reputation raw fish had for increasing the libido, and Michele seemed over-amped already. He worried all the more as he watched her shove down raw salmon and tekka maki. In addition, he didn't have much trust in himself to do the honorable thing, especially after putting away a carafe of sake. It had been over a year since he'd been with a woman. With one more advance like the one she made on him earlier, he'd likely be about as unyielding as Jell-O.

During the ride back to her house, Michele was talkative. Danny learned how she and her friend Marylou had spent most of last weekend speculating about their futures—two, thirty-something, divorced women scheming how to get their lives on track before hitting “the big four-O.” For her part, Michele admitted, she decided to stop feeling sorry for herself and go out and grab what she wanted from life. She had played the victim long enough.

Hearing this, Danny immediately understood her change in demeanor and saw himself as a potential conquest in her campaign for self-fulfillment. But naturally, she would want something more than a night of good sex out of him. That was just a come-on, like twenty-five cent-a-pound bananas.

Nonetheless, he accepted her offer to come in for birthday cake and a nightcap, asking only that she make it a coffee.

“That sounds good to me too,” she said.

She led him into the kitchen and proceeded to put on the pot. He sat down at the small oak dinette table and began the conversation he had been loathing all week.

“You know, I’m going to a recruiting seminar in Anaheim, California, the week after next.”

“You are? How long will you be gone?”

“Well, the seminar is only three days but I am going to take a couple days vacation so I can stay the entire week.”

“Isn’t that where your ex-wife lives?”

“Not exactly. She’s down in Newport Beach.”

Michele eased herself onto the chair across from him. “Are you planning to see her?”

“Well, I hope to, but I haven’t told her I’m coming yet.”

“Oh, I get it,” she said. “You’re planning to surprise her, right?”

“Something like that.”

“And what do you think she’s going to do? Tell you all is forgotten and she’s ready to take you back?”

“I’m not that naive.”

“Well, I hope not.” She rolled her blue eyes at him.

“Look Danny, I don’t want you to think I’m giving you advice, but you have to remember that I’m the one who’s been divorced for ten years. I’ve had a lot of these same feelings and there’s one little nugget of wisdom I think I ought to share with you.”

“What’s that?”

“Things are never the way you imagine them to be with your ex. There’s a good reason you’re not married anymore and time doesn’t make that reason go away. In fact, if you ask me, things

only get worse with time. Me and Jimmy fight more now than we ever did—on those rare occasions when we talk to each other at all, that is. And believe me, if it wasn't for Jason, I'd never have one more word to say to the lousy creep."

"I know you're right, Michele, but something in me keeps saying I have to try to work things out with her. I've thought a lot about it and I really believe I still love her."

"Of course you do. You'll always love her." She took his hand. "But mark my words, Danny. You're going to go out there and find out that you don't *like* her anymore. And she's not going to like you either."

"I guess I'm going to have to discover that for myself."

"Oh, you silly man." She stood up and yanked both his arms to pull him out of the chair. Danny had to assist her by exerting some effort to lift himself on his own. "Come with me," she said, leading him out of the kitchen, "I'm going to show you what love is all about."

Mike was expected at seven to pick her up for dinner. She had protested, saying that she preferred to meet him at the restaurant. But he had insisted, claiming she would have a hard time finding the place, and it was not at all out of his way to come and get her.

Since her gut-wrenching self-examination Wednesday evening, she had begun to see things differently. For the better part of two days now, she had been mulling over a new approach to the evening out with Mike Tattersall. Once she realized what a fool she'd been with Danny, how she had unconsciously sabotaged their marriage, she began to think that a relationship with Mike could not possibly be any worse. And, if she *was* so incorrigibly self-serving, why not take a shot at this wealthy, successful, good-looking guy who also seemed to be taking an interest in her. After forty-eight hours of deliberation, she had it all planned. Keep up the image of a

romantically disinterested, career-motivated employee and let him play his game. Sooner or later, he would tip his hand and then she could decide what to do next. This way, if he really wanted her, she would not miss out on the opportunity just because of an arbitrary rule which she herself made up, and which may or may not have any value in real life. But, on the other hand, if he was just being an egotistical flirt, she wouldn't embarrass herself by throwing caution to the wind and falling all over him, metaphorically speaking, that is.

Last evening, before they went to their classes, she aired this theory out on Trace. After a moment's contemplation, Trace admitted that she couldn't really find fault with it, except to say that she was sticking with her earlier instincts and advice for Julie to "get out now, before things got *complicated* and she got *hurt*." Julie told her not to worry; she knew what she was doing.

Later, in class, Julie picked up some practical understanding by projecting herself and Mike into the material on *sexual harassment in the workplace*. She, the woman and the subordinate, was the one with the deck stacked in her favor. She did not have to allow a single thing to go on that made her uncomfortable. And Mike *had* to behave himself. Otherwise, she could have him dead to rights with a harassment charge in the classic style. *So, let the games begin*, she thought. *I can't lose.*

Before Mike had chance to ring her doorbell, Julie exited through the sun porch and shut the inside door behind her. Feeling the bite of the crisp night air, she swung into her jacket as they walked toward his car, a black BMW of recent vintage.

"You look lovely this evening," he said, opening the door for her.

"Thanks." The cavernous interior of the car smelled like a curious combination of dyed leather and Mike's cologne—very masculine.



“Where’re we going for dinner,” she asked as he backed out the drive.

“A little Italian place I like up on the mesa.”

“Good. I love Italian.”

He drove up West Balboa toward the Superior Avenue hill and Costa Mesa. It was a clear night and traffic was heavy. With Mike concentrating on the road, their conversation died out quickly. Jazz was playing on the stereo—just what she would have expected. Julie listened, enjoying both the mood and the luxurious ride, feeling strangely relaxed with her new self-awareness. She saw her reflection in the passenger window glass. She was smiling like the Mona Lisa.

After a few moments Mike broke the spell. “Allison says you’re doing great. I think she hated to admit it, but she couldn’t deny the obvious. Like I said earlier, the Williams proposal is near perfect. Thanks for e-mailing it to me.”

“No problem. I’m glad you’re happy with it.”

“I’ve only made a few edits. We’re basically going with what you wrote.”

“I had a good teacher.” Julie lied, but saw no reason to criticize the outgoing mother-to-be.

“And I made the right choice for her replacement.”

*You sure did, she thought. Nice of you to take all the credit, too.*

“So, since I’m convinced you’re going to work out perfectly in this position, I definitely want you to accompany me on the sales presentation next Thursday in Thousand Oaks.”

“Okay, I guess.”

“What do you mean, you *guess*?”

“Well, I’ve got a night class on Thursdays—at Cal State, Fullerton. Will we be back in time?”

“That’s hard to say. Sometimes we have to wine and dine the client afterward, you know, to cement the deal.”

“I can’t really afford to miss class.”

“Let’s just cross that bridge when we come to it. These things have a way of working themselves out.”

She didn’t respond immediately. It seemed to her that he had just hurtled over her objection as though it weren’t even there, a trait of his, she was discovering. “All right then,” she replied, “but I’m going to hold you to getting me back before six. I can’t miss class.”

“I’ll do my best,” he said. “But we can’t leave the deal hanging. Our business is entirely based on sales. And sales is all *timing*, as you will soon find out. So, if we get the signatures on the contract and the big shots are comfortable, we’ll come home. But if we have to buy them some dinner and a couple of bottles of wine to make them all happy, then, so be it.”

“Well, we can always drive separately. Then if it gets late...”

“Julie, Julie. I wouldn’t hear of it. I don’t want you driving all the way to Thousand Oaks and back by yourself. You leave it to me.”

She decided to drop it. He was, after all, her boss, and she wasn’t exactly scoring points by badgering him. “Okay,” she said.

“Good girl.”

*Well, that was a sexist condescending comment*, she thought, but did not say. Maybe he honestly didn’t realize that she was an older woman.

\* \* \*

There was a tear falling out of Michele's left eye as Danny stepped backward across her threshold into the damp night. He reached out and smoothed it away. "I'm sorry, Michele. Please don't cry. I'm not worth it."

"It's just that I had this thought that I may never see you again." She sniveled.

"I'll be back. And if things go as you predicted, I won't ever doubt you again."

"Just don't make a fool out of yourself."

"I won't. Promise."

"And you better hurry back. I'm not going to last forever, you know."

"I know." He descended the two steps onto her walk and waved. "Bye."

"Call me."

"I will." He knew he probably wouldn't.

Walking to his car he listened to the familiar sound of the January thaw—snow crinkling, water dripping off rooftops, running down spoutings, rolling and rushing along the street gutters under frozen sheets of ice. He drew a deep breath through his nostrils; there was hickory smoke in the air, no doubt from romantic Friday night hearth fires nearby. He pictured young couples holding each other, listening to their fires pop, watching the flames dance. He sat down on the cold seat of his Regal GS, fired up the engine and drove off down the lane.

Michele would get over him. *Besides*, he reasoned, *she can't lose something she never had*. He gave her credit though; she hooked him pretty well tonight with her charms. And she very nearly landed him, especially with that last big *pull*. But he held. Giving in would have been fatal; he kept telling himself that.

It was all replaying in his mind as he entered the northbound freeway ramp at Fourteen Mile Road, heading home. She had gotten him onto the bed easily enough, and unbuttoned his shirt,

all the way down. Then, while he lay there on his back, she began rubbing his chest and scratching gently with her nails. Then they kissed and eventually got to rolling around together. Her tongue was on fire and she tasted sweet, like Japanese wine. He was weakening—fast.

But he held. He knew she would hate him if he made love to her and then dropped out of her life. He couldn't do that to her; she had experienced too much heartbreak already in her life. And he did not want to know how good she was either, though he got an inkling tonight of what she might be like in full abandon, her red hair flying, her lips and hands hard at work. Making love to her could have changed his mind about everything. And he especially did not want that. For once, he had done the right thing, and he was feeling pretty good about it.

Of course, he would probably hate himself in the morning when he woke up and she was not there next to him. But then again, that was not the particular hill he wanted to die on, or so he would be reminding himself for some time to come. Like now, as a hint of her perfume lingered. *Oh, hell. Why didn't I stay? Nobody likes to be alone—especially me. Julie, my dear, you better be worth it. And by the way, how long does it take you to answer a few simple questions?*

Julie ordered some veal piccata and Mike, the broiled cod, southern Italian style. Since their disagreement in the car, things had smoothed out between them, especially once the Chianti started flowing. She quickly discovered that Mike liked talking about himself, so she let him, figuring that with each statement he made, she would have a greater advantage. And eventually, he would slip up and clue her in regarding his intentions. But he didn't, at least not that she could tell in her semi-inebriated state, having drunk two glasses of the Tuscan nectar herself.

After their plates were cleared, Mike ordered them each some Tiramisu for dessert, along with shots of Frangelico. She had never tasted either but he assured her she'd find both to her liking.

By the time dessert was ordered she knew that meeting tonight on the pretext of business had been a complete charade. Mike had not brought up a single business issue all evening except for the brief discussion in the car about the presentation next week which, she realized, he hadn't even known about last Saturday. So it could only have been an afterthought and, in essence, a way of *guaranteeing* that they would end up together again. And for a whole day this time! It had been a pretty clever way of setting up another date; she had to admit. But what she was thinking now, where tonight was concerned at least, was that he simply wanted to take her out on a "date." It was exactly as she had suspected from the beginning. He must be interested in her for more than just what she could do as his "Marketing Communications Specialist." Only now, considering her new outlook, she was less worried about how to respond. She was actually beginning to feel comfortable with him. At least he knew how to pick good restaurants.

Their dessert and drinks came and Mike finally did it—slipped up, that is. After plunging a spoon into his Tiramisu he lifted it toward her, inviting her to taste it from his hand. "Allow me to turn you on to this luscious temptation," he said, sliding the spoon into her mouth. She tasted it and smiled.

"What do you think?"

"It's wonderful."

"Yes it is, isn't it?"

She had him now. But there was no reason to reel him in just yet.



## Chapter Fourteen

They remained in the restaurant for another half-hour, talking. Neither of them seemed in a hurry to leave. A little bored with office talk and feeling feisty from the liquor, Julie took the conversation up a notch by reminding Mike that he promised her last Saturday to make the evening “strictly business.” She wondered why they’d been sitting around just chit-chatting all night.

“Is that all you think we’re doing?” Mike replied.

“Well...yeah...what would you call it?”

“Look, Julie, we’re going to have to work with each other. So, naturally, we have to get better acquainted, don’t you think?”

“I suppose,” she said. “But, do you have these getting acquainted sessions with all your direct reports?”

“Only when necessary.”

She could not tell if he was being serious or if this was merely a convenient dodge. “So then you’ve brought me here out of obligation.”

“Well, actually, I want us to feel particularly comfortable together because we’re going to have to collaborate on most of the company’s new sales opportunities. And, in order to be as

productive as possible, we're going to have to actually *like* working with each other. The best case scenario would be for us to know what each other is thinking without even having to ask."

"So, you're wining and dining me to get me to buy in." She threw her verdict back at him somewhat recklessly but also quite valiantly, feeling like she had gained the upper hand with her line of questioning.

"If that's what you prefer to call it." He looked away from her to tally and sign the check. He then pocketed his AMEX card and stood up. "Come on, time to go, wining and dining activities for the evening are complete." There was somewhat of an edge to his directive. Still, in gentlemanly fashion, he waited for her to get up. Then he re-positioned her chair.

They did not talk again until they were in the car. She was thinking that perhaps she should apologize for her sarcastic remark, that maybe she had angered him and he was giving her a little silent treatment in return. *This is all so ridiculous*, she thought. *One date and we've already got problems*. But then, it was entirely possible that she was blowing the incident all out of proportion. He might just be tired from his week on the road. And she *had* badgered him, slightly. She decided to operate on the latter supposition. "You must be anxious to get home after traveling all week."

"Yeah. I really am. But I haven't missed much. There's not much to come home *to*, just the maid, and she only works on Thursdays."

Julie must have guessed right. He didn't seem to be harboring any hostility toward her. She probed deeper. "Tell me something, Mike."

"What's that?"

"How is it that a guy like you has remained a bachelor all these years?" It was a gutsy question, but well within the bounds of her new persona.



“I don’t know. I’ve never met the right girl, I guess.”

She thought better of responding.

He continued, “It’s not that I haven’t wanted to settle down. But so many women these days are...well...shallow, if you know what I mean. I can’t picture myself with an airhead, trophy-style wife. But I’m not looking for *Susie Homemaker* either. And at my age, almost everybody has baggage. It’s difficult.”

She knew what he meant. It looked somewhat the same from her side of the fence. “That’s so interesting,” she said. “I would have thought that a guy like you could get just about any woman he wanted.”

“It would be nice if it worked that way, but unfortunately, that’s not the case.” He paused momentarily. Julie mentally spun through the possible reasons why he couldn’t manage to find or successfully keep a woman.

Then Mike went on, “Take you for example. Let’s say I decided on you, hypothetically speaking, of course. So...I somehow convince you that I might be worth knowing, or at least you’re willing to try one night on the town with me. So, I take you out for a nice dinner and some wine and a little conversation and, before we can get out of the restaurant, we’re embroiled in a debate over some inconsequential thing or another, simply because we don’t happen to see everything the same identical way. Or, something one of us says gets misconstrued and, next thing you know, we’re *arguing* over it, and that’s the last time you ever care to see me.”

“Is that what you think happened back there?”

“No, no, absolutely not. I’m just trying to give you an example of how things sometimes go. Relationships are difficult, that’s all.”

“I can’t disagree with that.”

He stopped for a traffic light and looked over at her. “Look, Julie. I really like you and I think you and I are going to work well together, back at the company at least. But I can’t seem to figure you out. You seem so distant. It’s like you’re a million miles away at times, in some other galaxy or something.”

“Really?”

“Really. And so I’m just trying to determine how I should communicate with you across the void.”

“I’m right here Mike. There is no void.”

The light turned green and he drove off again, re-fixing his gaze on the road.

Julie sat in the passenger seat, motionless and quiet, listening to the car stereo. Someone was playing a saxophone in the style of Kenny G. It might even be him; she could not say for sure. *Poor Mike*, she thought. *He’s not at all what he appears to be on the surface. He may even be more melancholy and lonesome than I am, if that’s possible. We just might be right for each other. Anyway, landing him could be easier than I originally thought.*

Mike stopped the car in her driveway and killed the engine. He looked over at her. In the soft glow of the streetlights, Julie could see weariness in his eyes. “I hope you’re not upset with me for tonight; I didn’t deliberately mislead you,” he said. “I just wanted to get to know you better. That’s all.”

“I’m not upset, Mike. I just like to play it straight with people and I like when they do the same with me. I’m too old for games.”

“Fair enough,” he said. “I don’t like games either.” He cracked open the car door. “Come on, I’ll walk you to the house.”

They began the twenty paces to her front gate. Quickly, Mike reached over and took her hand. Her heart jumped. They kept walking, hand in hand, neither of them looking at the other. As they arrived at the entryway to her villa, and before she could reach for her key, he drew her to himself and into an embrace. She didn't fight him, but neither did she return the gesture. She simply allowed him to hug her while resting her head against his shoulder. With her hands dangling limply at her side she was constrained by his grasp. They remained that way for about ten seconds though it seemed longer to her. Then he eased himself back, just far enough to look down into her eyes, his hands still clasped behind her. "No more games, I promise," he said.

She remained silent. Their eyes were locked.

"I want you to know how much I enjoyed being with you tonight," he said.

She broke his gaze and looked down, fumbling in her pocket for her house key. Meanwhile she racked her brain for some kind of response that would be both kind and non-committal. He continued to hold her.

"I would really like to kiss you right now," Mike said.

"I'm not ready for that," she replied. "I better go."

He did not release her. "Julie, don't deny the obvious. There's a mutual attraction between us."

"I like you Mike, and I enjoyed getting to know you a little better tonight. But I think we should keep things professional between us. It's really for the best."

"And *I* think you and I could have something special together. Why not give it a try?"

With key in hand she wriggled enough to get her right arm free of him. "I'm going inside now Mike." She unlocked the gate. "Please don't be angry with me but I don't think we should try

anything. Think about it, how are we going to work together at the office if there are romantic feelings between us? That can only lead to trouble.”

“Do you really want me to just walk away and leave you alone?”

“Yes...and no. But yes is the sensible answer.”

“That’s what I thought,” he said. “You feel it too. Just kiss me once and I’ll go home. I promise.”

“No kissing, Mike.”

At that, he took her head in his hands and turned her to himself once again. Bending slightly to her, he looked into her eyes as if to say, *stop me now if you dare*. When she said nothing, he kissed her lips, softly at first, then harder. She let him have the moment he’d begged for. Then, as he separated from her, she repeated her earlier statement. “I’m going inside now, Mike.”

This time she followed through.

As she changed into her pajamas, she could feel herself shaking. Her body was racked from the experience. At one point she’d almost given in and let him come inside with her. He certainly wouldn’t have refused; in fact, it was unquestionably what he wanted. *Then, what would have happened?*

Instead, she summoned her wits and held him off. Except for that kiss, of course. And, though she really didn’t have much choice in the matter, allowing him to kiss her assured him that she was not completely out of reach. It should serve to keep him in the game—a game which, she was more and more convinced, was to be played under *her* rules. In fact, there would not be any action on the field at all until she could apprise him of her definition of terms like *fair play*, *out-*

*of-bounds, fouls and penalties.* Then, if he proved willing to go along with her conditions, and if she still felt him worth the effort, she might start to show a little affection of her own.

He wasn't perfect of course. She could already list off a number of his faults. But then again, she did not expect perfection. Yet, there were things about Mike that made him very appealing. Even Tracy would probably agree if she were the one being pursued. One should not generalize about people, men especially. Each has to stand on his own merit. And Mike certainly had merit, or so it appeared from her immediate vantage point.

For now, she would just continue to observe him, maybe give him a little encouragement when necessary. Ultimately, she would determine if he was truly worth her devotion, and eventually, her love. He already had her attention.

On Sunday, Danny awoke to find the *Water-Winter-Wonderland* in complete meltdown.

According to the newspaper forecast, the temperature would reach the low forties today before falling back by mid-afternoon. Unfortunately, the brief respite from the freeze would only serve to exacerbate winter's treachery as everything iced up overnight.

He checked his e-mail, hoping to find a note from Julie. Nothing. He could not help worrying that his last letter might have scared her off. She had responded so quickly twice before, now four days and—nothing. Maybe he had miscalculated, or perhaps had been too presumptuous about the possibility of renewed interest on her part. But he knew that there was nothing more he could do in a letter to get her to come around—to trust him, and perhaps, even to want him once again.

Though he considered the option briefly, a phone call was definitely out of the question. The best chance he had with her was face to face. He would have one whole week out there to turn

her heart back twenty years. He hoped it was enough time. Every moment would have to be used to his best advantage. Starting now he would have to, as Vic might say, “plan his work and work his plan.” Plus, by spending time working on his strategy, he might get his mind off last night’s date with Michele and the nagging feeling he had that he had closed off any future possibilities with her, and that, if he changed his mind once more, it would be too late. If things went badly out on the coast and he had to come crawling back to Michigan, hurt and rejected, he’d have no one to come back to. He had seen to that last night.

First, he would work out. His body was already responding to the routine and he found himself looking forward to pushing himself beyond the pain threshold. After that, he would go back to the books. Amazingly, from what he had read in the past few days, he felt like he was beginning to understand women, at least in some small way. He was anxious to share some of his ideas with Valerie.

*That’s one good thing, he thought. At least there’s Valerie. Sweet Valerie. I’ll still have her friendship.* Somehow that didn’t seem as fragile as love, at least the kind of love Danny had experienced in his life. And suddenly, he knew what Valerie meant, that the key to success with Julie was to win her back as his friend. The only question was, could he in one, short week win back both her trust and her friendship? *Of course I can, he thought. Friendship is easy. I’m good at friendship. As for trust, well, that’s going to be the tricky part.*

## Chapter Fifteen

Off the shoals of Laguna under a dissolving layer of low clouds the ocean pulsed, rising and falling with its incessant tidal rhythm. Meanwhile, the sun streamed down from its midday zenith, bathing the south coast in winter's yellow light. Julie headed her Mitsubishi Mirage off the PCH and up into the hills toward her dad's condo. More than three weeks had passed since her last visit on Christmas day.

Though her life has not become meaningfully intertwined with theirs, having her dad and Lora nearby has been good for Julie. It has lent a sense of belonging, of family and permanence to her existence, and validated her choice of a homeland. But unfortunately, she and her dad have never actually been close.

With her parents divorcing when she was a young teen and her mother subsequently taking her east to Michigan, a relationship with him had been a practical impossibility. And, since moving back here to California eighteen months ago, she had yet to bridge the gap that time left between them. Consequently, their relationship has not progressed beyond the perfunctory.

She has, however, developed a new sense of appreciation for Lora. Her long-held view of Lora as home-wrecker and "snake" has been annulled by the reality of Lora herself—a loving, understanding, witty, intelligent and sensitive human being, far different from the image her

mother had forged for her out of hurt, jealousy and retribution. And so, while her dad has remained aloof (his true nature in Julie's opinion), her relationship with him has become coupled through Lora, a somewhat amazing coincidence, indeed.

Then again, Lora was her senior by only ten years, so it was perfectly logical that Julie might find it easier to relate to her stepmother than to her own natural father, whose coming of age coincided with the ending of the big war. Plus, they were both women.

Either way, on this visit, Julie was primarily looking forward to seeing Lora and catching up with her. If perchance an opportunity to converse and possibly connect in some meaningful way with her father presented itself, so much the better, but she harbored no false hope in that regard.

Lora answered the door when Julie arrived. As usual, the house was neat as a pin. Walking in, Julie handed her the bottle of California Merlot she brought and complimented her on her appearance. Lora was Julie's height, about five-six, rather tall for an Asian woman, and today she wore heels to accentuate her stature. Her ensemble consisted of a pair of perfectly creased, deep-brown, wool-flannel slacks and a collarless silk blouse, tied at the neck.

Julie always regarded Lora as beautiful but today she looked especially so. Her complexion was flawless. She wore no foundation at all and only had a hint of blush on her cheeks to take some roundness out of her face. Her lips were glistened with a fresh application of red-orange gloss. Her perfect eyes, dark and slightly upswept, needed no accent whatsoever. She had pulled back a cluster of her long, sable-brown hair and fixed it in back with a jeweled clasp. From there her locks cascaded down past her shoulders, shining radiantly in the ambient mid-day light, like fine spun silk. How lucky her father was to be married to such a beauty, Julie thought. And she wondered if she herself had ever been so lovely, let alone now, at the threshold of her middle age. Meanwhile Lora, who was already over fifty, appeared ageless.



“Is dad home,” Julie asked after stepping inside?

“I expected him by now, but he’s not back from the marina yet. He insisted on going fishing this morning. Days like this are too few and far between this time of year and El Niño has been bringing in fish like crazy.”

“That’s okay. We’ll have some time to ourselves,” Julie said. “I was hoping to get you alone anyway.”

Lora invited her to the kitchen where she said they could talk while she continued the dinner preparation. She was roasting a duck and fixing some brown rice and steamed broccoli. She washed the broccoli and, as she began breaking off the flowerettes, Julie told her about her dilemma—the whole story, right down to the passionate embrace. She didn’t even leave out Tracy’s warning to stay far away from the man she called “bad news.”

Lora mostly listened, asking only a question or two here and there to be sure she was getting things straight. Occasionally, she looked directly at her stepdaughter and smiled a little knowing smile.

“What would you do?” Julie asked, knowing full well that Lora was a romantic and as such she would most definitely have an opinion. “Should I continue to lead him on or am I playing with fire?”

“Everyone who falls in love ends up playing with fire. You cannot have one without the other; they go hand-in-hand.” She wiped her fingers on a dishtowel and took a seat at the kitchen table next to Julie. “For some, the fire burns out quickly. Others get burned by it. Still others find a way to get it under control and keep it going for years. The problem is, you never know how it will go for you.”

“But, I don’t want everything I’ve worked so hard for to go up in smoke if things don’t work out. That’s the real problem, not whether I can handle him or not.”

“Then, perhaps you should break it off right away. That way you won’t be putting yourself or your job at risk. But if you’re looking for a relationship without risk, you’ll be looking for a long time.”

“I know. That’s what I’m afraid of. It won’t be long before I’ll be too old and unattractive, and guys like Mike won’t even give me the time of day.”

Lora took her hand into her own. “Oh, Julie, I think that point in your life is far off in the distance. You are still very beautiful. Any man would be proud to have you by his side.”

“You’re too kind, Lora.” She kissed her stepmother’s cheek. “You must have known you were playing with fire when you married dad. How’d you keep your marriage together all these years?”

“Now you’re giving me too much credit. I was too young to know anything at all about love. I think maybe I was just lucky. But when I first met your father I discovered one of the secrets of keeping a man’s attention.”

“I can almost guess what that is.” Julie said, laughing.

“You’d probably guess right. Men like it when you’re passionate. The more passionate you are, the more they want you around.”

“But what if you don’t feel passionate?”

“Then you’ve got to act like you are anyway. Eventually, it pays off. Believe me. Your father is a very responsive husband; I’ve made sure of it. And I don’t mind that he spends time on his boat either. Everyone needs to have some privacy, some time to just be alone with their thoughts. Myself included.”

Julie agreed with the latter axiom at least, the one about private time. “Well, one thing’s for sure,” she said.

“What’s that?”

“I’m not going to try being too passionate with Mike. Not right away, at least.”

“I can understand that,” Lora acknowledged while getting up to check the stove. “Just don’t wait too long, Jul. If you really want to hook this guy, that is. I’m sure he’s not looking for a relationship based on conversation, even if that’s what makes you feel good. Women like that are far too plentiful.”

Julie was trying to think up a response when she heard the garage door open. Shortly thereafter, her dad came in, trailing the smell of the Pacific and carrying a bucket containing three large fish. Evidently the morning had been somewhat profitable.

“Hello there girls,” he said.

“Hi dad.” Julie said.

“Take those damn things out back Jack, before you stink up the house,” Lora told him. “And get yourself cleaned up. Dinner will be ready in five minutes.”

Julie left shortly after dinner. She claimed to have homework, which she did. But she really just wanted some time alone. Halfway back to Newport she stopped at the Crystal Cove State Park to take a walk on the beach in the bright afternoon sun. The day had turned warm yet there were few others who had come out to enjoy it, at least on this little stretch of stone-strewn coastline, bounded by cliffs on either end. One couple walked hand-in-hand while a woman searched for shells or perhaps some small pieces of worthwhile driftwood. Julie took off her shoes and socks and carried them as she ambled along the surf line. She loved the sounds of the waves and gulls,

the fresh salt breeze blowing back her hair, the sting of the spray hitting her face. Much like her father, she realized, she was happy being alone, pleasing herself, perhaps because of all the years when she could never find a private moment. If it wasn't the kids needing something, it was Danny. Then there was work and meals and cleaning and laundry and shopping and chauffeuring and...

It felt good that all of that was behind her. *No wonder Lora has managed to stay so young and lovely*, she thought. *She's never had kids and only worked for her own amusement, certainly not out of necessity. Dad made plenty of money at Hughes.*

But now her life was at a crossroads. She couldn't have it both ways. She either had to give up some independence or stop hoping she was going to find and keep another man. Mike, she imagined, would be at least as demanding as Danny had been. She could already see that he wanted to possess her. And he would certainly demand things of her. She could not help wondering how long she would be willing to give him those things before developing resentment toward him for boxing her in, for keeping her from whatever life there was to be lived apart from him and his private world.

She noticed two gulls taking turns chasing each other as they flew in ever-widening circles over the sea. They seemed to be in perfect balance with themselves and with nature. But they kept screeching at each other and Julie could not tell whether they were being playful or if there was anger between them. There was a fine line between the two, she realized, one easily crossed in every relationship. Successful couples manage to come back quickly when that line is crossed, however—her dad and Lora, for example. She had been around the two of them enough to know that they were not immune from angry words. But she could also tell that the predominant mood between them was love, and from what Lora had said earlier, a passionate love at that.

It was difficult for her to imagine her father in that way, but as she did she became overwhelmed with a feeling that she herself had been cheated. She had never experienced passionate love, except for a moment or two at a time. In her experience, love and marriage had to be endured, a sort of life-sentence which, luckily, she had been released from before turning old and gray. Now she wondered if such passion and playfulness could be found in a relationship with Mike. Or would he turn out like Danny, dominated by his own needs and desires, incapable of putting their relationship first. For that matter, could she?

She knew she was outrunning herself again. There was no guarantee that any kind of meaningful relationship at all would develop with Mike. And she could very well be the one to stop it before it got started. Yet there was no denying the spark between them. So, as wrong as it might be to lead him on while deciding what to do, she could not force herself to keep shutting him out. She had to at least give him a try.

*What a shame that men don't come with a thirty day money-back guarantee,* she mused. Although, with this man there was more than money at stake—namely, her job and her reputation. One thing was certain though. At some point in the not-too-distant future, she would have to start taking the risks Lora talked about. She would have to let Mike know that the feelings between them were somewhat mutual, that she might be willing to let him into her life as something more than a *boss* or a *friend*. Still, even with the benefit of Lora's advice, she was not quite ready to pull out all the stops, not just yet anyway. But she also knew she couldn't hold out much longer, playing the disinterested party. At some point Mike would begin to lose interest in *her*. Then she might never know if a relationship with him could have worked, only that she did not give it a chance because she feared losing her own freedom and having to think about someone in addition to herself.

Driving home, Julie began to feel a sense of guilt over her failure to respond to Danny's last letter. She had previously made it seem as though she wanted him for a friend, which she did. But alas, she was very near the point of proving herself incapable of even the casual friendship she herself had suggested. All because she hated her egotistical self. *How ironic*, she thought. *I have a problem and he's the one who ends up suffering. It's just the opposite of the way things went when we were married.*

Perhaps this was nature's way of serving up retribution. But then again, she couldn't be sure that he actually was suffering. *Certainly, he couldn't be sitting around pining away because I've failed to write him back. If he is, then it serves him right.*

Nevertheless, she felt it now well past time to write him again. So, when she arrived home, she would make it her first order of business.

At three-fifteen she walked through the sun porch and into her living room. After opening a couple of windows to let in the fresh afternoon air she settled down on her favorite living room chair and took her notebook computer in hand. She pulled up the file containing the letter she last wrote Danny but then subsequently never sent. After giving it a read, she decided to amend it rather than start all over again. Mostly, she'd have to soften the tone a little. Then she would try to seem interested in him and his life, even if she did not exactly feel that way in her heart. She could fake it and maybe eventually the feelings would follow.

First she would apologize for taking so long to write back.

*Dear Danny,*

*Please forgive me for my slow response to your letter. I don't have an excuse. Honestly, I've just been trying to get my own head together regarding relationships and I didn't know quite how to respond to you.*

*You really surprised me with your note. I thought sure my last letter would have gone unanswered. Not that I was trying to scare you off. Quite the contrary. I wanted to know if you truly had changed, like your letter seemed to indicate. I hoped you had, and after reading your note from "Siberia," I felt sure you had, at least a little. (Unless you hired a ghost writer or something.)*

*Anyway, my dilemma is this: As I've already told you, I'm not interested in going back to the way things were between us before the divorce. The only way we'll ever get along is if we can somehow start over, as different people than we used to be. And, naturally, the more I thought about it, the more I doubted that could ever be possible. I figured we would be kidding ourselves to think it could.*

*But then I thought that we just might have a "future" (as you've suggested) after all. And, that the past could be "history," not to be repeated. This is of course what I hope is true. Still, it isn't much of a relationship to simply write notes back and forth. But it is what we can do to separate ourselves from the past and take a step in the right direction...*

She quickly re-read the letter and, satisfied that she had gotten it right this time, clicked on the *send* icon. It was a small risk, telling Danny that she had some interest in him, and that she wanted to work at building up their friendship all over again. Especially since by so doing she would also be proving to herself that she was an emotionally healthy person, and that she had not only survived the worst of their years and the divorce, but come out the better for it all. Plus, she suddenly felt like a risk-taker, a gambler of sorts. She felt strangely willing to put her feelings on the table while the wheel of life spun around, beyond her ability to control the outcome.

Fortunately, there wasn't all that much at stake here, nor could she imagine anything bad

coming back to her as a result of what she wrote. She only hoped she might demonstrate her ability to be a true friend while simultaneously proving herself less self-serving than she feared she truly was.

Time would tell.



## Chapter Sixteen

Danny held his staff meeting on Monday morning. He informed everyone that he would be away next week attending the recruiting conference in Anaheim and subsequently taking a couple days off, but that they should nevertheless continue with business as usual in his absence. He appointed Gillian to fill in for him. He happily congratulated everyone for succeeding in the search and hire of the two candidates for the Chrysler project. Bill Cook, in a rare display of appreciation, even stopped by the meeting to thank them personally. More opportunities were promised now that they had an initial hold on the project, he said. Everyone groaned but stopped short of telling the Cookster to stop selling. Within the atmosphere of mutual disdain that exists between the company's salespersons and recruiters, there is an awareness that each is dependent upon the other for success.

After the meeting Danny sat at his desk and, over a fresh cup of coffee, began a review of his plan for the year. As usual, it had been generated by Vic and the Base Line executive management without any input from the people at Danny's level. And, also as usual, the final plan was delivered to Danny weeks after it actually went into effect—revisions and approvals not completed as quickly as originally hoped. Now, with January half over, this year's plan finally found its way into Danny's mail folder in a sealed envelope marked *CONFIDENTIAL*. He

discovered it shortly after arriving this morning but, with the pressing need for meeting preparation, he set it aside and temporarily forgot about it.

Thumbing through the document now, his eyes went immediately to the summary chart on page three. Base Line was expecting him to hire an average of 30 new people a month, a total of 360 by yearend. Allowing for a thirty-percent turnover in their existing contract staff of 640 and some fallout on the new hires, the company was planning to end the year with 750 billable contract resources. Danny shook his head then hung it down in a gesture of hopelessness. Even in a market flush with candidates such numbers would be aggressive. And, as everyone close to this business knew, the auto industry was perking along in excellent health. The big three and their major suppliers were soaking up every available technical resource in town. Unprecedented amounts of compensation were being paid out by companies in the business to retain available talent. This was anything *but* a market, flush with candidates.

He was doomed. But the really sad thing was that nobody cared. Danny was simply expected to do the impossible—no more, but especially no less. And if he could not pull it off, they would find someone else—someone who would claim these ridiculous numbers to be well within his or her reach—a liar, basically. With any luck at all, someone from sales might get promoted to replace him, like Bill Cook, for example. Then at least Danny could go out the door laughing.

According to Danny's way of thinking, the real problem lay with the high turnover rate. At thirty percent, it meant the company would lose over two hundred employees this year alone. Obviously, if Base Line could fix its turnover problem, there would not be a need to put so much pressure on the recruiting department to bring in hordes of new hires. And, if the executives understood the marketplace, they would certainly not see 360 as an achievable number for new employees this year. Clearly, the company would be better off investing in its current staff,

perhaps raising salaries a little faster, upping fringe benefits somewhat and cultivating a little more career-orientation and allegiance within the ranks. But somehow the executives with their Ivory Tower perspectives failed to see the landscape in the same light as those who walked with their feet on terra firma. And naturally, the “plan,” now finalized, could not be further amended or altered. In point of fact, it had probably been stamped into the moon over the weekend so as to be clearly visible to anyone who might be gazing into space amid thoughts of buying a successful technical services company and thereby plumping up the acquiring corporation’s profits and stock values. For the right price, Danny was certain Base Line could be had.

He filed the plan away, vowing not to look at it again. He wondered how he might communicate the aggressive targets to his staff without demoralizing them. They knew the realities of the marketplace even more keenly than did he. Saddling them with these goals would be extremely counter-productive. Why bother?

He swung his chair around and went into his e-mail. Surprisingly, he found the letter from Julie, written last evening. He read with interest.

*Well, I’ll be,* he said to himself after finishing. *She has actually apologized to me. Now we’re getting someplace!*

She had also asked him to call her, another indication that he was making progress in his quest to recapture her heart. But the thought of hearing her voice on the phone scared him a little. What would he say? Could he manage to carry on a meaningful conversation with her, or would they discover that they had few things to talk about and even less in common? In light of these uncertainties, he decided against a phone call, at least until he could sort out what to say. And with this decision he realized how unprepared he yet was to confront her in person, though in less than six days he would be landing at LAX, and soon thereafter—if he followed his plan—he

would appear on her doorstep. Suddenly he felt like a teenager again, one trying to prepare for a first date with a girl he had always admired and finally had a chance to take out. And inexplicably, he wanted her more than he ever had, though he could see how easy it would be to fail at his mission. Consequently, he was scared-stiff.

Back in the office after his week on the road, Mike Tattersall buzzed around his new marketing assistant all day like a hornet. He first wanted to make sure that the Williams Industries proposal was letter-perfect and ready for submittal. Then he suggested that they (meaning she) start constructing the presentation for the sales call in Thousand Oaks on Thursday. He promised to help Julie with this one, using the rationale of making things easier for her since it was her first sales presentation and he, of course, knew precisely what the customer wanted.

Allison Kraft had mentally checked out days ago and was therefore no more valuable to Julie than the old typewriter they kept around the office for emergencies, though no such emergency of sufficient consequence ever came up.

Over the course of the day, Mike called Julie into his office three times to review her work, and on two occasions he spent at least thirty minutes looking over her shoulder while she built presentation slides from existing templates in the marketing data base.

She did not mind so much that he was there; she rather liked being in close proximity to him now that she had made up her mind to pursue her relationship options. But it bothered her that he would not let her do her work alone. Having someone watch as she typed upset her equilibrium, even as it piled unneeded and unwelcome stress on her and made her want to say something to him before his micro-managing turned habitual. Another day of it and she would be acting like a caged lion. *Then, heaven help him,* she thought.

She got through the difficult moments—those when she felt like she was under the microscope and Mike was getting ready to start a dissection procedure—by imagining herself retired from all this and living decidedly up-market as the queen of his castle on Long Butte Drive across town. Without question, he could afford to keep her in some style far greater than anything she has heretofore known, allowing her to put her energies toward finishing her degree work at Cal State, and to turn her thoughts toward what she would *really* like to do with her life, not what she has *had* to do in order to simply get by. Not that she would marry him for these reasons alone, of course. But if the specter of marriage did raise itself, these reasons were sure to make the short list of evaluation criteria just below items like true love, the ability to get along without arguing, and whether they were able to consistently enjoy each other's company. Sexual compatibility, though no doubt also important, would fall somewhat further down the list.

Mike might not weigh the factors accordingly, she realized, but she would just have to insist that he take a good hard look at these things from her vantage point. Such a wide-eyed view, she realized, was something she had never insisted that Danny consider, not having understood the pitfalls of married life with quite the same depth of clarity at the tender age of nineteen. Though this was probably one of the reasons why they never managed to connect at a deep emotional level and ultimately why their marriage ended prematurely, leaving her feeling bruised, used up and near-worthless. And however important sex might be, however good it could get, it would never be nearly enough to guarantee happiness.

Mike did not say a word all day in reference to their encounter on Saturday night. Nor did he make any moves on her. There were no soulful looks, no coy smiles, no touches—nothing but professional behavior, excepting for the indulgent, over lordly management of her work tasks. Julie was left clueless regarding how to interpret his behavior. On the one hand, she was happy

that he was not signaling to everyone present that they had a kernel of something special sprouting between them. But on the other hand, she wondered if he had already made the decision to give up on her, writing her off as far too cold and aloof to merit his affections, too much trouble in the long run. Either way, she was not about to bring up the subject with him. Nor was she willing to communicate that she had begun to drop her defense barriers against the possibility of a relationship. He was going to have to do a whole lot more to get that out of her.

Later, at home, after recognizing that she had been fantasizing a little too much, she managed to get her mind off Mike, at least temporarily. She did some reading for her sociology class and responded to e-mail from her daughter. In her letter, Clarrie had made reference to the conversation with her father on his birthday, claiming that, though he was somewhat afraid of how such a gesture would be received, deep down he seemed like he wanted to set things right. By now of course this was not a revelation to Julie, but her daughter's appraisal of the situation did help serve as a confirmation that Danny was being sincere. This inspired hope and encouragement in her. Some modicum of reconciliation was welcome, perhaps even necessary, if she were going to be able to live her life beyond the reach of the long shadow cast by the breakup of her marriage. If she and Danny could truly forgive each other, become friends again and renounce their past errors, she imagined that they could experience a kind of emancipation from all the guilt and remorse which they (she, at least) had been suffering for the past couple of years since Danny proclaimed his infidelity toward her and everything went to black. Maybe then she could really get on with her life, and so could he.

At ten-thirty she went to bed, and lying there she thanked God that things were beginning to look somewhat neat and tidy in her life, the way she always believed they should. Aside from a few remaining wrinkles, all her past worries and fears were being ironed out. And she had not

even done much of the work. Things were just happening around her. It was as though she were a spectator in the drama of her own life. And considering it all, Julie Baker Predmore felt happier than she could remember feeling in years. As she settled down to sleep, she could not help smiling.

By Thursday things had changed somewhat.

Mike's attention to her at the office all week had been interpreted by the other women for what it truly represented—his interest in Julie beyond her value as Marketing Communications Specialist. She had come to be viewed as his latest conquest—a gross overstatement of reality of course, and something she vehemently denied to all who confronted her on the matter. But as a result of having to defend her honor, she was irked. And what bothered her most was the realization that a rumor could have developed and taken root so fast. It did not even matter whether such gossip was a direct reflection of the truth or a colossal distortion of it—people just believed what they chose to believe. As far as everyone was concerned, she had slept her way right into the marketing department. The only question was—*was he worth it?*

Finally, she resigned herself to stop worrying about what the others thought of her; she could not change their opinions anyway. Besides, if she did convince everyone that nothing had transpired between her and Mike and then, ultimately, they ended up together, well...she would just be adding fuel to her own cremation pyre. She would lose the precious little credibility she still maintained.

Desiring to remain above the fray, she resolved to worry only about the things that mattered. For instance, the sales call and presentation she had worked all week to perfect. That was infinitely more important than the grist in the office rumor mill. And, though Mike would

actually be the presenter up at Clark and Betts, her ultimate reputation at SunBurst would be more closely tied to how well events like this turned out than to malicious words spoken over the Sparkletts jug. If this deal got sold, it would be twice as difficult for people to criticize her and sneer over her supposedly undeserved promotion. Over time, she would ultimately convince anyone who questioned her talent or her ethics that Julie Baker Predmore got where she did on her brains and her abilities, not on her back.

The weather was rotten again, had been for three days now. Nearly three inches of rain had fallen over the Southland in the past forty-eight hours alone. El Niño was making another visit and would likely be hanging around for a day or two. As a result, flood and mudslide warnings were posted up and down the coast. It especially did not help that half the population of Southern California lived precariously on what could only be considered unbuildable land anywhere else—millions at the mercy of the elements.

She had not run this morning. Instead she spent some extra time on her appearance. If she was going to be “window dressing” she should at least look her best. In spite of the rain, she chose to wear her best suit, a dark green worsted wool two-piece she purchased at a Washington’s Birthday sale last year. Before putting it on, she slipped into a plain black silk blouse and buttoned it in back. A pair of black nylons finished the ensemble. She wore no jewelry. While admiring herself in the bathroom mirror, she smiled and thought, *not bad for a middle-aged woman. I’m even having a good hair day.*

As promised, Mike picked her up at seven-thirty. The appointment with Clark and Betts was not until ten, but considering the bad weather, he wanted to allow plenty of time for the drive up to Thousand Oaks.



Mike was dressed exquisitely. Julie put the value of his suit, shirt and tie at two monthly rent payments. His shoes had come off an alligator's back and would have, no doubt, covered another month's living expenses, including utilities. He buckled his seat belt and backed out her driveway.

"I picked up some coffee on the way over. That cup's for you."

"How thoughtful of you, Mike. Thanks."

Julie picked up the cup and lifted the lid a little. It smelled wonderful. Though she had already had a couple of mugs at home, she was not about to insult him by refusing it.

Mike guided the BMW out Balboa toward Superior Avenue, Harbor Boulevard and the 405. The sky was thick with clouds and the morning remained shrouded in darkness. Julie listened as the radio barked out traffic and weather reports. Already the roadway problems had begun; fender benders and other sorted mishaps were being reported from Anaheim up into the Valley and there was a major tractor-trailer accident in Pomona for which the CHP had shut down westbound I-40. Residents in the Malibu Hills were being warned to take necessary precautions as the rain there had been especially heavy overnight and a few hillsides were giving way under the force of the deluge. Police were evacuating residents in various neighborhoods along the coast and in some canyons east of LA. There were also fears concerning sanitary sewer overflow in the city. The Los Angeles sewage treatment system was very near its capacity and if the rain kept up, untreated waste could overflow into the streets and waterways for the first time in the city's history.

All of this mayhem was being attributed to El Niño, The Child, a periodically recurring extra-warm ocean current born in the equatorial Pacific. It seemed odd to Julie that this phenomenon, which occurred every decade or so and caused mayhem here and as far away as southern Africa,

should be named for the Christ child. But then again, *He* wasn't exactly welcomed onto the scene by the people of His day either, and ultimately His presence shook the world, right down to its very foundations. Maybe the two had more in common than one might otherwise think. Nevertheless, this visit of El Niño was proving to be the most severe in recent history, and the current storm seemed to bear witness to its calamitous potential.

"Well, do you feel like you're prepared for the presentation?" Mike asked.

"I should be asking you that question. Unless there's something you failed to mention about the agenda."

"Suppose you did have to do it. Would you be ready?"

"Yes and no."

"Meaning?"

"The presentation is ready, but I'm not. I need to observe you a few times before I could possibly feel comfortable doing one myself."

"That surprises me, Julie. I had you figured for a quick study."

"So I am, but I'm also thorough. I'd want to do the best I could, so it only makes sense to learn from an expert." She hoped the compliment would get him to drop the whole ruse. Clearly, he did not plan to have her do the presentation, so why pretend otherwise?

"Okay. I'll let you off the hook this time. But maybe tomorrow you could try doing it for me. I'll coach you through the tough spots. Role playing is one of the best ways to learn, you know."

"So I've heard. But I've never actually been much of a role player. With me it's what you see is what you get."

“That’s more or less what you were saying last Saturday night as I recall.” Mike glanced over at her with the obvious intent of trying to read her thoughts. “Only I think what you said exactly was, you were *too old for games.*”

Julie remained silent while wondering what might be coming next. He had obviously taken the occasion to needle her.

“I’ve been giving that conversation a lot of thought,” Mike said. “Considering how we’ve worked together the last few days, it’s clear we aren’t going to have problems maintaining our professionalism in the office.”

*Now, where was he going?*

“So, it seems to me that what you were worried about is not going to be an issue at all.”

“Remind me what I was worried about,” she said, hoping he might get more directly to the point.

“You were worried about how things would look at the office if we had feelings for each other.”

“Oh, right.”

“And what I’m saying is that, clearly, we can work together regardless of our feelings for each other. The relationship between us won’t get in the way of our work.”

“Mike, are you saying that you don’t think anybody back at the office knows you have *feelings*, as you call them, for me?”

“Among other things, yes. That’s precisely what I’m saying.”

“Well, I’m sorry to have to break the news to you, but it’s simply not true. Everybody knows. And they think we’re having an affair as well...and...that I got my promotion as a result of, well...you know... To put it bluntly, they think I’ve slept my way into the job.”

Now Mike was the one momentarily silent. He looked over at her, incredulity written on his face.

“You hadn’t heard any of this.” Julie said.

“No, I haven’t. How do you know these things are being said?”

“I’ve been accused, that’s how.”

He looked at her. “Well, I’m sorry to hear that, Julie. But you certainly shouldn’t be too concerned. You’ve done nothing wrong.”

“I’m glad you feel that way.”

“Small consolation, huh?”

“Very small.”

Mike aimed the BMW onto the San Diego Freeway, joining an endless multi-lane congestion of cars, enroute to jobs in the city and surrounding suburbs. There was no other reason to be driving on a morning like this.

Once merged into the traffic, Mike picked up the conversation again. “So what do we do now? It seems a shame that you’ve been accused of something you haven’t had the pleasure of doing. But on the other hand, it leaves us both without a good excuse for getting together.”

Isn’t it just like Mike to turn her negative situation to his advantage, she thought, but naturally did not say. He was right of course. She saw the stars in precisely the same alignment. Only now, with this direct statement of his intentions, she no longer wondered if he had lost interest.

“Except that I’m not the kind of person who does things simply out of convenience” is what she did say.

“Nor am I,” Mike said. “And I didn’t mean to imply that we should get together out of convenience. Just that there are no artificial barriers standing in our way; that’s all. Do you see what I mean?”

“I suppose so.” She had him hooked now.

“You suppose so?” Mike mimicked her.

“Right.”

“You know I have a mind to pull off the road right here and kiss you.”

“You don’t want to be late to the meeting, do you?”

“We won’t be late.”

“Then pull off.”

They arrived at Clark and Betts twenty minutes before their scheduled meeting time of ten o’clock. Julie’s heart was still racing from their mini-tryst along the 405. Mike’s kiss had tasted like coffee and she was certain hers did as well. But it was morning, what else could be expected? He had run his hand through her hair and caressed her face. He then slid his hand down toward one of her breasts. She granted him a momentary touch but then quickly pulled away. After a few more kisses and an awkward front seat embrace they calmed themselves, and Mike redirected the car into the stream of traffic.

For the remainder of their trip to Thousand Oaks, he held onto her hand and frequently stole a glance at her. A couple of times when the traffic was *stop-and-go*, he leaned over and kissed her again. Surprising herself somewhat, Julie willingly obliged him with equal intensity.

Now at the client site, her concern was for the presentation. She was hoping that Mike could focus his mind on the task at hand and ultimately succeed in getting the business. Meanwhile,

she was also hoping to be able to mask her elation over their budding relationship, although she was quite certain that, at present, her feelings for him were shining out like a searchlight beacon. She resigned herself to simply sit in a corner of the room and look professional. Mike would be doing all the talking anyway. It might take some effort however not to publicly swoon over him, and not to gush if she were required to say something besides, *hello, I'm Julie Predmore, Mike's marketing assistant, (and whatever else he desires as well...)*

On the one hand, she marveled that she had finally given in to him. But Lora's advice had been haunting her all week. She knew Mike would only grant her so many chances before writing her off. Sooner or later, playing the ice queen would push him away, right into somebody else's arms.

Tracy, for example—regardless of what she said for the record—was one girl who would not bat an eyelash before latching onto him like a crab in the height of mating season. Besides, she was now convinced that, in spite of her so-called rule, he was the best thing to come her way since the divorce. Therefore, she did not want to ruin her own chances for future happiness by standing on principle. He was not perfect, of course, and they had already proved that they could find ways to disagree with each other. But in all relationships there were obstacles to overcome. How could this one be any different?

Meanwhile she felt young again. And whether her exhilaration stemmed from Mike's magnetism or from her pent-up need for love, she could not exactly ascertain. But her head was spinning nonetheless.

Introductions accomplished, Mike immediately took command of the meeting. He asked for the co-owners, Bill Clark and Bruce Betts, and their VP of Finance, Chad Stewart, to express their expectations for the session. There was no attempt to mask their desperation; they hoped

SunBurst might be able to guide them through the difficulties their company had recently been experiencing. These troubles were especially puzzling after the firm had had two good years, surpassed its initial goals and achieved a respectable level of success. Now they were at a crossroads. Their success and the growth that had accompanied it were causing them to falter on several fronts. There were employee issues and management issues and space concerns and receivables problems and tax burdens and cash flow difficulties. And they had outgrown their information systems as well.

It was a made-to-order opportunity for Mike.

He began his presentation. Working the PC-based presentation software deftly, he pointed to the images on the projection screen while talking to the concerns expressed previously by the company principals. Julie's slides flowed seamlessly. At Mike's insistence she had interspersed some eye-catching graphics and colorful charts and used various types of dissolves to enhance the overall visual effect. Bill Clark was taking a lot of notes and Bruce Betts' head kept nodding, as if in agreement with everything Mike was saying. For his part, Mike periodically asked if he was communicating his points to their satisfaction, and whether they agreed with SunBurst's proposed solution.

When the presentation concluded, Mike solicited questions. There was only one—from Bruce. "When can we get started?"

Mike replied that it shouldn't be a problem to have a consultant on site within two weeks.

"That would be soon enough."

Chad Stewart wondered what they could do in preparation. Mike handed him a checklist of tasks they could begin performing immediately.

It was as though the whole meeting had been scripted and rehearsed. Mike appeared masterful. Julie could only sit there and admire him, and wonder—*if I have to do presentations like this, will I ever be that smooth? I hope I don't turn out to be a disappointment to him.*

After the handshakes and the ceremonial signing of the work order, Mike offered to take everyone to lunch. They were happy to oblige. Bruce suggested the nearby Santa Fe Grill—*wonderful food and valet parking so we won't get too wet.*



## Chapter Seventeen

At lunch Mike was even more animated than usual. Exuding confidence from the sale, he kept the conversation lively. He even risked allowing his grilled swordfish to get cold so he could involve the rather stone-faced Chad Stewart in a discussion about the present value of capital versus its future value in a non-inflationary economy. Mike explained why leveraging a company's capital assets made perfect sense, especially given the 1997 tax laws. Julie quickly became bored with the topic, especially since it was clear to her that Mike was attempting to impress everyone with his knowledge while also making sure that they would each go away from today's lunch thinking it a worthwhile investment of their time. If this was wining and dining, she considered it rather unpleasant.

As the waiter was pouring coffee, Bill Clark got a call on his cellular. While listening, a curious look came over his face, one indicating surprise or consternation or perhaps both. "You can't be serious," he said. And then, after a brief pause, "Okay, I'll tell them. Thanks for calling."

Bill folded up his flip-phone and shook his head. "You're not going to believe what's been going on while we've been hard at work here," he said, directing his comment to Mike.

"Try us," Bruce replied.

“That was Jackie, back at the office. She just heard a news bulletin on the radio warning motorists to stay off the roads and freeways, especially down in the Valley. Apparently, a bridge has flooded on the 101 and there was a mudslide on the Coast Highway. Both roads are shut down. Nobody’s going anywhere. Meanwhile, several major surface streets are flooding from high water and storm sewer overflow. The authorities are saying that the city is virtually stopped with gridlock and it’s not even rush hour yet.”

“Oh boy,” Bruce said. “I hope you two weren’t planning on getting back home before dinner time.”

“No worries,” Mike said. “Neither of us have anyone to hurry back to. We’ll be fine.”

But Julie was concerned that she could miss her sociology class and, while walking out of the restaurant, she took the opportunity to get in a private word with Mike, reminding him of her commitment.

“I wouldn’t worry too much about class if I were you,” he said. “If things are as bad as they’re saying, I’m sure the university will cancel all of its night classes. If you like, we can give them a call from my car phone.”

“I would like,” Julie said.

“Consider it done.”

Once in the car, Julie dialed the university to set her mind at ease. As luck would have it, Mike was right. Though the official announcement had not been made yet, the woman from the administrative office confidently stated that they would be shutting down very shortly. There would not be any classes tonight.

Julie thanked her and hung up. "You called it," she said. "They're canceling all evening classes."

"Well...now we've got no place to go and nothing to do except watch the rain," Mike told her. He was idling the BMW in the restaurant parking lot, defogging the window glass. "We better not risk driving home right now if the roads are as bad as Bill said."

"Why not turn on the radio and catch a traffic report?"

Mike did so while pulling the car into an empty space in the lot. They sat and listened. Mike reached over and took her hand. "Thanks for your help today. It went perfectly."

"You're welcome. Only I didn't do much."

"You did more than enough." He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it gently.

The familiar musical feed to the traffic and weather report interrupted them, followed by a female announcer's voice:

*"Our traffic aircraft have all been grounded because of the unusually heavy cloud cover and poor visibility, but KFWB radio has just learned that the California Highway Patrol has declared a state of emergency on all area freeways due to flooding and the threat of mudslides. CHP is asking motorists to refrain from driving anywhere if at all possible. If you do go out on the roads, you should be prepared in case you have to abandon your vehicle. Many road surfaces are flooded and impassable, and the CHP is warning that officers will be removing and impounding abandoned cars. The best bet is to stay put, Don."*

*"That's right Elise. Although I'm sure some of our listeners are wondering how they're going to get home from work, or if they might be better off spending the night at the office."*

*"Well they need to keep in mind that they'll be traveling at their own risk."*

*"You and I, on the other hand, we'll probably be at the station for awhile."*

*“You’ve got that right, Don.”*

*“As we reported earlier, thanks to a major mudslide, the PCH is closed in both directions just north of Las Flores Canyon road in Malibu. There is no easy detour there of course. In the San Fernando Valley, flooding has closed the 101 at the Haskell Avenue junction. There’s a backup now all the way to Tarzana where police are routing traffic off the freeway. I-405 is also closed due to the flooding of Ballona Creek. All southbound traffic is being detoured out the Santa Monica Freeway to I-5 where, at least for the moment, there are no reported problems, just heavy volume. Those of you headed home to the Valley better take the Golden State or 170 north to at least Van Nuys or you’re going to find trouble. In the city, many surface streets are carrying water, so beware. Much of West LA is under water and the Los Angeles River is already several feet above flood stage.”*

*“Farther down the coast, there are problems in the San Gabriel and Santa Ana River valleys as well...”*

Mike snapped off the radio. “I’ve heard enough. It doesn’t much look like we’re going to be able to get home tonight.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean we’d better try and get a hotel room or two before there aren’t any vacancies within a hundred miles. It’s a good thing it’s Thursday and not the beginning of the week.”

Reaching into the back seat, Mike grabbed his briefcase and hauled it forward. He opened it and removed his day planner, then closed it again and tossed it back over the seat. Planner in hand, he quickly perused the alphabetical phone listings. “Here’s the number of the Diplomat Suites where I stayed last week. It’s close by, hopefully they can accommodate us.”

He dialed the number on his cellular. Julie simply sat there watching the rain pound the windshield. At the back of the parking lot she could see palm trees swaying, their fronds whipping in the wind. The weather seemed to be getting worse; there was no sky, only low-hanging gray clouds, pregnant with rain.

“Hello,” Mike said. “I’m calling to see about a couple of rooms for the night... Yes, tonight... Well, I’m not going to be fussy; what have you got... Uh-huh... Uh-huh... Yes, I’m a club member... Uh-huh... Okay. Let me guarantee that one then.”

Julie watched as he took out his frequent guest and credit cards and read off the account numbers. Then he thanked the person and hung up.

“Well...?”

“Well, nothing. They only had one room left. Apparently, a lot of people have the same idea.”

“Aren’t you going to try someplace else?”

“No need. This room’s a suite. We’ll have plenty of space for the two of us. Besides, the clerk said he didn’t think there was anything open from here to Ventura.”

“I’m not so comfortable with this.” Julie thought she had better stake out her position early.

“Don’t worry. The suite has two private rooms and I’ll be glad to take the couch. All right?”

“She thought a moment. “I guess so. But just so you know, I’m not sleeping with you Mike. And I don’t even have a toothbrush. Or a change of clothes.”

“We’ll manage,” Mike said. “And of course you don’t have to sleep with me.” He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. “It’ll be fun. Kind of like being stranded on a deserted island. We’ll just have to make the best of it.” He put the car in gear. “Let’s go before the weather gets any worse.”

\* \* \*

The suite looked roomy enough, Julie thought after sizing it up. It was freshly cleaned and scented with that peculiar hotel smell. The front part resembled a living room with couch and chair, a coffee table and a television credenza. There was also a dinette table and three chairs adjacent to a mini-bar and sink. The bathroom was gracious and contained both a shower and a whirlpool tub. The bedroom contained a writing desk with matching chair off by the window, another television set, perched on top of a bureau, and a king-sized bed—plenty of real estate, she acknowledged to herself, in case she changed her mind about making Mike take the pull-out.

On the way to the hotel she had been fighting down butterflies. Now she suddenly felt nauseated. What had she gotten herself into? What would her mother think regarding her handling of this sudden quirk of circumstance? It was odd, she thought, how her mother always came to mind at times when she was facing moral dilemmas.

Mike exited the bathroom where he had gone to relieve himself. He immediately picked up the phone in the front room. “I’m going to call the desk and have housekeeping send up some toothbrushes and toothpaste, a razor and some shave creme.”

“Good idea,” she said, while inspecting the mini-bar list. She felt like she could really use a drink but wondered what Mike had in mind. The prices were outrageous: five dollars for a can of beer. But what did she care? Mike would be picking up the tab—as usual. She was beginning to get accustomed to that at least.

Mike spoke with the clerk and then asked to be transferred to room service. A moment later he was ordering a bottle of Fume Blanc, chilled. Julie ceased wondering what he had on his mind.

“I’m going to call the office and check my voice mail,” he said after setting the receiver down. “Do you need to talk with anyone there?”

“No, I don’t think so,” she replied, thinking: *I can only imagine what they’ll be saying about me after this.*

“Why don’t you take off your shoes and relax for a few minutes? I’ve ordered some wine. At least we don’t have to rough it.”

Julie’s head was swimming. This had all happened so fast. And now, here she was, about to play house with Mike Tattersall, a man who two weeks ago she didn’t know beyond the daily *hello, how are you doing?*

Two suppositions were competing for her attention as she sat down on the bed and pulled off her shoes. Mistrustful of his intentions, she wondered if he had planned this cozy arrangement in advance. Then again, she knew they wouldn’t be here at all except for the storm, and as clever as Mike was, he wasn’t capable of controlling the weather. So, their being here in a hotel room together with nothing to do but wait for the storm to pass must simply be happenstance, an act of God, so to speak. And if that were the case, which it most certainly must be, why not allow the evening to progress naturally? *Just let’s see where things end up*, she thought. *I can always put on the brakes and tell him I need to be alone.*

Mike hung up the phone and walked back to the bedroom where she was sitting, one leg up on the bed, massaging her toes.

“Here, let me do that for you.” He sat down next to her and lifted her leg onto his lap. His hands were strong; she winced as he pressed his thumb on the joint between her third and fourth toes. “Sorry, is that too much pressure?”

“A little. It’s sore from being in pumps all day. What’s up at the office?”

“Nothing of consequence. The weather is the big story everywhere. Apparently some of the boats in the marina are taking a lashing. Kind of makes me glad I don’t own a yacht. Just one

more thing to worry about.” He continued rubbing her left foot with one hand while lifting her right leg onto his lap with the other. Julie scrunched her butt back slightly and pulled her skirt down. Even with that, there was way too much leg showing. She hoped he wasn’t going to get any ideas just because she was letting him rub her feet.

“This is really some coincidence; don’t you think?”

“What’s that?” she asked, knowing full well what he meant.

“The two of us here, together for the night. And, who knows? We may be stuck here for days.”

“I certainly hope not.”

“Oh come on. Where’s your sense of adventure? Besides, it’s either this or work. Which do you prefer?”

“Unfair question,” Julie replied.

“What do you mean—unfair question?” He was looking directly into her eyes, smiling somewhat, obviously in a playful mood.

Julie took him on, “it’s unfair because both choices have to do with you.”

“So what? I just want to know which one you’d prefer; that’s all.”

“All right then. I’m going to have to say work.”

“Work? Why work?”

“Because work I know. This, on the other hand…”

Mike let out a feisty growl, and switched from massaging her feet to tickling them. She giggled as she pulled her legs back from off his lap. “Wrong answer,” he said, shaking his head. He leaned over and brushed his nose against hers. “Let’s see if we can’t get you to change your mind.” He clasped her in a bear hug and drew her lips to him. Julie gasped from his grip but



nevertheless offered him first her lips and then her open mouth. Her time had come and she knew it. She was going to have to either put up or shut up.

A moment later, there was a knock at the door. The wine had arrived.

While the young man opened the bottle, Julie stood up, straightened her hair and walked over to look out the window. They were on the fourth floor. But even from here she could not see the distance of a city block. Rain was beating on the glass, and on everything else for that matter. For the first time since leaving home this morning, she thought about her villa. Fortunately, the landlord had put on a new roof before she moved in, but being as close as she was to the ocean, she wondered if this rain would flood her out. A freak storm a month-and-a-half ago brought water up into her sun porch, and a few of her neighbors had to bail out their garages and kitchens. Two inches of early morning rain fell during an unusually high tide and several doormats ended up clogging storm drains on Balboa Boulevard. Conditions today seemed equally bad to her if not worse, and if it was raining like this in Newport Beach, half her possessions could be floating by now. She couldn't bear the thought of everything she owned getting ruined. Then what would she do? Plus, in spite of all the warnings about the expected severity of this year's storms, she had not bothered to get flood insurance.

Meanwhile, back here at the Diplomat Inn, she was entirely in the hands of a near stranger. She watched as he poured two glasses of wine and carried them back to the bedroom where she stood. She quickly re-fixed her gaze north toward the mountains—except they weren't visible. Only clouds could be seen hanging in the air like huge gray ghosts, and water everywhere.

“Let's turn on the TV,” she suggested. “I'm a little bit worried about my house. I'd like to see what the weather's like down the coast.”

“Okay,” Mike said. “We've got all afternoon and evening. We can do anything you want.”

They sipped wine while switching between local stations and the Weather Channel, but nothing was said about how deep the water might be on the Balboa Peninsula. After about an hour, Julie could only suppose that no news was good news, at least where her neighborhood was concerned. Finally, Mike flicked off the tube. "It's too depressing," he said.

"What do you say we try out that whirlpool?"

"I don't think so, Mike."

"Just checking to see what you were up for," he said.

"Well, I'm not up for that. It would be one thing if I had a bathing suit, but as you know..."

"We could go in in our underwear. It'd be a good way to get them clean for tomorrow."

"Uh-uh. No way! I'll just wash my things out in the sink later, thank you very much."

"Okay. Just let me know if you change your mind."

"I'm not going to change it," she said with conviction. But she wondered, *why not?* The tub would probably be relaxing, and it might be fun to fool around with Mike in the water, and it would certainly be nice to see him naked, which he would, for all practical purposes, be. All she had to do was say the word and he would be off running the water. Only problem was—she would end up just as naked and there would be no stopping what might happen next. *We'll just have to remain clothed*, she thought. *Don't want to tempt fate.*

She was beginning to feel relaxed from the wine and suddenly quite warm as well. She got up from the couch and removed her suit jacket, setting it on the adjacent chair. As if on cue, Mike also stood up and walked into the bedroom where he tuned the bedside radio to a soft rock station. Coming back, he extended his hands toward her. "Let's dance a little."

"I'm a lousy dancer," Julie said, sitting down again.

"Let me be the judge of that."

She hesitantly went along, allowing him to pull her up from the couch. He embraced her with both arms and she draped hers around his neck. She could feel her heart beating abnormally fast. She also recognized that a tingle had found its way up into her chest. *This is really happening*, she realized. *It's not a dream*. Mike was obviously getting aroused as well. She felt him pressing himself against her. They swayed slowly to the music until the second song was over and the station cut to a commercial. Then, Mike slid his right hand behind her head and turned her face to his. Their lips met and Julie felt herself melting in his arms.

After kissing her he reached down and put one arm under her legs. In one effortless move he lifted her from the floor and began carrying her into the bedroom. He laid her on the bed and started unfastening her skirt. Like a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming vehicle, Julie was both stunned and mesmerized. Mike slipped off her skirt and then his own trousers, setting them both on the desk chair. He removed his watch and set it on the bureau. Next he turned the radio off and lay down next to Julie.

“Let me take off your blouse so we don’t wrinkle it,” he said. Fortunately for her at that moment, his words broke the spell.

“No Mike. I don’t want you to do that.” But there she lay, on the bed in her pantyhose. And she could see that Mike was already enormously stimulated, his boxers scarcely concealing his desire.

“Come on Julie. I really want you. I’ve wanted you since the day I first saw you. I can’t wait any longer.”

“You’ve got to wait, Mike. I’m not ready to have sex with you. Let’s just enjoy being with each other.”

But he did not wait. In the next few moments, Mike Tattersall removed his shirt and undershirt until he was clothed only in his boxer shorts. Then he took Julie by the hands and sat her upright. While kissing her up and down her face with hot little kisses he reached behind her to unbutton her blouse.

“Please Mike, don’t,” she protested.

“Don’t fight it Julie. You want me too; I can tell.”

For some inexplicable reason she did not resist as he slipped her blouse from off her shoulders, though she believed she ought to stop him somehow. But he had read her right; she did want him. Her loins were throbbing with desire for him. Only she wasn’t going to tell him so.

Next, Mike unhooked her bra and removed it. “You are even more beautiful than I imagined,” he said before kissing her again, this time on the lips. Then he lay her down on the bed again and began to gently ease off her panties and pantyhose one leg at a time. And when he finished she lay there, naked.

My God,” he said. “Your body is exquisite.”

Julie felt her skin begin to crawl with goose bumps even as Mike’s hands roved all over her. She couldn’t believe that she had allowed him to undress her—completely, and that, despite her inner pangs of conscience, she did not stop him. This was so unlike her. She had always kept herself under control where sex was concerned. Danny had been her only partner and they had married soon after she first allowed him to make love to her. Now, she lay here on a strange bed in a strange city with this man, feeling both the pricks of her own conscience and the exhilaration of physical arousal. And Mike was quickly driving her over the edge of restraint. She could not let him go on.

“Here,” he said. “I’ll give you the pleasure of taking off my shorts.”

She ignored his suggestion. "I'm a little cold," she said, hoping to sound sincere, but it was a lie.

"Let me pull down the covers and we can climb in together."

"I think I'm ready for that bath now."

"Let's make love first."

"No Mike, we're not going to make love."

"Come on Julie. I'm about to burst with desire for you."

"I'll go run the water." And with that, she jumped up off the bed and disappeared into the bathroom. She slipped into one of the two terry cloth robes that hung behind the door and began filling the tub. Mike appeared in the doorway, completely naked now. She could see that he'd lost some enthusiasm from his earlier state. *Good, she thought. I'm beginning to get things back under control.*

There was a knock on the door. "Who the hell can that be?" Mike said.

"I don't know but you're going to look mighty silly answering it like that." She grabbed the other robe off its hook and tossed it to him. "Here, put this on first."

It was a housekeeper delivering the requested toiletries. Mike asked her to wait momentarily while he got some money for a tip. When he arrived back in the bathroom, Julie was sitting in the tub.

They played around in the water for almost an hour. Julie thought it best to keep him there as long as possible. But she could not deny that she was having a good time. Fortunately, the whirlpool, though roomy, was not nearly large enough for any acrobatics. But Mike still found plenty to do to keep occupied. When they started getting get cold, they washed each other and ran some clean, warm water to rinse.

While toweling themselves, Julie decided to make her stand. "I'm having fun with you tonight Mike and I'm actually glad we got stranded here together. I just have to ask you to do one thing for me."

"What's that?"

"Please respect my feelings about going *all the way*. I can't let that happen, and I..."

"Shh, Shh," he said, cutting her off. "Let me just take you to bed. We'll only do what comes naturally."

"No intercourse, Mike. Do you understand?"

"Julie, Julie," he said, whispering into her ear as he wrapped his long arms around her neck. "You can't deny you want me and I *definitely* want you."

"That's beside the point," she said, pushing him away. "I need you to give me your word. I need to be able to trust you; that's all."

He thought a moment, then said, "you can trust me."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Good. I'm hungry," she exclaimed, like a bolt out of the blue. "Can we order something to eat?"

"How can you think about food at a time like this?"

"Come on. We've got all night to be together."

"I thought I was sleeping on the couch."

"Not if you're a good boy."

\* \* \*

They ordered room service and sat on the couch watching TV and waiting for the food to arrive. Mike poured some fresh wine from the bottle they'd ordered. Julie eyed him, admiring his good looks. His face had turned bright crimson, no doubt from the bath and the way she was denying him, playing him like a yo-yo. She, on the other hand, felt fantastic, now that she was in command. There was only the tiniest twinge of conscience left nagging her. Their being together like this couldn't possibly be within the realm of moral acceptability. But it was like Mike had said—they were doing what came naturally.

After they ate and brushed their teeth, Mike snapped off the television and wooed her into the bedroom once again. He disrobed her first, then himself. He pulled down the bed covers. "Lie with me," he said. "I want to hold you close."

"As long as you mind yourself," Julie said.

"I'll be good."

She climbed in with him, trusting him, looking forward to being held. She sensed more exhilaration than from a runner's high, feelings she hadn't felt in years. Perhaps it was the wine but she now knew how much she had been missing the touch of a man.

Once wrapped in each other's arms, they rolled around on the bed, holding each other tightly. Hardly a minute or two passed before she realized that their bodies were aligned physiologically, in nature's way. She sensed the danger of their position. Mike obviously felt the natural alignment as well and he quickly took advantage of the physics at play.

"Mike, stop! You promised."

"I can't help it, Julie. You're so ready and I'm so...so hot!"

In a split-second he had entered her, gliding in hard and fast. She fought to pull herself away. “No! No! Please Mike, get off me.” She screamed and pushed against him but it was useless. He had her drawn tight to himself and was holding her there with his embrace. She beat against him with her fists but he just kept thrusting himself into her soft, moistened flesh.

She shrieked in agony and began to cry, feeling both physical pain and mental anguish, but just that quickly it was over. Mike was spending himself inside her, his whole body convulsing with the delivery. Then his muscles began to go slack. She quickly squirmed out from underneath him. Leaving him there on the bed, she grabbed her robe, escaped to the bathroom and locked the door behind her.

Thoughts whirred in her head—frightening thoughts, despairing thoughts, thoughts of deep remorse. She imagined herself getting pregnant with his child. She was undoubtedly still fertile at forty. And unlike Danny, Mike had probably not had his tubes snipped.

She then envisioned herself at the doctor’s office receiving a diagnosis of “HIV Positive,” or “Genital Herpes,” or some other equally horrifying, sexually contracted malady. She felt dirty, but mostly she worried how she could ever face him again.

She could not face him. But neither could she remain in this bathroom all night. One thought in particular kept ringing in her head like the tolling of a church bell—she had been raped!

Mike Tattersall had raped her.

There would never be any going back to the way things were before—hopeful and anticipatory, loving and warm. Her trust in him had been completely violated. He ruined everything for one fleeting moment of gratification. Their relationship and future had been sacrificed for one body-racking orgasm.



Certainly, he would not see it the same way. *He's much too self-absorbed to feel any of this,* she realized. She could only guess at his thoughts when a knock came on the door.

"Julie, open up... I want to talk to you."

"Damn you, Mike."

"Julie, come on. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Go away Mike. Leave me alone."

"I just got carried away; that's all."

"Right. And that's what I'm going to tell the police when they find your body! '*I just got carried away; that's all.*' Damn you, Mike; that's all. Damn you to hell!"

There was no reply.

Julie Baker Predmore slumped to the floor in the private bathroom of room 415 and wept. She was dressed only in the hotel-provided attire—a white robe with an embroidered 'Diplomat' logo on the left breast. Outside, a massive storm raged all across the Southland, a storm that was not only making a mess of LA, but of her life as well. And now, as if she were in some sort of queer, harmonic balance with the elements, there was an equally gigantic storm raging in her heart.



## Chapter Eighteen

At five-thirty exactly, Danny Predmore left his office and hopped the down-bound elevator, joining four other people headed out for the weekend. He pushed the button for the third floor. Valerie Robinson had promised to meet him there, just outside the Peninsula Title office suite.

It was Super Bowl Weekend; there were lots of preparations being made for the biggest party day of the year. Everyone was gearing up for an early start on the festivities. But, for the first time in recent memory, Danny could care less about any of that.

At “3” the elevator car suddenly became too small to accept all the awaiting passengers so Danny stepped off. He walked over to where Valerie was standing and took her by the hand. “Let’s take the stairs. It’ll probably be faster.”

When they got into the stairwell he stopped, leaned over to her and gave her a kiss on the cheek. “Happy birthday,” he said, graciously.

She smiled back at him, her cheeks flushing slightly. “Thanks.”

“Twenty-one. Wow. That’s a great year. You’ve got your whole life ahead of you.”

They walked downstairs and out of the building. Danny apologized to her that he had not warmed up the car. “I should have done at least that much for you on your birthday.”

“No, you shouldn’t have,” Valerie told him. “You are doing enough just by taking me out.”

“But it’s my pleasure to take you out.”

She slipped her arm around him and hugged his waist. “You’re so sweet.”

“That’s funny,” he said. “I’ve always thought so too, but you’re the first person to notice.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“It’s true. I’m largely misunderstood by everyone—except you.”

“Well, that’s what friends are for—to understand each other.”

“Then that’s what we’ll drink to this evening—to understanding!”

“And friendship,” she added.

“And friendship.”

They got into Danny’s car, and after he scraped some ice crystals off the windshield, they drove out of the building parking lot and up the northbound I-75 ramp toward Lake Orion. They were going to one of Danny’s favorite places—Billy’s Steak House.

The freeway was clogged, as usual. But Danny noticed how much faster the drive went with someone to keep him company while he drove. Actually, Valerie talked almost non-stop, unloading her workday experiences. He wondered who got to hear these things on nights when he wasn’t around, basically every other night of her life.

Upon entering the old roadhouse, Danny gave his name to the hostess. He and Valerie were immediately seated in a booth in the rear dining room. The ambience suggested warmth and romance and Valerie’s face glowed in the yellow-lit room. Had Danny not already made up his mind that she was off-limits, he would have been totally smitten with her.

Still, he managed to puff up with pride every time she looked at him with her dark eyes. Her look spoke volumes about how highly she regarded him, and how she was happier to be here with him tonight than anywhere else she could have gone in celebration of her birthday.

“So, tell me,” he said, opening the wine list, “what should we order to toast the rest of your life?”

She let out a laugh. “I have no idea. I’ve never tasted anything but beer and I didn’t like that very much.”

“How about some champagne?” He hated champagne but believed Valerie might find it to her liking.

“Sounds good to me.”

“Then champagne it will be.” Danny handed her one of the menus. “Here you go. Pick out whatever you want for dinner.”

When the waiter came by, Danny asked for a bottle of French Brut, not the best on the list, but still \$45.00 a bottle. He made a brief show of looking at the menu but the tenderloin tips had been on his mind since lunch. Meanwhile, Valerie studied her menu diligently. Danny took the opportunity to admire her from across the table. She was wearing a green Scottish plaid jumper over a white turtleneck shirt. Her hair curled beautifully about her forehead, framing her angelic face. She wore little makeup; Danny figured she did not really need any at all. She was a natural beauty.

At that moment she looked up and caught him staring.

“What?” Her eyes widened.

“Nothing. You’re beautiful, that’s all. And I like your outfit.”

She cocked her head slightly. “Thanks. It’s one of my casual Friday outfits. Real comfy.”

“So what did you decide on?”

“I don’t know for sure. But I think maybe the whitefish.”

“Good choice. You’ll like that for sure.”

Their champagne arrived and they ordered dinner. Danny lifted his glass to her. “Here’s to *understanding...*”

“And *friendship*,” she added.

“I was getting to that,” Danny said as they clinked glasses.

“I didn’t want you to forget.”

His instincts were correct. She liked the champagne. Danny warned her however not to drink it too fast. She remained in her chatty mood, giving him chapter and verse of her struggles to become more independent of her parents. She could not understand why they didn’t recognize her maturity level, and why they would not let loose on the reins. For instance, why should she have to constantly report her whereabouts to them? Shouldn’t a young woman with an Associate’s Degree and a full time job be able to conduct her life with some modicum of privacy? But no; her parents wanted to be informed of everything she did and everywhere she went. Danny agreed with her position, but at the same time he tried to help her understand that her parents loved her and probably worried about her. Considering how beautiful she was (and how outgoing), he could understand why they might be concerned. But it was too much, he told her, to try to control her life down to every move, or to deal with her like she was a teenager—which clearly she no longer was. “It’s just hard for some parents to let go,” he said.

“Well, if they don’t start to let go soon, they’re going drive me out of the house.”

“Maybe that’s what you need,” Danny said. “To get out of their house and into a place of your own.”

“I would really like to do that. But I don’t have the money right now.”

Danny thought of offering her refuge at his house should she ever need it, but he stopped short. “Well, if you want, I’ll help you put together a financial plan for how to comfortably make the move. I’ve got a good track record with money management.”

“Do you really think you could help me? I’m pretty poor, you know.”

“I’m certain of it.”

Their dinners arrived and while Valerie was attending to hers, Danny asked her the obvious question, “what did you tell your parents you were doing tonight for your birthday?”

“I told them I was going out to dinner with a friend from work. And not to wait up for me, 'cause I may be out late or stay the night.”

“And they weren’t suspicious?”

“They had to cut me a break—after all, it is my birthday.” She took in a forkful of her fish. “And I didn’t say they weren’t suspicious; they’re always suspicious. But, I’m a good girl, remember, so I’ve never given them any reason to doubt my word.”

Danny could see that. He would not doubt her either if he were her dad—actually her step-dad, as he recalled. Nonetheless, attempting to view the situation from her parents’ position, the only thing that might concern him was that she, perhaps somewhat naively, had put herself entirely into his hands for the evening, obviously trusting him not to take advantage of her. But then again, her step-dad had no way of knowing any of this. And that was most assuredly a good thing.

“Well, drink up then,” he recommended. “Sounds like you have a whole night of independence ahead of you.” But she needed no encouragement; she had already neglected his warning about the champagne.

Valerie asked him to tell her about his trip and how things were going between him and Julie. “I don’t know,” he replied. It’s kind of hard to judge. All we’ve done is write e-mail back and forth.”

“Did you tell her you’re coming out there?”

“No. I want it to be a surprise.”

“Do you think she’ll be happy to see you?”

“That’s hard to say.” He picked up the bottle and refilled her glass. He had only drunk a few swallows of his own. “The thing that bothers me is that she seems so distant in her letters. It’s like we were never close.”

“She’s probably just being self-protective. You know, she doesn’t want to get hurt again.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.” He carved up a too-large chunk of steak before putting it into his mouth. “So, how do I get her to drop her guard?”

“Just be yourself, Danny. Like you are with me.”

Hearing her say these words, Danny became encouraged. He sensed that he’d already arrived at the place he needed to be in order to win Julie back. He *did* know how to treat a woman in precisely the way women want to be treated. Valerie just said so herself.

He set to carving up another piece of meat. “I just have to keep reminding myself that the past is the past. And you know what?”

“What?”

“I have you to thank for helping me really believe that.”

She slid closer to him on the padded seat and kissed him on the cheek. “You’re so sweet,” she said, and rested her head against his shoulder.



He quickly changed the subject. “You’ll never believe what my company expects me to do in the upcoming year.”

“Tell me.”

By the time they finished their meals Valerie had become giddy. And Danny felt a little guilty for having gotten her drunk. Since her car was still parked in the office building lot in Troy, he knew he couldn’t take her back there any time soon and let her drive home in her present state. He thought over his options for a moment and then suggested, “how ’bout we order some coffee and dessert?”

“Only if I can have an after dinner drink. I’ve always wanted an after dinner drink.”

You don’t need an after dinner drink, he thought, but did not say.

“Sure, whatever you want. It’s your night.”

Upon returning to their table, the waiter, when asked for a recommendation, suggested the signature brandy—at six- fifty a glass. Danny could have predicted as much. But then, he hadn’t had brandy in the space of Valerie’s lifetime either, so he merrily agreed to two glasses, along with two coffees and two slabs of Billy’s legendary double-chocolate cake. What’s a birthday without cake, anyway?

Danny conceded to himself that the waiter deserved a decent tip when Valerie, with a look of pure delight on her face, said she liked the brandy even more than the champagne. Unfortunately it delivered the knockout blow, putting her deep into the ozone, where even the coffee couldn’t reach her.

Not knowing what else to do, after paying the bill and helping Valerie with her coat, he led her to the car, buckled her up, got in himself and began driving toward his house. She yammered

the whole way, though it was a short drive, slurring her words somewhat and rambling on about this and that—“Dinner was fand-dastic. The cake was ‘to die for.’ I feel posid-div-ly wonderful. Danny, you are such a dear...”

He hoped she did not object, he said, but he was going to take her to his house to give her some time to sober up. “Great,” she said. “It’s way too early to go home anyway, ‘specially on my birthday. Do you have any brandy at your house?”

“Don’t be silly.” Danny said.

“Why not? I like being silly. I never get to jus’ be silly anymore. It’s fun.”

After pulling the car into his garage, he told her to wait until he came around to help her out. He lifted her arm around his shoulder and led her through the kitchen door.

After hanging her coat, he helped her to the living room couch. “Relax a few minutes,” he said. “I’m going to go put some coffee on.”

By the time he came back she was gone.

Danny walked down the hall in search of her. But upon hearing sound emanating from the bathroom he headed back to the living room to wait for her return, settling himself into his favorite chair. After a few moments he heard the squeak of the bathroom door and watched for her to emerge from the hallway. When she did not immediately appear, he set off in search of her once again.

He got all the way to his bedroom before finding her. She had turned on the light and was looking around.

“I thought you got lost.”

“I’m just taking a tour,” she said, grabbing onto one of the posts at the foot of his bed.

“Sorry it’s such a mess,” he said. “I’m not the neatest housekeeper.”

“At least you made your bed.”

“My mother taught me that.”

“Yeah,” she acknowledged. “Mothers are like that.”

“I put on some coffee.”

“I know.”

“Come on. I’ll show you around the rest of the house.”

“Okay.”

Danny pointed out his master bathroom but cautioned her not to go inside. He had not picked up after himself this morning. Plus, he deliberately left out all his toiletries so he would not forget to pack what he needed for the trip. He took her by the hand and led her into his office, Daniel’s old room. His computer sat quietly on the desk there. Against the wall stood a bookshelf containing various manuals, binders and paperbacks, haphazardly arranged. Assorted papers lay scattered on the floor, along with a couple of beer cans and a near-empty bowl of pretzels. He realized that, like his bedroom, the office was in dire need of straightening. It embarrassed him that she was seeing everything in such disarray. But she did not seem to mind.

From there they went into Clarrie’s old room, which looked pretty much as it did when his daughter lived at home, except that all her pictures and personal items had gone with her to college. Valerie said she liked the pink and white-striped wallpaper, and the balloon-style curtains. The bed looked comfortable, she added.

Finally, they proceeded back down the hall toward the living room. She clung to his shoulder as they walked, bumping into him along the way.

“There’s the dining room, which I hardly ever use,” he told her. “Julie got all the good dishes in the divorce settlement anyway.” He led her back toward the couch. “Well, that’s pretty much

all of it, except for the lavatory. The basement's finished but it's kind of a mess down there. Plus, I have the heat turned off downstairs."

He helped her seat herself again on the old blue couch with the poofy pillows, a remnant of his married life. Julie had picked it out without having consulted him first. But then again, he had never been much of a furniture shopper.

"It's a nice house," she said, adjusting one of the pillows behind her.

"I'm glad you like it." He did not know what to say next until he remembered the coffee. "I'll go get us some coffee." He turned on his heel and left her alone again.

He returned carrying two mugs of steaming brew and put them down on coasters on the coffee table.

"Come here; sit next to me," Valerie suggested. "We can talk."

As he did so he felt a little bit like he was back in college again. Like he had taken Julie out on a date, gotten her looped and invited her back to his apartment to see what might develop. He of course felt a strong attraction to Valerie; it was futile to think otherwise. But he had already made a commitment to himself to respect her, to treat her appropriately, and not to try to make anything out of the relationship beyond the bond of friendship. Now, alone with her in his house, sitting next to her warm body, he was struggling to remember why it would not be a good idea to try and seduce her.

She turned herself so as to better converse with him. "You know what I've been thinking?"

"No idea," he replied, noting that she seemed to be getting a second wind.

"I've been thinking that here I am twenty-one years old, in the prime of my life and I have nobody to love. It's ridiculous. Most of my girlfriends from church are either engaged or married already. And I am just getting old, all alone."

“I’m sure it can’t be as bad as all that,” Danny said, studying her. “You may feel old, but take my word for it, your life is just beginning. And besides, I’m sure there’s a guy out there—right around the next bend probably—who you’ll fall madly in love with.”

“I doubt that.”

“Why? You’re beautiful—ravishing, really. What man wouldn’t want to find someone like you? I only regret not being born twenty years later than I was.”

She leaned over to kiss him on the cheek. “You’re sweet,” she told him for the third or fourth time tonight. “You have no idea, Danny, what it’s like ‘cause you’re so different from my parents. They are so strict; they don’t want me to date any guys who aren’t members of the church, or at least Christians. And so there’s no place where I can go and meet guys except church, and that doesn’t leave me with many choices. Besides, the church guys are such geeks.”

“I’m sure your parents want the best for you. They’re just being a little over-protective; that’s all.”

“I know.” She picked up her coffee mug and blew some steam off the top. She audibly slurped some coffee. “I really love them, you know.”

“I’m sure you do.”

“I think what they’re afraid of is, if I don’t live my life according to their standards, I’ll end up with some guy who’ll beat me up or run around on me or something. But the thing is, Christian marriages are just as likely to end in divorce as any other marriage is these days.”

Danny didn’t know what to say in response to this last statement, but he tried again to encourage her, “Don’t worry; you’ve got so much to offer someone. You’re not going to end up as a statistic.”

“I’m not so sure, Danny.” She paused to take another sip, then continued to verbalize her thoughts, “I think Christian kids like me get married way too soon because they aren’t allowed to have sex any other way. Then, once they find out who the other person really is, it’s divorce court time.”

She went back to her coffee. Danny watched her, admiringly.

After setting her mug down she went on, “And I’m probably the next victim. I’d already *be* one if I dated more often, like the guys I met at college. All *they* ever wanted was my body.” She turned to him again and looked right into his eyes. “Tell me something, Danny.”

“What’s that?”

“Were you a virgin when you got married?”

“Not exactly.”

Valerie giggled at his response. “What does that mean—‘not exactly?’”

“Julie and I dated for a while, and after we got engaged, we thought it would be all right to, you know…”

“To have sex.”

“Right. We knew we were going to get married so we figured it was okay.”

“But you see, that’s exactly my point. I couldn’t even do what you did without committing a sin, and according to the church, sex is the worst kind of sin, ‘cause you commit it with your body. It’s true of course, but that doesn’t change the way a person feels inside.”

Danny began to feel the import of her internal struggle. The one burning passion that every young person has, the thing everyone wants most in life, this was the very thing that Valerie had been taught to run away from. It was as though she was fighting against her very own soul. She could either give in to her desires, or virtuously attempt to defy both nature and her own

physiological instincts. There would be no victory regardless of the outcome. Marriage was the only way out of the dilemma. But then, how could you be sure you were picking the right partner—your *soul mate*, so to speak?

He took her hands and held them. “Hang in there, Valerie. You’ll get through this.”

She put her head on his chest. “Hold me, Danny. Just hold me.”

Danny put his arms around her and for the first time felt the softness of her breasts as she pressed against him. He also felt the warmth of her breath on his neck and the gentle grip of her hands as she wrapped her fingers up over the top of his shoulders from behind. With his senses full to overflowing with her, he found himself fighting back an unbelievable urge to kiss her. It was she, however, that saved him the agony of restraint when she presented her lips to his.

They kissed gently and lingered together for a moment. Danny pulled away first. “I don’t think this is a very good idea.”

“Why not? Don’t you like me, Danny?” She ran one hand down the side of his face.

“Of course I like you, Valerie. You’re probably the best friend I have. But I’m an old man and you’ve just had a little too much to drink.”

“Come on, I want you to kiss me again.”

He of course wanted the same thing, but he did not want to ruin the specialness they had by allowing something romantic to get in the middle. And mostly he did not want to rob her of the flower of her youth, something he knew he could easily do if he let down his own artificial defenses.

“All right,” he said, giving in temporarily, mainly because of his deep regard for her, and because he could not bring himself to deny her what was in his power to give, especially on this night—her night. “But only once more.”

They kissed again and he carefully lay her head down on his lap. With one hand he began stroking her hair. He could tell that she was still slightly inebriated and therefore somewhat confused, feeling desires which she'd been forced to suppress since early adolescence. He had seen drowsiness in her eyes earlier and consequently he hoped she might fall off to sleep if he could get her to relax. Once asleep, maybe she could overcome her birthday melancholia, a painful mournful state, one with which he had acute familiarity, having been there himself not a fortnight ago. With some sleep she could likely revive her predominant spirit, slough off the night, the champagne and the brandy all together, and especially her amorous feelings for him. In addition, explaining her whereabouts to her parents would be better left for morning when she would have a clear head on her shoulders and the usual spring in her step once again. He could take her to her car before heading down to Metro Airport for his 1:00 flight to California.

He was right. In about ten minutes she was sliding off toward dreamland. Feeling her grow heavy with sleep, he tried to get up without waking her. But, while attempting to put a pillow under her head, she stirred again and mumbled something unintelligible.

"Shh." he said. "Go to sleep. I'll get you a blanket."

"I don't want to sleep here."

"Well, you certainly can't go home in your condition."

"No, no, Danny. I want to sleep in your room...with you."

"I don't know, Valerie."

She lifted her head up and looked at him with sad eyes. "Not for sex, Danny. I can't have sex, remember? I just want you to hold me. That's all."

So, Danny took her to his bedroom, but as he tried to get her to lie down, she protested again. She didn't want to wrinkle her clothes. So, gingerly, he helped her out of her jumper and blouse,



and for a moment he stood there gaping at her—at the young lovely body he was about to hold in his arms for an entire night, at her magnificent breasts, her graceful round bottom, the soft protrusion of her belly, all adorned with white satin underclothes. And inwardly he cursed himself for being so damn old and so damn concerned that he didn't spoil their friendship or her innocence, such that he shook at the very thought of violating her. And then he sat her on the bed and, seeing her shiver, he went to his closet for one of his old cotton button-downs that she could wear for a nightshirt.

He put her into his bed and covered her with the sheet and quilt. He then went into the bathroom to undress and, looking at his own aging, not nearly so magnificent body in the mirror, he thought it best to put on some pajamas—a clean pair, of course. He brushed his teeth, straightened his hair and used the toilet before returning to her.

“Hold me, Danny,” she said, somewhat sleepily.



## Chapter Nineteen

Julie could not remember a worse day in her life. Even the divorce had been easier to handle. Two years ago she had marched through the long spring days leading up to the dissolution of her marriage with her head held high. She had done nothing wrong; Danny had been the one at fault, his immaturity finally catching up with him. Plus, during that whole stretch of time she cultivated hope for her future and thoughts of a new life—a fresh start out on the West Coast with no chains on her there, no husband, no kids to care for and no more five-month winters. She passed the time daydreaming about how she might craft her new existence. She would go back to college and finally earn the degree that was denied her when she got pregnant with Daniel. She would become a career woman.

But none of that seemed important to her any longer. In fact, hardly anything mattered at all. She just wanted to crawl into a corner and die. Her mind kept replaying the horrid scene in the hotel room. Over and over she would relive the moment when her entire world had spun out of control. And who could be blamed but herself? She had been so reckless and naive.

Thank God Trace had proved to be a true friend. And Remy too, for that matter. At least she had the two of them.

After crying her eyes out in the hotel suite bathroom, she had managed to gather her wits long enough to go out and collect her clothes. Mike was standing in the bedroom doorway still dressed in his white robe, one hand on his hip and the other conducting animated supplication. He tried to get her to talk, told her she was overreacting. She ignored him. And fortunately, he did not attempt to arrest her physically. She quickly escaped his nerve-jangling gaze, locking herself in the bathroom again. She got dressed, rinsed out her eyes and applied some makeup. Then she walked out the door, wishing she never had to see his face again, but realizing that he was still her boss, and she had no idea what to do about that.

She called Trace from a lobby telephone and told her she was stranded at the Diplomat in Thousand Oaks, that there was no way she would be getting into a car with Mike again, and was there anything Trace could do to help? It was nine-thirty and the rain had only just begun to let up, but after thinking a moment, Trace told her to sit tight. She would call Remy. Come hell or high water (both of which had arrived already, of course), they would be there to pick her up.

They arrived a little after midnight. Remy drove his Suburban; four-wheeling it all the way up from Costa Mesa, passing through standing water and detouring around the deeper washouts along the route.

When Julie saw them come through the revolving door, she leapt off the lobby couch and into Tracy's arms, tears spontaneously erupting again and streaming down her cheeks. Then the three of them hopped into the front seat of Remy's truck and headed back down the coast. On the way she told them what had happened, leaving out some of the parts where she had led Mike on a little too overtly and shared his passionate feelings to the point of wanting him to do everything possible with her—short of physical union, that is.

"I told you he was trouble," Trace reminded her.

“Tracy, give her a break, will you? She’s been through an ordeal.”

“I know that, Rem. But the guy’s bad news, pure and simple.” She swung her head around and barked again at Julie, “I hope you’re going to have him charged with rape.”

“I don’t know, Trace. I’d rather not have to relive any of this if you want to know the truth.”

“Well, at least file a suit for sexual harassment against him then. He and his kind need to be slapped down, hard!”

But the real truth about how Julie felt was simply this: She was far from certain that she could make any charges at all stick against Mike. And, she certainly did not want to have to defend her own honor in a court of law, starting off as the presumed victim but remaining so only until some slick trial lawyer—the best of which Mike could easily afford—managed to turn the tables on her under cross examination. That would be like pouring salt into her already deep and jagged wound. No, there would not be any pressing of charges; she just wanted to walk away from the whole tangled and tawdry affair—but how?

Slowly but surely Remy got them back home, picking his way along the freeway system and surface streets, many of which had been a yard deep in rushing water and torrents of mud six hours previous. Owing to the lateness of the hour and Tracy’s early starting time at work, they agreed to drop Julie at her house and all get some sleep before the sun came up. Trace promised to look in on her woe-begotten friend later in the afternoon, when all her sales calls were done and she was free for the weekend.

By morning, after tossing and turning in her bed for the remainder of the night, Julie had sunk even lower than the state she occupied when her friends met her at the Diplomat. She could not bring herself to see or talk to anyone. Unable to cope, she first called into work, claiming she

was taking a personal day. Then she force-fed herself a bagel and washed it down with some coffee. She decided to clean the house and did so with more thoroughness than she ever had before. She tried to get into her college reading but could not keep her mind on the subjects. Finally, at about four o'clock, she put on some jogging clothes, pulled her car into a metered public lot nearby and went out running, hoping that when Tracy came, she would not find her home. In a way it was cruel, but Trace would have to understand. She needed to be alone.

She ran for well over an hour putting foot over foot, through sodden sand on the deserted beach, past some costly destruction in the harbor and throughout the commercial district where shopkeepers were busy cleaning up the remnants of the storm. She continued running until she was completely used up. But before she reached total exhaustion, while on the crest of her runner's high, buoyed up like a surfer on a wave, something Remy said on the trip back last night presented itself to her afresh, echoing through the caverns of her mind.

He had been talking about the Northridge, and how, when it hit four years ago, it shook the earth along a previously unknown fault line. No one had foreseen or predicted this disaster; the seismologists were caught unawares, their models having failed them miserably. The quake just happened—naturally, unavoidably, and far beyond the limits of anyone's control. To relieve its own bottled-up internal pressure, the over-stressed earth spawned a tremor twelve miles beneath the San Fernando Valley surface. The consequent shaking quickly spread upward and outward across the sleepy suburbs until, in a moment of time, over seventy people had died and 24,000 buildings had been damaged. Before the newspapers were all delivered that morning, billions of dollars worth of destruction had been wrought in the Valley.

Remy said there were fault lines like this everywhere and that they ran up and down the coast, even in places where scientists did not suspect—as the Northridge so painfully illustrated. And

suddenly, as she trotted along a quiet street on the peninsula that had been under siege from the elements a mere twenty-four hours ago, Julie saw herself in the same sort of way—her very own heart and soul etched top to bottom with fault lines, and her life a virtual pressure cooker, capable of exploding at any moment. And it had done exactly that last night, leaving her to kick along a trail of death and destruction strewn with fragments of the people and things she had once held dear to her heart.

But just like the victims of the Northridge, Julie, upon returning from her run, vowed to sweep out the debris and reconstruct everything anew—with one notable imperative. She would not allow Mike Tattersall to work his seductive magic on her again, nor would she fall for any man like him. She was finished looking for a high class, big shot, wealthy husband. There was no longer room for anyone in her life more sophisticated than she, herself. She only wondered why learning something so simple had to be so painful, especially when it was something Tracy seemed to know inherently, like how to breathe or which way to put on your brassiere.

The instrument panel digital read 11:35 when Danny got back into his car and headed for the Detroit Metro Airport. Perhaps he was cutting it a little close but he felt certain the freeway traffic on a Saturday morning would be light. The trip to the airport should not take him more than about forty minutes.

While Valerie's car was warming up, they embraced in the parking lot. Danny kissed her one last time. Then she climbed behind the wheel of her Cavalier and drove off for home, waving good-bye.

Valerie. He said the name over and over to himself. In two weeks she had wormed her way into his heart so deep that he considered her closer than family. She had literally become his

closest friend. Still, it was a mystery to him how or why this relationship had taken hold, except to say that he had changed significantly over the past two weeks. He no longer fit into the life or relationships that had defined him previously. And apparently, in his coming unstuck from the old Danny, he somehow gravitated to her. Clearly, their lives had become knit together in a unique and special way.

Driving along the cold hard concrete of I-75 with its frozen verges dusted in white from an overnight snow shower, he could still feel her warmth. And sensing that she was still here with him, he allowed his mind to wander back through the morning they had spent together.

She wanted to make breakfast—pancakes for them both and sausages for him. He needed to pack. So, while she prepared the food, still dressed in her makeshift nightshirt with a pair of his old sweatpants and thick winter socks to keep warm, he busied himself folding shirts and counting out underwear for the trip.

They ate together in the dining room, Valerie's choice; she claimed it was her favorite room in the house and besides, she had never lived in a house with an actual dining room. Over coffee they talked and lingered, neither of them wanting the morning to end. Somewhat sheepishly, she admitted being embarrassed over getting drunk and climbing into bed with him last night. It was not exactly right to have done that, she said, and it certainly was not normal behavior for her. She just needed to feel loved and accepted. And he had met that need, to her delight and satisfaction. Thanks to him, her birthday had been special.

But this morning she wanted to be sure he understood her feelings. She told him how she hoped that he would not think less of her for what she had done. He did understand and told her as much, saying that he appreciated her being so open and honest with him.



Watching her clear away dishes, he sipped his coffee and reflected on the night before. He finally came to grips with something that had been troubling him for days—how, up until then at least, he had been acting out of a very shallow understanding of his role in their relationship, but at the same time going on instinct, taking one step at a time. He tried to understand what was developing between them, calling it friendship for lack of a better designation, but still he could not completely categorize the feelings he had for her. Every time they were together and she looked into his eyes he found himself getting weak knees and a queasy stomach. It was an inner sensation akin to love. Yet, at the same time, he felt the utmost respect for her such that he would not, indeed could not, view her as he might view any other female, as an object of sexual desire. Sometime last night however his feelings began sorting themselves out, fitting together in his mind like the final pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, and the resulting picture of the two of them suddenly became recognizable.

In this picture he viewed her partly as he would a prized possession, one of incredible value to him, though he knew he could not possess her, nor would he wish to. And yet, he was ever-so-thankful that she had entered his life when she did, at a time when he had been living his life at the margins, near the point of drowning in loneliness and his own dogged stupidity, seemingly unable to free himself from the undertow of his shortcomings. But then she happened by, appearing so innocent at first, but in time revealing the depth of wisdom she possessed. She quickly became the prescription for his unhappiness and near-terminal adolescence. Befriending him, she also lifted him out of his pitiful state, such that two weeks with her in his life had seemed more like two years. And in that brief span of time he had become unflinchingly certain of her character and absolutely convinced of her predestined connection to him. His only concern having been that the feelings between them might not be exactly mutual and therefore, ultimately

and perhaps soon, he would wake up to find her gone. But there was no doubt in his mind that she had been the catalyst for change in his life. And whether she stuck around or not, he owed her a debt of gratitude for helping him see his life—past, present and future—in an entirely new light.

Earlier this morning, when she had taken her seat next to him in the dining room for breakfast, his mind flashed back to the moment when she landed smack in the middle of his world like a meteor—so unexpected and yet so blindingly real—and he thought about how far he had come since then. It made him smile.

“What is so funny?” she had asked him.

“Nothing’s funny. I’m just happy; that’s all.”

“About what?”

“Because we met and because you’re now a part of my life.”

He was no longer concerned that she might soon be gone, primarily because he recognized the power he had within himself to keep her close to him, to develop an indestructible bond between the two of them. Though, as recently as yesterday, her birthday, he had found himself sitting at work wishing and hoping that she might somehow indicate to him her true feelings, perhaps let him know how much he meant to her, that there was mutual admiration on her part, and maybe even a former hole in *her* heart which he, by being there for her, had somehow filled.

Then they had their evening and their night together, and today his answer had come; his wish had come true. It was now clear to him that they had become united in care and compassion for one another. Friends certainly, but more than just friends; they shared a place in each other’s hearts.

He would miss her, and she, him. She said so herself. But he would only be away for a week and he promised to call her at work on Tuesday morning at ten. It would be seven A.M. out on the coast and he would be getting ready for “day two” of the recruiting seminar. By then, he would have lots to tell her and she could anticipate a full run-down on how things were going with his quest to make up with Julie.

Valerie wished him “God-speed” and the “very best of good fortune” in his attempt to win back his wife. But she made him promise that, if things *did* end up working out with Julie, he would not forget *her* or walk out on their friendship, and this was a promise he gladly made because he could no more forget Valerie Robinson than he could his own name. She was truly in his heart forever and he told her so for the second time. And, as a gesture of his love for her, before they got on the road for Troy, he gave her a key to his house and told her that she was welcome anytime. It was her house too, he said.

Before retiring Friday night Julie called her friend Trace and apologized for missing her visit earlier. She had been out running, trying to clear her head, she said, and it was the truth. But she figured that Tracy had to be miffed as a result of not finding her home, especially since Trace had explicitly told her she would be coming by after work. To make amends, Julie suggested that Trace come for breakfast in the morning. She promised to whip together a crumb cake from an old recipe she had, one that had always been her daughter Clarrie’s favorite.

As agreed, Tracy showed up at nine o’clock. By then, Julie had the cake out of the oven and a pot of fresh coffee brewed. They spent the morning together talking mainly about what had taken place on Thursday, first of the storm and the ensuing floods which were now being blamed for over a half-billion dollars in damage. And then of Julie’s sexual encounter with Mike and what

she was going to do about it now that she had had some time to consider her options. This of course was the very conversation that Julie knew would occur and the reason why she had avoided her friend on Friday afternoon. Verbalizing the details of her affair with Mike was extremely painful for her, though she knew she could not keep it all bottled up inside either. Naturally, with a friend like Tracy, she did not have to.

Over breakfast, Trace told her how she had phoned an attorney friend of hers yesterday—a former boyfriend named Alan Grant—and asked him for advice, having first described Julie’s situation to him. Based upon the facts as Tracy related them, Alan agreed that Julie had an excellent case for sexual harassment, and there might even be the basis for a criminal case for rape. Upon hearing this, Julie pinched together her lips.

Tracy went on, “So, why don’t you call him up; his name’s Alan Grant. He can help you Jul, really.”

“I can’t call him.”

“Why not?”

“Because you told him all that. It’s embarrassing.”

“Come on Julie. You can’t just let Mike get away with what he did to you. The law is on your side. Justice can be yours here.”

Julie thought about the irony in this: Tracy giving her a lecture on justice and the law.

“I don’t know, Trace. I just want it all to be over.”

“Well, I would want that too if I were in your shoes. But at least get some money for your trouble.”

“And how am I going to do that?”

“Let me give you some advice...”

\* \* \*

Though Julie had no other job prospects at the moment, in no way could she go back to work at SunBurst. She did not even want to see Mike again, let alone work for him. Maybe she felt this way because of her own culpability in the matter, a possibility she suspected to be at least partly true though she resisted acknowledging it. Or perhaps she was running away because, over the past two days, she had developed an impenetrable and unyielding hatred of Mike Tattersall for forcing himself on her after she begged him to stop. In either case, she was through at SunBurst—her so-called “career” and “promotion” be damned. She would start anew by getting her resume together this afternoon, then combing tomorrow’s HELP WANTED ads, and first thing Monday, she’d be off looking for another job. And Mike could burn in hell.

Now, with the benefit of Tracy’s encouragement and some time to think about what to do, she pulled out her computer and began writing a venomous letter to Mike Tattersall. She would demand the equivalent of two years’ salary, just as Alan Grant had suggested—or else she would press charges. She did not need Alan to write such a letter. After all, *she* was the injured party; no one could say what needed to be said any better than she could. Of course she had no real plans to carry out the threat of litigation; she was still mortified at the thought of having to face Mike in court. But she would make the threat sound convincing nonetheless. Surely Mike had to know that her case was winnable in this day and age when men more highly exalted than he have been snared by their own uncontrollable passions, and especially when the objects of such passions are their organizational subordinates. Mike screwed up royally and now he was going to have to pay to keep her from publicly denouncing him, discrediting his name and wrecking his business prospects from Santa Barbara to the Mexican border. She would come down on him like another massive storm off the Pacific, or so she would make it seem, anyway.

Another thing occurred to her as well. On the scale of violations, what Mike did to her was even worse than Danny's philandering, at least according to her present way of thinking. Danny had betrayed her, certainly. But the two of them had been slowly drifting apart for years, and she had done very little to pull their marriage back together. Looking back on it now, she could see that his unfaithfulness was predictable and could even have been prevented. She had just been too self-absorbed at the time to see their marriage problems with any objective clarity. Nevertheless, there were all those years with Danny when he had proved his love for her, provided dutifully for her, and given her two wonderful children. Such love and dedication could make up for a multitude of sins.

Mike's transgression was of another stripe altogether. He had deliberately taken advantage of her, overpowered, violated, and hurt her more deeply than she had ever been hurt before, even considering her parents' divorce and the displacement of her home to Michigan at the tender age of fourteen. This situation was unprecedented. The damage Mike had done was irreparable; his sin, unpardonable.

She spent two hours writing the letter, taking breaks only to get coffee and use the toilet. Then, satisfied with what she had written and convinced that it should elicit the desired result, she saved the file and started to work on her resume. That was when she heard the doorbell.

## **PART III**

### DISCOVERIES





## Chapter Twenty

To Danny Predmore the weather in LA felt like that of a warm spring day in Michigan. It heightened his mood as he stepped out of the airport terminal into the balmy coastal air. Once behind the wheel of his rental car, he immediately lowered the windows to clear out the stale odor of cigarettes, then decided to leave them down while he drove—it was *that* warm. And, though he did not detect anything particularly noxious riding the incoming breeze, he wondered about what pollutants he might be breathing in.

On approach to LAX he had noticed an immense dirty-brown cloud hanging over the Metroplex. Of course he'd seen bad air before, growing up during the polluted sixties in the shadow of the Chevy complex, and over Southwest Detroit where he had worked for years. But somehow, *this* place did not seem as bad as he had been led to expect, especially considering the palm trees—and the warmth. It was 64 degrees—in January! He would not see a day like this in Michigan until April at the earliest.

So, with both front windows down and the Hertz map laid out on the seat next to him, Danny aimed the green Ford Taurus down the freeway toward Anaheim. He was booked at the Best Western near the Convention Center.

There was city everywhere, as far as his eyes could see. And traffic. He was also well acquainted with freeway driving of course, had been since his teen years, but he had not seen

anything quite like this. The sheer volume of it was staggering. He was beginning to understand the genesis of the term “freeway madness.” People seemed courteous enough though. No one appeared ready to run him off the road for not signaling his intention to change lanes or some other inadvertent error. But then again, it was only a little after three o’clock on a Saturday, no doubt a light day and time for freeway traffic.

Seeing the Interstate junction sign, he stole a glance at the map. He had to turn south onto the 605. About ten more miles to go and he would be there.

In the four-and-a-half hours he spent in the air, Danny did a lot of thinking. He thought about work and how Vic had been riding his backside lately. Again he wondered how he was going to succeed this year with the company’s expectations for his department set in the stratosphere. Ironically, Base Line Industries would profit immensely even if his team only succeeded in hiring half the people his business plan called for. But Danny’s personal income would suffer if he missed the numbers by a mere ten percent. Much more than that and he could probably count on being replaced.

Sometime back he remembered actually enjoying his work. Now he could not even recall what a happy career felt like. This was particularly vexing because, without exception, in a recent company survey, every staffer his team hired this past year put job satisfaction as a “top three” career priority. His mission, indeed the mission of the entire company, was to make certain those priorities were achieved. So, everyone coming into the company could expect to have present and future job satisfaction. Everyone would have a happy career—except him! Too bad that fact did not seem to register with his superiors, especially not with Vic DeSalvo.

Feeling depressed over this recognition, when the flight attendant came by, Danny asked for a beer, which he then quickly drained as an antidote for his troubled state of mind.

His thoughts turned to Julie. Her letters made it seem as though she had evolved into a markedly different person. She had had a year-and-a-half of living apart from him and apparently used it to make some real improvements in her life. She had become more physically fit, more energetic, more content with herself after finally landing a career of her own. She had even gone back to college to work toward her degree. In fact, from his still far-off viewpoint, it looked pretty impressive. With this recognition Danny felt the reverberations of a dissonant chord being struck somewhere near his heart. Given her new persona, Julie might no longer see him as her equal. In *her* eyes there may no longer be a vision of the past, of the twenty years of her life he had occupied. She may very well have abandoned her need to look back. She might even prefer to keep everything associated with her old life buried deep in the frozen Michigan ground, him included. Yet, because of what she had hinted at in her last letter, he maintained a glimmer of hope that new life could again spring forth between them, that his past mistakes were indeed not fatal, their winter not interminable. He only hoped that, by the time the sun rose a week from today, it would shine down warmly upon the two of them, bright with the hope of a brand new season for their relationship.

Of course, his personal journey had brought him through some changes as well. He had put considerable distance between himself and the person he had been during their married years—especially so in the past two weeks. And, at least from his viewpoint, these changes made him a better man—more balanced and, presumably, more desirable. He hoped that Julie might also see him in *this* light, not simply as the man she used to know, although he had no idea how to help her isolate present reality from two decades of experience. Unfortunately, when divorce separates two individuals, their opinions, being much more deeply rooted, generally stay attached. At least he had taken the time and effort to set the stage with his letters.

Still, no matter what the outcome of the week ahead, he was not going to change back. A long time in coming, this *new* Danny was the Danny he has always wanted to be—a Renaissance Man, fully renewed. And just like Julie, he had nothing whatsoever to look back for.

His hotel room was small but cheerful, decorated in pastels and sea moss greens. The one window overlooked an outdoor courtyard and swimming pool, neither of which was in use this afternoon.

After hanging his shirts and suits, Danny took a shower and shaved. Then, after wiping his face with a washcloth, he studied his reflection in the harsh fluorescent light from the overhead fixture. He wished he did not look so pale. As it was, no youthfulness remained in his visage. And, in spite of all the work he had done to get his body in shape over the past two weeks, he still had nearly ten extra pounds to shed, mostly from around his waistline. Here and there, a gray hair sprung from his chest, too many now to pull out. His once youthful blond hair, fine as silk thread, had long since darkened and was now receding. Standing back to survey the entire picture, he worried that he had lost so much over the years that Julie would not be interested in what he presently had to offer, especially since she had been working non-stop for a year-and-a-half on her own shape and could probably still turn heads.

But he could not do a single thing about the fact that he was aging, or that his youth had departed. Frustrated, but not to the point of despair, he vowed to perish all such worrisome thoughts on this painful subject.

After doing so, he dressed in a pair of khaki slacks and a navy blue sport shirt—a decidedly ordinary outfit. What he did have to offer could no more be defined in terms of clothing than by a measure of youthful physical attractiveness. His proposition was a matter for the heart alone to

consider. There was no point in trying to dress it up with fancy clothes. Fortunately, however, he had recently put a fresh shine on his shoes, and the cleaners had pressed a single straight crease into his trousers. First impressions were still important.

Leaving the Best Western, he avoided the freeway and drove instead along Harbor Boulevard toward Costa Mesa. The hotel desk clerk told him how to find Julie's house; she said it would be easy since all the streets running off W. Balboa Boulevard were numbered in reverse sequential order. He also figured that somewhere along the way he could find a flower shop.

It occurred to him that he had not been so anxious about seeing someone since he was a teenager. Even with Julie things had been different the first time around. There was no real anxiety or apprehension then, at least none that he could remember now, nearly a quarter-century later. Back when they first met, the two of them had flowed together naturally, like they were meant for each other and nothing could possibly pull them apart. But something had. And now, oddly enough, he felt a sense of oppressive angst over seeing her again, like they might cross each other once more, and the slightest provocation would produce the same disastrous results that occurred before. And the worst part was, he remained clueless regarding how to realign himself with her in such a way that they might fit together harmoniously again, with no lingering animosity between them.

He mentally struggled to put a handle on his feelings and, after a moment's consideration, came up with "threatened." That was it—he felt threatened. Only he did not know what specifically was posing a threat to him or his potential future success with Julie. If it was he, himself, in the person of the old Danny, he figured he had a good chance of overcoming the odds and rekindling her affections. But if it were an outside threat—maybe another man for instance—a much tougher challenge might be awaiting him.

Fortunately, before he drove himself crazy with such thoughts, he saw a large painted sign for the Fountain Valley Florist. He hoped yellow roses were in season.

Minutes later, bouquet in hand, Danny emerged from the flower shop, got back into his rental car and continued the journey southward. So far, California did not look so much different from the metro-Detroit suburbs where he grew up—except for the bright sunlight, the exotic vegetation, the palm trees and all the foreign cars. Harbor Boulevard, one long commercial strip, resembled Van Dyke Avenue or Woodward, and peeking down the cross streets, Danny could see cookie-cutter houses, no doubt built during the postwar boom. It was remarkably like home.

He turned south on 55 and continued eyeing the scenery as he approached Newport Beach and the Balboa Peninsula. Here in Costa Mesa the atmosphere seemed a little more up-market than that of a few miles back in Santa Ana. Driving along with his windows still down, Danny sensed he was getting close to his destination. There was fresh humidity in the air, intensifying with every breath. Then, as he piloted the Taurus over the edge of the mesa, he saw the montage below. His eye went immediately to the water. Sparkling like a sea of diamonds in the late afternoon sun, the Pacific rose up to meet the horizon. Danny's heart suddenly became a huge lump in his throat.

Five minutes later he glided to a stop just past his wife's villa. Pausing to take one last peek at himself in the mirror, he smoothed his hair, grabbed the bouquet of flowers and headed for her front door.

Julie was not expecting visitors and, this being Saturday, she immediately suspected some religious proselytizers had come a-calling. Or perhaps it was someone out selling magazine subscriptions or collecting for charity. It was a good day for any and all such activities. But she

was not in the mood to fight off “Witnesses” or to explain why her budget would not permit any new expenses at present. So, regardless of the cause, she thought it best not to answer. She did however try to steal a glimpse of whoever it was by peeking out her living room window. The bell rang again. Unfortunately, when she peeked out, only a pair of brown men’s shoes could be seen in the gap below the iron porch door. Her angle of view and the bars of the gate obscured everything else.

Finally, after the doorbell rang for the third time, she felt obliged to yield to his persistence, if not to her own curiosity.

When she opened the door to the porch and saw Danny standing there, seven feet away, her pulse quickened. Her insides lurched upward, temporarily preventing her from speaking. She simply stood there motionless, gaping at him across the sun porch.

“Hi, Jul,” Danny said, one hand behind his back concealing the flowers.

“Danny!” She blurted while reaching into her pocket for the key to open the gate. “Here, let me unlock that for you.” The heavy brass mechanism clanked. She studied his face.

“What on God’s earth are you doing here?” She managed a smile. It was the little wry smile of a kid experiencing her first sourball, an expression he had seen on her face many times before.

“I came to brighten your day.” He handed her the bouquet.

“Oh, my,” she said, accepting the yellow roses. “They’re beautiful. I don’t know what to say. This is all so...so surprising.”

“You don’t have to say anything at all. Just let me look at you a moment.” They remained in the entryway of Julie’s sun porch. Danny looked her over as if judging a racehorse, close-up. She immediately became self-conscious, remembering that she had not fixed herself; she was clothed in jeans and an old knock-around flannel shirt.

“You look fantastic.”

“You think?”

“Absolutely.”

“You don’t look so bad yourself,” Julie told him. “What are we doing standing here? Come inside.”

She followed him into the living room. With her free hand she grabbed her computer off the chair and set it on the TV cabinet. She pointed to the chair and suggested he make himself comfortable while she put the flowers in a vase.

“I hope I can find one big enough. It’s not often I get a dozen roses.” She could not remember the last time. She banged a couple of cabinet doors in the tiny kitchen and then ran the water.

She called to him across the snack bar, “You didn’t really answer my question, you know.”

“What question was that?”

“The one about what you were doing out here, two thousand miles from home.”

“Just dropping by, like I said I would.”

Julie set the cut-glass vase on the bar and began inserting the roses one at a time, trimming the stems with kitchen shears.

“I believe you’re BS’ing me Danny. You know that?”

“Maybe I am—a little. But I’m still here.”

Her curiosity was moving upward and off the scale. “You’re not going to make this easy for me, are you?”

“Okay, I’ll come clean. But only because you’re wearing my favorite shirt.”

“This old thing?”

“Yeah. I gave it to you for Christmas some years back. Remember?”



She had forgotten. "Right. I've always liked it too." That at least was true. She finished arranging the roses, came back into the living room and sat down in a chair across from him. "So...?"

"Okay. It's both business and pleasure. I have a three-day recruiting seminar to attend in Anaheim starting Monday. Then, a couple days of vacation."

"You're here for the whole week?"

"Right. Till Sunday afternoon."

"Why didn't you tell me you were coming?"

"I wanted to surprise you."

"Well, you certainly did that. What can I get you to drink?"

"What are you having?"

"I don't know. I've been drinking coffee all day. I'm in the mood for something else, maybe some orange juice or something."

"Sounds great. I'll have some too."

This was strange, she thought, while arising to get the glasses and pour the juice. Danny never asked for orange juice before, except at breakfast.

"I like your house," he said, getting up and following her as far as the snack bar.

"It's not much, but it's cozy."

"Maybe you can show me around."

"You've already seen most of it." She handed him a tumbler, nearly full of O.J. He raised it to her.

"Here's looking at you kid," he said with a tough guy inflection, not really sounding like Bogart.

She giggled a little. “Come on, follow me. I’ll show you the rest of the place.”

She had no worries; everything was still pristine from her marathon cleaning session of yesterday. She led him through the living room and into the hall. Danny watched her as she walked. *Thinner than the Sunday paper*, he thought. *But she’s as foxy as ever.*

Stopping by the bathroom, she pointed to the doorway. “This was my first decorating effort after moving in. I wanted to make it look like California from around 1970.”

“Fantastic. I love it.” He walked in and took a closer look at one of the watercolor beach scenes hanging on the wall.

Julie shook her head. *He never used to like orange and yellow, especially together*, she thought.

“Over here’s my bedroom. I did this up with a *Country French* theme in mind.”

Danny walked in. He whistled. “You’ve got a gift for this. I’m really impressed.”

“No kidding.”

“I’m serious. I see you’ve still got the owls to keep you company.”

“Yup. Lots of good memories there.”

She led him across the hall and pushed open the door to the spare room. “This used to be a garage, but about twenty-five years ago, it was converted to a second bedroom. I use it for storage.” She pointed to the vinyl curtain. “The washer and dryer are back there.”

“That’s convenient.”

“Yeah, no more lugging the clothes down the basement and back again.”

“It’s great.”

“The laundry room?”

“No, no, the house. It’s perfect for you.”

“I think so too. And it’s wonderful having the beach so close, especially in summer.”

“What are you talking about. It feels like summer now.”

“No, Danny, this is winter. It’s January, remember?”

“Right, right, what was I thinking?” He banged his forehead with the heel of one hand.

They sat back down in the living room. Julie felt awkward. She was running out of innocuous things to say. Sooner or later he might ask how her job was going. She did not have a suitable response at the ready.

“How about dinner out tonight?” Danny asked. “Unless you have other plans, that is.”

“No, no...I mean yes—sounds great!” He had already broken her somber mood and cut through her two-day funk.

“Well, I haven’t eaten a thing since the crummy lunch on the plane, so let’s go now. We’ll beat the rush.”

“I need to change first.”

“Okay...if you want. But I think you look perfect already.”

“At least let me wash my face and put on a little fresh makeup.”

“Sure. I’ll just wait here.”

She handed him the TV remote. “You can watch something while I get ready.”

“Thanks.”

Julie hustled into the bathroom. She flicked on the hot water tap and clipped her hair back in preparation for washing-up. She could hardly believe he was here. It did not seem real.

Waiting for the water to warm a little, she applied some underarm deodorant. Too bad she didn’t have time to jump into the shower. She wanted to rid her mind of the ickiness she had

been feeling before Danny arrived, rinse her earlier woes completely down the drain, at least symbolically.

Quickly, she washed and dried her face and then inspected herself in the mirror. She beheld her narrow chin for about the millionth time. Two large slightly sunken eye sockets stared back at her until she regarded her high cheekbones—one of her better features. Then she took in the tiny lines around her mouth that seemed to be multiplying. A proper make-up application should take about fifteen minutes, but she didn't want to leave Danny waiting so long. She wondered if a rush job would be flattering enough.

*Get a hold on yourself*, she thought. *You're losing it—again!* She listened but could not hear the TV.

“Danny,” she called, cracking the door open, “feel free to help yourself to some more juice if you want.”

“Thanks, but I'm okay, Jul.”

“I may be a few minutes.”

“No problem. Take your time.”

While rearranging her cosmos, Julie's mind flipped through a hundred questions: *What is he really up to? Why didn't he let me know he was coming? Why is he so different, so polite, so accommodating? What if he wants to get physical later and I have to fight him off? I couldn't handle that again. And why hasn't he so much as touched me, or offered me a hug, or a handshake? Not that I'd have wanted a hug, of course, a handshake would have been fine—appropriate, actually. What should I tell him about my job?*

By the time she had her lipstick on, she was starting to sweat again, so she applied more deodorant. She brushed her hair and took one last look in the mirror, turning for a profile exam as well. She had no chest whatsoever in this shirt. *What could Danny possibly like about it?*

“Okay, I’m ready.”

Danny was right where she had left him; he had not turned on the tube.

“This is a nice place to sit and think,” he remarked.

“It’s my favorite.” She grabbed her coat off the rack.

“It would be mine too.” He got up to leave with her.

“What were you thinking *about?*”

“It’s funny,” he replied, making eye contact with her.

“What?”

“It’s been a year-and-a-half since we’ve been together and before coming out here, that seemed like a lifetime to me. Now that I’m here, it seems more like yesterday.”

“Yesterday?” Incredible. She was still in *lifetime* mode.

“Right. Except that you, my dear, are much more beautiful here in your natural setting.”

“Oh stop it Danny. You’re being ridiculous. Let’s just go eat.”

“Okay, but you have to pick the place. I’m not yet up on the local hangouts.”

“Then we’ll go to the Abalone Grill.”

“Sounds perfect.”

“Shit, Danny. How the hell would you know? By the way, I hope you brought a jacket with you. It gets cold around here at night, especially in winter.”



## Chapter Twenty One

Danny awoke to the realization that it was Superbowl Sunday and the game was being played seventy-five miles down the road. Of course he was not in possession of a ticket, but neither did he plan to try and procure one. Furthermore, he didn't care one whit about the game because in an hour he was meeting Julie for breakfast at her house and they were going to spend the day together. They would see some of the attractions, maybe take a walk on the beach. They would work on rebuilding their friendship. No Superbowl was a match for that.

Last evening had gone well—better than he had actually expected. At no time was he at a loss for words, though surely it was his greatest fear going in that they would end up together but speechless, staring at each other across a strange dinner table with nothing whatsoever in common and even less worth discussing. Then, after surviving the ritual, they would quietly go their separate ways again, the point having been made painfully clear (to him at least) how foolish it was to ever think they could successfully overcome their failures and lay aside their differences.

But the evening did not turn out that way at all. Not once did they argue; not a single careless word was spoken between them. Julie seemed to truly enjoy herself. She smiled the entire evening and even laughed at his jokes. When dinner was served, they sampled from each other's

plates like when they were first dating. Of course Danny had hoped for their first “date” to go as well. But there was no way of predicting how it might actually turn out, and, considering how he had caught her unawares, it was possible she went out with him only to be polite. Yet, if that had been the case, he seriously doubted she would be cooking breakfast for him this morning.

Something seemed to be troubling her though, something he could not quite put his finger on. When asked, she repeatedly said everything was “fine.” But he sensed otherwise. It seemed odd, for instance, that she kept changing the subject when he tried to get her to talk about her career. He remembered acting similarly himself so many times when *his* job had been getting *him* down, when it was too painful to discuss work, even with Julie. Once home for the evening, he preferred to forget about the office, though he never succeeded in putting it entirely out of his mind.

But he knew as well as anybody how the career treadmill just keeps rolling at maximum speed, and how every weekday morning you are inevitably consigned to jump back on looking like you are enjoying yourself, while inwardly you might be dying a slow deliberate death. Naturally, there is nothing anyone can do to alter this reality, career options being limited as they are to one’s own range of talents, education and experience, and especially considering the precipitous fall one’s income will take if career tracks are switched in the middle of life’s uncertain journey. For Julie’s sake, he hoped that she had not arrived at this point so soon after supposedly finding her niche, and that the tenor he thought he picked up in their conversation last night was really nothing at all, just a reflection of his own emotional state of mind regarding work and career.



But why worry about it? If something was bothering her, he would find out soon enough. For now, the best plan was to make the most of every moment they had together, and fortunately, they had an entire day ahead of them. For this he was genuinely thankful.

From Danny's hotel room window this new day looked like a carbon copy of the previous one. And the television forecast simultaneously bore witness, although some low clouds were predicted to persist along the coast. Winter out here was like a September stroll in the park.

Julie got up at her usual weekend time—6:15. She dressed for her morning run, stretched, and then headed toward the beach under cover of darkness. A biting wind forced her to zip her parka all the way up and to put on gloves and ear protection. She ran hard, thinking about nothing in particular, only that she wished for a clear head with which to challenge the day. First, she had to empty her mind of everything that had gotten stuck there over the past few days and weeks, something only a good run could do.

After about fifteen minutes of pushing herself, she was sweating profusely and had to begin removing excess gear. But she had not succeeded in starving out her thoughts, and her memories especially remained fully in tact.

She tried concentrating on the weather. Though this cold damp morning was suited only for fitness fools like her, today should be glorious once the clouds burned off—bright and sunny and unusually warm. It was hard to believe that just three days ago, in its second stormy assault on the Southland, El Niño had washed everything not anchored down in LA out to sea. Julie, of course, had come within a hair's breadth of being swept away with it, emotionally at least.

But like the city, she was beginning to recover. And surprisingly, considering her state of mind a mere twenty-four hours ago, deep down inside she could sense a genesis of hope for the

days ahead. With his arrival, Danny had broken through the gloomy firmament of her existence in the same way a blazing sun comes up over the eastern horizon at dawn—big and bright and warm, the exact way she hoped to see it this morning.

But many nagging thoughts remained, her reticence to plunge herself back into the murk of another relationship being first and foremost among them. And she could not help feeling wary of Danny. He was, after all, a *man*, the likes of which she knew only too well, though presently he seemed so different from when they were married. But so did Mike Tattersall seem different at times, or at least there was the image of himself he projected—carefully-posed, glossy and irresistible. Then, when she finally saw through the polish, she discovered his *true* self: rotten, untrustworthy and contemptible. And, although she never saw Danny as exactly “rotten,” she wondered about *his* current motives, nevertheless.

In their conversation last night they had not ventured into the past, but it was undoubtedly still there, biding its time, waiting to emerge. And there was also the future to consider, something she could only imagine as wildly uncertain.

There was something else too, though she could not say exactly what, except that she was nagged by it—a feeling perhaps, or a premonition, something like a sinking sensation in your gut that you cannot define but you know is there. He was much too placid to be Danny. It was as though he had had a personality transplant or something. Not that she wanted to change him back or anything, just that it was spooky to think that he could be so very different. Sooner or later the other shoe would have to drop; so she figured. The other guy would show up, and for that reason alone she resigned herself to remain vigilant. Even more so than she was with Mike.

Besides, Danny would be going back home to Michigan in seven days and then, where would that leave her—or *them*, for that matter? Exactly nowhere. So she had better just stick to developing the friendship like she planned all along, nothing more.

But the nagging sensation persisted. There were wrinkles in the cloth she could not iron out—little things, like the fact that suddenly this was not the long distance friendship she had anticipated. He was right here, a dozen miles up the road to be exact. And then there was the feeling she got from being with him again.

Such thoughts were proving too much for her oxygen-starved brain to handle at the moment. But she knew that, just like with running, all she could do was take the journey with him one step at a time. So that would be her plan.

*First a shower, then the supermarket, then...I guess we'll see.*

Danny could smell his home-cooked breakfast all the way out on the sidewalk. Clearly, his anxiety over being with his wife again had not affected his appetite. And apparently, their separation had not diminished her cooking skills.

He strode up to her front door and rang the bell. Unlike yesterday, she answered on the first ring, appearing in stocking feet and wearing an apron with ruffled shoulder straps—another remnant of their marriage. Danny flushed with warm memories of holiday times with savory stuffed turkeys roasting and homemade pumpkin pies cooling on the counter.

He took her hands as they greeted and it was all he could do to refrain from hugging her. Her hair framed her face beautifully and she looked positively captivating, even more so than last night. Still, some serious trepidation remained in his heart and mind. For, unlike the way he had

regarded her when they first met as teenagers, today he saw her as someone almost beyond his reach.

He gave her hands a gentle squeeze before letting go. They lingered there on the porch for a moment, with little more than a foot between them, and Danny continued to fight back his desire to take her into his arms. But at the same time he sensed that, by being too forward or presumptuous, he might put her on the defensive. He could not afford such a setback.

He would wait for her to make the first move or at least give him some indication that something like a hug would not put her off or be misconstrued as a pretext for other more intimate acts. This did not mean that other such acts were not being contemplated by him. But neither was it his primary aim to achieve physical intimacy with her, at least not right away.

Surprising him somewhat, she took him by his right hand and pulled him toward the house. “It’s cold out here. Come inside. Breakfast is ready. I hope you’re hungry.”

Danny said he was, “...famished, actually. Probably because my stomach is still on Eastern Standard Time, It thinks it’s noon already.”

Julie directed him to a seat at the snack bar, where orange juice was poured and waiting. She took the last two pieces of toast off the griddle and slid them onto two plates. Others were keeping warm in the oven. “I think you’re going to like this,” she said, setting a plate in front of him. “Do you want your coffee now or later?”

“Whatever you prefer.”

*There he goes again*, she thought, reaching for the carafe and pouring two mugfuls. But instead of saying anything, she simply set down a mug for each of them and climbed up into her chair next to him at the bar.

“What is this, some kind of French Toast?”

“Stuffed.”

“Huh?”

“Stuffed French Toast. It has creme cheese and apricot preserves inside.”

“Mmm, tastes good. I like it.”

“You haven’t changed so much that I don’t know what to feed you.”

“No, I suppose not.”

They ate together without a lot of conversation. Not wanting to seem ill mannered, Danny tried to chew quietly, Julie being right there next to him, so close that he could feel her warmth.

Julie’s fragrance hinted of fruit. He could not pinpoint the scent exactly—citrus perhaps, or maybe pear. She spoke between bites of her breakfast, “So, what did you want to see first? There’s the Sherman Gardens, which are really beautiful. Or—although it’s a little bit of a hike—we could drive down to the mission at San Juan Capistrano. Except that you’re two months early if you want to see the birds.”

“Why don’t you surprise me? The only thing I really want to do is see the ocean. Maybe we can take a walk on the beach after we clean up from breakfast.”

“Okay then. But it will probably be a little chilly down by the water this morning.”

“You’re kidding, right?” he said, still chewing, as though he were addressing the back kitchen wall. “Living out here must have thinned your blood out or something.”

This was beginning to sound a little more like Danny, she thought. “You wouldn’t say that if you’d been out running with me this morning.”

“How cold could it have been—40?”

“I almost forgot that I once married an Eskimo.”

“Not an Eskimo, a Michigander—a man from the land of great winters.” Danny cleaned his plate and asked her if she had any more. She rose to serve him, taking another half-piece for herself. Sitting back down she decided to put him to a little impromptu test.

“Of course, if you prefer, we could just hang around town today, maybe go to Neiman’s or Macys. You could buy me a new outfit.”

“That would be fine. I’d like that. Except you may want to save the shopping for a rainy day. Or is it true what I heard—that it never rains in Southern California?”

“Don’t believe it. If you wanted to see rain you should have been here last week. We had eight inches in one day—floods, mudslides—it was unbelievable. We lucked out here in Newport though; it was much worse up in LA. Especially in the Valley. Still, some of the boats in the marina took a beating from the wind and the tidal surge.”

“I heard something about that on the news. They blamed the whole thing on El Niño.”

“Of course, what else? I guess everybody finally got sick and tired of hearing about earthquakes and wildfires so the media had to invent something else to yammer about. Plus, the insurance companies and home improvement people are having a field day with this El Niño thing. You’d think the world was coming to an end to hear them talk.”

“We’ve had our share of yammering back home too. Every time a snowflake falls somebody blames El Niño. Like we’ve never had snow before the ocean started warming up.”

They laughed over this and then Julie asked if Danny had enough to eat. He said yes but asked for a little more coffee. She cleared the plates and suggested they move to the living room to drink their coffee, but Danny insisted on helping with the dishes. She let him, even though there was hardly enough room in the tiny kitchen for two. For his part Danny liked the close quarters. He was enjoying being next to his wife, plus, it had been far too long since they had bumped hips

while doing household chores. And, though he never before regarded washing up after breakfast as a pleasurable experience, he found that, today at least, it was fun—even a little romantic.

As Julie was drying the griddle, the phone rang. It was Tracy, asking if she wanted to do anything together today. Julie said she would have, except that her “former husband” had dropped in and she was going to show him around a little. Danny could not help overhearing one side of the conversation. To him it sounded like Julie was using his visit as a convenient excuse to avoid her friend. Naturally, he was not going to point this out to her, but he gained some insight into her relationship with Tracy. Perhaps it was too soon to draw conclusions, but Julie did not seem anxious to run off with Tracy to have some fun. He felt a bit relieved.

After putting on jackets they left the house and headed toward the beach. It was a quiet morning, with light traffic on W. Balboa. They paused momentarily until a wide break appeared in the westbound lanes and then crossed. Danny took her hand as they waited on the median for eastbound traffic to clear. Feeling the warmth of Danny’s touch, Julie flushed a little. A wave of emotion rolled over her and broke, leaving behind the foamy residue of mixed feelings.

They ambled down Fortieth Street toward the water, both dressed in jeans. Danny had on a flannel shirt under his jacket. Julie wore her ski vest, bright yellow with a Gore Tex filler, overtop of a body-hugging brown turtleneck.

Once on the beach Danny slipped one arm around her waist. Julie considered returning the gesture but didn’t, not wanting to give him any ideas about the prospect of a renewed romantic relationship between them. She could not, however, deny the internal sense of comfort she derived from being with him this morning. This stream of thought, replete as it was with conflicting signals and motives, troubled her. She felt so off-balance, so unsure about how to act around this man she thought she knew.

A biting wind was blowing in off the sea and the sun had yet to break through the thick layer of morning clouds. With nothing to keep her arms warm, Julie zipped her jacket all the way to the top. The style she had carefully crafted earlier was quickly blowing out of her hair. She was defenseless against the stinging, wind-borne, salt mist from the in-coming tide.

“What do you think? Feel like winter yet?” she asked him.

“Not really, no.”

She peeled his arm off her waist and took his hand to lead him as she had earlier. “Come on, this way. I’ll walk you down by the marina.”

They followed the surf line. Preoccupied with studying the surroundings, Danny did not say much. At one point, however, he asked about the jetties. Julie told him they were called *groins*. He laughed at that, recognizing the obvious double meaning in the name. He told her he liked the smell of the ocean and the sound of the waves crashing on the beach.

Maybe he seemed so carefree because he was on vacation, she theorized, away from home and his humdrum existence. Seeing him like this, however, made her suddenly conscious of her own troubles: the fact that she had no job, no present source of income, and she probably would not find time today to comb the classifieds as she had planned.

She worried about how and when she might break the news to Danny about her job, and whether she should tell him the whole truth—about Mike and all—or invent some other reason as to why she was going to have to seek other employment. She really did not want to be dishonest with him. Then she thought about how she had been with Tracy: so aloof, so unwilling to trust Trace with her true feelings. Why, a mere fifteen minutes ago, she had brushed Tracy off once again. What kind of a friend did that—repeatedly? She had an inkling to let go of Danny’s hand and dive into the ocean. She could swim out toward Catalina until hypothermia overcame



her and took her under. But just as quickly the thought passed. Besides, she would never do something like that. Still, somehow she had to deal with her current fix.

Danny interrupted her thoughts. “You know it’s too bad you have to work this week.”

“Why is that?”

“Because there’s something else I’d like to do.”

“What?”

“Nah. It’s pointless to talk about it.”

“What do you mean?”

“There wouldn’t be enough time with you having to work and all.”

“Danny, don’t tease me like that. Tell me what it is.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Okay then. I’d like to see Las Vegas. I’d like to take you there for a few days. But, I understand how important your job is to you, so I should probably just forget about it.”

“Who said I couldn’t get away?”

Hearing this, he stopped walking and held her back as well. “I guess I was just assuming you couldn’t get any time off.”

They stood alone by the surf, face to face now, the ocean to one side, the beach houses to the other. “Don’t assume Danny, you’ll make an *ass* out of *u* and *me*.” She giggled. “Let’s see what kind of shape you’re in.” With that, she pulled her hand free of him and ran off in the direction of a volleyball pit further down the shoreline. There were no players, just a lonely net, fluttering in the wind. Caught flat-footed, Danny remained motionless for an instant. Then, seeing rooster

tails of sand flying up behind her, and realizing she wanted to be chased, he shook his head, smiled to himself and made pursuit.

Julie turned left and headed toward Twenty Eighth Street, in the direction of the Lido Bridge. She did not know what was making her run, except that she had cornered herself with that last question. There was no way out of telling Danny about her job situation.

At Balboa Avenue she looked back over her shoulder. Danny was lumbering along, chugging like a locomotive, hands swinging un-rhythmically; he would never catch her at that pace. She slowed to a comfortable trot to give him a fair chance.

When he had closed to within fifteen yards, she stopped at the corner of Lafayette Avenue. Seconds later, he arrived, out of breath.

“You have some work to do,” she told him, “if you want to do mornings with me.”

“Who says I want to do mornings with you?” He puffed. “I’m not a morning person, remember?”

“Right. I almost forgot. Come on, I want to show you Lido Isle.”

“Sure. Just give me a minute to catch my breath.”

Back at the house again, Danny used the facilities and then sat himself down in Julie’s favorite chair. She busied herself in the kitchen microwaving milk for hot chocolate. “Sorry, Danny, but I don’t have any of those little marshmallows you like.”

“No problem. I’m cutting back on sweets anyway. Ten more pounds to lose.”

“Oh, yeah?” She looked at him over the snack bar. “Who are you trying to impress?”

“No one in particular.” A lie, of course. “I just thought I’d get an early jump on summer. Speaking of which, I bet it’s a lot like summer in Las Vegas this time of year.”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“But would you like to find out?”

The microwave beeped. Julie opened its door and removed Danny’s mug, putting another one in for herself and resetting the timer. She stirred powdered mix into the steaming milk and carried it to him.

“Well?” he said.

“Well, what?”

“Just tell me one thing. Should I make reservations for Vegas or not?”

“When would you be going?”

“You mean we—when would *we* be going?” He waited for a response but only got silence in return—and a funny smirk as she screwed up her face.

He pressed it a little. “How’s Thursday through Saturday sound?”

She tapped her lips with her forefinger. There was her class on Thursday night. She really should not miss it, especially after last week’s session had been canceled. Then her mind flashed back to the hotel room and Mike Tattersall. “I don’t know, Danny. How about if you give me a day to think about it?”

“All right. I’ll set my watch.”



## Chapter Twenty Two

Traffic was heavy going down I-5. Danny saw a car flying a Denver Broncos' flag and remembered the big game was scheduled for three o'clock. "Must be traffic headed to the Superbowl," he said.

"Is that today?"

"Yeah, in San Diego."

"You should have said something. We could have stayed home to watch it."

"It's not that important to me. I'd rather be going to San Juan with you."

"San Juan Capistrano."

"Whatever."

Figuring he was going overboard to please her by denying himself the annual Superbowl ritual, Julie could not help feeling a little guilty. If she were in his position, she might not have done the same. Plus, now she owed him something in return, some in-kind selfless gesture to be named later.

She hated feeling guilty. The truth was, she had little practice at it, having been an only child and always the do-gooder in their marriage. Danny was the one constantly in the doghouse, guilty of something or other. She, on the other hand, had actually made an art form out of piling

guilt trips on him, so that he always owed her something in payment—though he rarely paid off his debts in that regard. Still, the slow consistent build-up of this mountain of debt had been a key element in their estrangement. And she had played the injured party so long she was incapable of pretending that nothing was wrong in their relationship. Unfortunately, she never learned how to forgive and forget, how to reset the clock, to balance the score in the game of married life.

In addition to the guilt trip fabrication, there were other thoughts distressing her as the desert scenery drifted by. After motherhood and family was thrust upon her, for twenty years she had applied herself as dutiful wife and mother only to fail miserably in the end. And though it was probably safe to say at this point that her kids have turned out okay, the family was nonetheless decimated by the divorce, blown apart both geographically and emotionally. Consequently, even at her most optimistic moments, she could not look back over those years and proclaim success regarding her efforts as wife and mother.

She subsequently came out here and joined the ranks of single-minded modern career women. True to form—although in only a fraction of the time it took for her marriage to unravel—she also managed to screw-up her career pursuit, thereby qualifying for membership in the “repeat offender” club. Most disturbingly, all her strength seemed sapped in the process. And then along comes Danny, all re-styled and cheerful, as if to remind her that nobody really cares if life has dealt her the worst blow of all—no money and no prospects. His cheerfulness only reinforcing her conviction that the miserable burden of her mistakes and failures must be borne by her alone.

*How dare he come out here and pretend that everything's all right,* she thought, though she remembered she had mentally forgiven him for his past infidelity. And she had also accepted a sizable measure of the blame for their failed marriage, at least privately. But his presence galled

her nonetheless, probably because, with him here, she could no longer hide from the ugly truth of her inadequacies. Though, curiously, she also sensed that if she opened her heart to him now, it was entirely possible that a healing process could begin within her own heart, something she desperately needed.

She knew the mature thing to do was to come clean, to admit her blunder with Mike which led to her second big fiasco. Moreover, now would be the perfect time to do it—Danny at the wheel, tracts rolling by to the right and left. The scene was set perfectly. But she remained so terribly embarrassed over her own complicit behavior and at how naive she had been that she could not find the words to begin. Naturally, she could put the blame on Mike. But Danny was not entirely without brains; sooner or later he would figure out what really happened, which would only serve to embarrass her more. It also dawned on her that the final insult might still be awaiting her, like a sentencing hearing after the guilty verdict has been ominously handed down. She could soon find out that Mike had given her some kind of sexually transmitted disease, many of which are incurable as she has come to understand. Such a revelation, besides dashing her hopes for future love and happiness, would put an entirely different spin on her story, a decidedly dismal one to say the least. So, first things first. She would go to the local clinic tomorrow for a check-up and blood test. If things came out okay, she would come up with a plausible story for Danny's ears.

There was, however, one bright star in her otherwise dark and dismal sky. With the telltale signs of PMS coursing through her system, she felt certain she was not the least bit pregnant.

She studied his profile as he piloted the rental car. There was delight in his face and a look of conviction. This was a different person than the one she had divorced—happier, more thoughtful and compassionate, and less self-motivated—or so it seemed anyway. She despised the mere

thought of having to tell him her story at all, with its sordid detail and self-accusatory timbre. *Oh well*, she thought as they approached the exit for Mission Viejo, *it will have to wait. I'll tell him when I'm good and ready and not before.*

“We’re almost there. Ours is the next exit,” she said.

“Right. Tell me again what this place is all about.”

“It’s an old Catholic Mission, built in the eighteenth century by the Spanish. There’s a church, a fort, gardens and a museum that celebrates the various cultures that are the heritage of California—Spanish, Mexican and Indian.”

“Anything about Don Diego or Sergeant Garcia?”

“Danny, don’t be ridiculous. What am I going to do with you?”

“You could hold my hand for starters.”

“I guess I could do that. If you insist.”

“I insist.”

As they meandered through the gardens, Danny felt both pleased and proud that Julie was by his side once again. It now appeared as though he had prepared himself adequately. He and Julie were getting along; there was no rancor between them. He even sensed a knitting together once again, only this time in a better fashion than before—more equably, and he hoped more permanently. Although she had not yet given him any clear indication that she might take him back, he was feeling more and more comfortable with the idea of asking her. But he was no longer impetuous as he had been in the past. He would wait until the perfect moment. He had all week.



Each time he looked at her his heart overflowed with pride because he knew she was the one perfect mate this world had to offer him. He had come to his senses when he realized as much, albeit a little too late to prevent the collapse of their marriage. But who knew? The divorce may have been a necessary prerequisite to this current state of mind, a condition in which he could only be viewed as smarter, more mature and, at long last, thoroughly convinced that Julie was *the one* for him from the beginning. And, in choosing her, he had inadvertently stumbled into the best decision of his life.

He watched her as she looked through the viewfinder of her camera, taking aim at some unusual-looking desert flora, currently in full-bloom. There was a peculiar haunting beauty about Julie Baker Predmore, a mysterious quality that had always drawn him to her, and now, was pulling him more intensely than ever.

But he was not harboring illusions. He knew she had a dark side, a part that made her unpredictable and bristly, and that held him at arms' length for so many years. Plus, she has never been transparent. During the years of their marriage, he rarely knew where he stood with her. Indeed, his previous withdrawal from her was predicated on an erudite fear over how she might react to any given situation. Now, he knew even less about her private thoughts and motives.

But today this mystery only added to her allure. And furthermore, he was certain he knew most of her trigger mechanisms, having repeatedly, even habitually, sprung them in the past. From here on out he was bound and determined not to set her off, at least not in predictable fashion.

Still, it was another realization that pulsed most notably in his mind, and which was keeping him from expressing himself with her too prematurely. Since he had already lost her once, he

was now in the enviable position of no longer having anything left to lose. He had lived eighteen months without her; he could certainly wait a few more days if necessary.

On the other hand, his confidence was bolstered by something visibly apparent in her emerald eyes when she looked at him. It was there from the moment he showed up at her door. He could not be sure it was a look of love, but something about it helped him believe that winning her back was possible.

“Let me take a picture of you standing right over there.” Danny pointed to a spot between two succulent plants with long, spiny, near-upright fronds. In the background, the rounded backs of the coastal mountains arched gracefully against a cloudless sky.

Julie did as requested. She was still dressed in her turtleneck and jeans, cinched together with a bright silver belt buckle. Danny took a full-length shot of her in partial profile. The pose made her look fetching, he thought, and then, with the assistance of the zoom lens, he moved in for a close-up of her face against the desert skyline.

Just as he snapped the picture, there was a vibration, a rattling of the ground beneath him, like the sensation you get at an air show when the big old prop-driven bomber thunders by overhead. But this was clearly not an atmospheric disturbance. Instinctively, though he had never felt one before, he knew it had to be an earthquake.

“Ooh,” Julie said, a sudden look of astonishment on her face. “It’s a trembler, a good one.” The rumbling continued, more or less unabated.

“This is unbelievable. It’s going on and on.”

Though it seemed much longer, the earth shook for only about thirty seconds and then all was still again, except for the contents of Danny’s stomach.

“Does this happen often?”

“Fairly often, although most quakes aren’t that strong. This one could have done some real damage, depending on where it hit anyway.”

Danny suggested they sit together on a nearby bench for a moment. “That was the weirdest sensation I’ve ever felt,” he told her. “It was like the earth had turned into the ocean for a few seconds. There wasn’t even any warning.”

“There never is. Earthquakes just happen, when you least expect it.”

“Wow.” He was visibly shaken from the experience. “Do you think anyone was hurt? I mean, could it have been strong enough to do the kind of damage that happened in San Francisco that day before the World Series game got going?”

“That’s hard to say.” Julie laughed a little, not mockingly, but she couldn’t help being amused by Danny’s childlike reaction to the tremor. The actual experience of the earth moving was something he obviously never felt before today. He was responding in the same way she had as a teenager, upon coming to Michigan and seeing her first snow storm.

“You know what’s really strange?”

“What’s that?”

“It’s like there’s a trend going or something. Every time they have a major sporting event on the West Coast, there’s a quake right around game time.”

“Well, there are over five hundred quakes a year along the coast which are strong enough to be felt.”

“Holy cow. That’s over one per day. It’s no wonder people are scared out here.”

“Yeah. But you can’t go about living your life in fear of what might happen to you. Besides, statistically speaking at least, many more people get injured and killed from other natural disasters in the U.S., like hurricanes and tornadoes and ice storms and plain old mid-western

winter weather. And really bad quakes only occur about once every fifty years on average. Personally, I rarely give tremors like this a second thought. After a momentary disruption, life goes on. It does give the TV news something to talk about though, especially if a chunk of concrete comes loose from a building and falls on somebody's head. They get a lot of mileage out of things like that.”

“I imagine they do.” Danny was amazed at how unruffled Julie was from the experience and how nonchalant over the prospect of earthquakes in general. This, his first quake, was a daunting experience to him, though he has never been one to scare easily. It gave him pause to think that, if he lived here, he would not be able to depend on the earth remaining fixed underneath him. Perhaps, in time, he could get used to the sensation. But he did not think he could ever overlook the potential for disaster. Nor would he be able to put aside thoughts that the next one might be coming for him.

She reached over and touched his hand. “Are you all right?”

“Sure. I'm fine. It was just such a strange sensation; that's all.”

She glanced momentarily out across the desert landscape. About twenty feet away, a small bird bathed in a shell-shaped pool of water, splashing about noisily. Groups of people strolled through the gardens, obviously enjoying the magnificent afternoon. A sudden chill could be felt in the breeze, evidence that the evening air was already descending upon them. Like her, nobody else seemed the least bit phased by the earthquake they had just experienced. She looked back at Danny; he was gazing about the garden, using the viewfinder of her camera as a spyglass of sorts, looking for some more good photo opportunities. Feeling her attention on him, he lowered the camera and smiled.

Julie smiled at him and said, “there's a lesson to be learned from earthquakes, you know.”

“What’s that?” He looked genuinely interested.

“It’s simple, really. What you just felt was the earth relieving itself of stress. You see, all this pressure builds up underground along the edges of tectonic plates called faults. That’s important I think—that they’re called faults. Keep that in mind.”

“Okay.”

“Anyway, in certain areas like here in California, these plates, which are really giant pieces of the earth’s crust, are trying to slide past each other at the rate of a few inches per year. This happens along a fault line—like the San Andreas for instance. You’ve heard of the San Andreas Fault, right?”

“Of course.”

“Well, in order for one plate to move past the other, something has to give, only the plates are made out of rock so they don’t give very easily. They don’t just slip on by, if you know what I mean?”

“I think I’m getting the picture.”

“Okay. What happens is that one plate resists the other until the pressure becomes great enough so the strength of the rocks is overcome and then, boom! You get a quake.”

“That makes sense,” he admitted. “But what’s the lesson?”

“I was coming to that. Have a little patience.”

Danny rolled his eyes.

“The lesson is this: You and I are like these plates, see. We’re jammed up against each other with a fault line in between. Then, as we move along in life, inching past each other, pressure builds up until something has to give.”

“And in our case, a lot gave.”

“Precisely.”

Danny thought silently for a moment, considering the metaphor. She was, of course, totally on the mark. She had described their situation brilliantly.

“You’re absolutely right,” he told her. “The question is, what can we do about it?”

“Well if we were truly like earthquake faults, considering we’ve already had the *big one*, we wouldn’t have much to worry about for another hundred years or so. Take that stone church over there for example. The tower was knocked off it by an earthquake back in 1812, but since then there haven’t been any severe tremors along this part of the coast. Unfortunately for us, however, we’re not rocks. We’re human beings, and that makes us totally unpredictable, much more so than the science of plate tectonics anyway.”

Danny wondered how she had gotten so smart all of a sudden. In the past he never really gave her much credit for insightful reasoning. “Where did you learn all this, in college?”

“In life mostly. Life’s a pretty good teacher, you know.”

He could not argue with that.

“Come on,” she said. “Let’s walk around some more. I’m getting cold sitting here.”

For Danny’s benefit she had tried to appear unaffected by the tremor, but she was now beginning to realize that it had a profound effect on her as well. With it had come a newfound freedom for self-expression, something she did not possess earlier. It was as though the relieving of the earth’s pressure had loosened some things within her as well, things that had been bound up by stress and fear. If there was ever going to be a time to open up to Danny, this had to be it. While reaching for his hand she took in a deep breath and then slowly let it out.

“You know Danny, there’s something I’ve been wanting to tell you.”

\* \* \*

First, Julie explained that she needed him to simply hear her out. They could discuss it after she finished telling the story. “No problem,” Danny said. Valerie Robinson had schooled him in the art of listening.

Next, Julie said that, if they were to be close friends again, they would have to be honest with each other, willing to share their intimate thoughts and experiences. Danny agreed, saying he wanted that kind of relationship as well. She cautioned him; he was supposed to simply listen.

“Right,” he said. “Sorry.”

She explained how Mike had offered her the promotion, and how excited she had been to finally get out from behind a secretary’s desk. Mike had promised to help her succeed in marketing and get her involved in the sales process. She got a small raise, but more importantly, she was going to learn some new skills.

There were signs from the beginning that Mike was interested in her, she admitted. But she had insisted they keep things entirely professional.

She and Danny were standing together by the Indian cemetery. Danny listened silently, sensing where she was going. The images flashing through his mind prevented him from making eye contact with her while she related the events of the past two weeks.

Eventually, Julie got around to the part about the presentation at Clark and Betts, and how Mike had driven them up to Thousand Oaks for the meeting. It was the day of the floods, she said, except that no one knew how bad the weather was going to get. “Then, with the freeways and bridges flooded out as they were by early afternoon and the CHP telling everyone to stay off the roads, we had no choice but to find someplace to stay the night.”

*This was going to be the hard part*, she told herself, as if she had just come to that understanding. She had no precise words in mind for the sordid part of her story.

“Mike could only find one suite available for the night. A lot of people were in the same predicament. I didn’t like the idea of sharing a room, but at least it was a suite.” She digressed for a moment and began explaining how difficult it had been to meet the right kind of guys—meaning the marrying kind, though she did not say as much. She had no real dating life, is what she did say. She truthfully admitted to her lonely times, though school and work tended to take up so much of her energy. “It never got so bad that I was ready to drop my standards or do anything rash. But let’s face it, I’ve not been getting any younger, and I didn’t want the years to just pass my by, leaving me to live the rest of my life alone.

“You need to understand what I was dealing with,” she added. “Mike definitely had a lot going for him—success, intelligence, good looks. And by this time, he had clearly taken an interest in me. I know I was foolish; I led him on. But I never intended for things to go as far as they did. Then, when I tried to stop him, I couldn’t. He was too strong for me, Danny.”

Finally, he looked right at her. Tears were rolling down her cheeks. Without saying a word, Danny put his arms around her and drew her close to him. Her body was shaking; she began to cry openly, and as she did, her slender frame convulsed with waves of emotion. After a moment or two, with one hand she reached up and brushed away tears from her face. With the other she held onto Danny’s shoulder.

They stood there in each other’s arms for several minutes. Neither of them spoke. Actually, Danny was at a complete loss for words. Additionally, he doubted that she was altogether finished with the story. There had to be more, he believed. But at least one good thing had come out of all this: his wife was in his arms again. And, feeling her body pressed against him, he was in no hurry to let her go. Instead, he held her a little more tightly and, throwing caution to the



wind, he kissed her, just above her left ear. Then he whispered some reassurance. "I'm here for you, Julie. I'll always be here for you."

She relaxed her hold on him and with her pain-distorted vision, looked straight through his eyes into his soul. "How can you say that Danny. You live two thousand miles away."

"That can be fixed."

"I'm not going back to Michigan. This is where I belong, Danny. I'm sorry."

"Let's not worry about that now. You've got more important things to think about. Like, what are you going to do about your job?"

"That job is history. But I am going in tomorrow to personally deliver a threatening letter which I hope will result in some significant severance pay."

"If you need money for a while, I'll be glad to help out."

"I don't want you to do that."

"Why not? You're my wife. You're my responsibility."

"I divorced you Danny, remember?"

"But I'm still here. You can't get rid of me that easily. Besides, I still love you Julie. I'll always love you. I made a huge mistake a couple of years ago, something I'll regret for the rest of my life."

She sniffed back some more emotion.

Danny took out his handkerchief and handed it to her. "Come on," he said. "I believe it's time I took you home."



## Chapter Twenty Three

They walked together into her tiny house. Julie flipped on the television so they could watch the second half of the Superbowl. “You must be famished,” she offered. Danny said he was. They had been out all day without lunch. She quickly put together a couple of sandwiches and set some snack foods out on the counter. Then, with the halftime about to climax, she sent Danny down the street to the local market for some beer. He came back with six bottles of Olympia. “When in Rome...” he said, when she commented on his choice of brands.

They spent most of the evening catching up on the past year-and-a-half. She probed into his private life until Danny felt like the subject in a biology experiment. He did not shade the truth though, which made him justifiably proud of himself. Then again, he had nothing to hide. There really was no other woman, hadn’t been since Lisa broke off with him.

He eventually got around to telling her how Bobby Brooks had tried to fix him up with his sister-in-law, Michele Sullivan. Julie laughed at that. “I can just picture you trying to handle her kid. He’s a hellion. Michele always claimed he had A.D.D. But if you ask me all he really needed was a good swat across the backside.”

“Well it didn’t work out,” Danny said, adding that being alone has been hard on him too, especially since his job falls way short of taking the place of a personal life.

She wanted to know what had brought about all the changes in him—he seemed so very different from when they were married.

“I’ve got a friend named Valerie Robinson to thank, mostly. She’s about Daniel’s age and she works in my building. We met one night in the parking lot when her car needed a jump. She helped me put my life into perspective. I never would have written that first note to you if it weren’t for Valerie.”

“So I have her to thank then?”

“You do...and I’d like you to meet her someday.”

“Is that right?”

“Jul, you don’t have to worry about Valerie. There’s nothing between us but friendship.”

“Just friendship?”

“Honest.” He didn’t have to equivocate with his response.

“Why do you think I divorced you, Danny?”

The question landed on him like a safe, instantly flattening him. Julie always knew how to cut to the heart of a matter. It took him a moment to gather himself sufficiently for a response. “I guess because you were upset over my affair with Lisa.”

“That was certainly part of it.”

“What was the rest?”

Her eyes widened. “We had nothing left between us, Danny—no love, no sex, no mutual interests—nothing.”

“Well...I know what you’re saying, but it wasn’t as bad as all that.” She had made it sound even more hopeless than he could recall.

“Even so, what’s changed now? You say you love me but those could just be empty words. And how do I know it’s not just a matter of you being lonely and me being available. It’s all very convenient, you know, us being together again. Why would things be any different between us this time around?”

Danny wished he could honestly disagree with her appraisal of the situation, perhaps offer some kind of argument which did not make him look like such a jerk in the past or such an opportunist at present, but unfortunately, nothing convincing came swiftly to mind.

“I can’t say exactly why, but I feel it in my heart; that’s all. Besides, I don’t believe love can be defined in tangible terms.”

“But you *can* love someone without really liking them, don’t you think?”

Danny considered her point with a furrowed brow. Julie nibbled on the end of her little finger for a moment, before making it personal. “And you may not want to be around someone either—take the way I’ve felt about you for the past couple of years, for instance.”

“So you never really stopped loving me then?” He was reaching, but it was a logical question.

“No, not completely, but I hated you all the same.”

Danny regarded her answer as a revelation of sorts, possibly the break he had been looking for. Leaving his chair, he walked over to the snack bar to conduct an animated appeal.

“Julie, I don’t have any defense for the past. What I did was stupid. I don’t think I’ll ever stop regretting it. But on the other hand, our time apart has helped me get a grip on my true feelings. So now I can honestly say that marrying you was the best decision of my life, and what I did to drive you away was the worst. Losing you was the biggest loss I’ve ever suffered. It was worse than if I’d cut off one of my arms or legs because, unlike your limbs, you only get one mate,

someone who becomes as much a part of you as an arm or a leg, and when that person's gone there's nothing left to take their place."

He paused a moment, hoping for a response. None was offered.

"I've discovered in the past year-and-a-half that there is a considerable part of me missing without you, Jul. I am absolutely convinced that no other woman can take your place, not in this life anyway."

Julie remained skeptical. "That may just be the way you feel until the next large-breasted Lisa comes along."

He walked over to her chair and crouched down beside her. "Look, when you divorced me and moved out here I found out what life was like without you, and I'm here to say that I didn't like it. And I didn't like myself in that kind of life either. So, I changed everything, or at least everything I could think of to change. And I'm willing to keep on changing. I'll do whatever it takes to make you happy. Besides, if I could live as a single man for over a year without having sex, I can get by without another Lisa, large breasts or not."

"You've had no sex for a year?"

"Over a year."

"How many different women?"

"Just Lisa, that's all."

Julie turned her face away for a moment. This was all so ironic, she thought. The score had been evened, although she felt a twinge of conscience over regarding their affairs in such cold-hearted terms, as if they were both involved in some kind of sport. Turning back, she reached out and took one of his hands. With her free hand she patted the seat cushion next to her. "Come sit beside me. Tell me something."

“What’s that?” He squeezed in next to her.

“Did you ever get a blood test afterward to see if, well...you know...”

“Yes...and no—I didn’t catch anything from her.”

“Well, that’s *one* good thing, anyway.”

“Right. I’m the poster boy for secondary virginity.”

She looked into his brown eyes. They appeared innocent and doleful. “What would you do if I told you to ‘get lost?’ That I don’t want anything to do with you anymore.”

“I wouldn’t have come out here if I thought you were going to tell me that. But, to answer your question, you can’t get rid of me that easily. I’m in love with you, Julie. And I think I heard you say you loved me too.”

“Not so fast. I did not say that.”

“You implied it though.”

“But I didn’t say it.”

“Well *I* did.” He lifted both of her muscular legs over his and put his arms around her neck. She did not resist him. “You are the most beautiful woman in the world and I don’t want to live another day without you in it. Nothing else matters to me, Julie. Honest.”

She was beginning to cry again.

“Julie, please don’t cry.”

“I’m sorry.” She sniffed. “I’m just a little vulnerable right now.”

Danny stroked her hair. “I’m not going to hurt you again. Ever.”

“I wish I could believe you, Danny.”

He pulled his handkerchief from his pocket and used it to dry her eyes. Then, with the backside of his fingers he began exploring her features. Her face was soft, just like he had

remembered it. He traced along her hairline, stopping to play with one earlobe for a moment. Julie cocked her head in response to his touch. He silently admired her delicate and beautifully shaped nose, the very same nose their daughter Clarrie inherited from her. Though unlike Clarrie's naturally smiling mouth, Julie's lips were solemn by nature. For another few moments, Danny sat there holding her, drinking her in, satisfying himself with their closeness. It seemed like a dream-come-true that they could be together again, sharing the same chair, hemmed in as close as two people could be. He longed for her to open her lips to him, yet she remained cautiously aloof. Finally, he gave her a little kiss on the cheek and lifted himself up and out of the chair, pulling her up with him.

He held onto both her hands and, with all the sincerity he could muster, he said, "If you give me a little time I'll prove my love to you. For now, all I can give you is my word."

"And your word is..."

"My bond."

"Uh-huh."

At a little past nine Danny noticed Julie's eyelids beginning to droop. "You look tired," he told her.

"I guess I am, a little."

"Maybe I should be going; you need your rest for the job search."

"I'm sorry I don't have a couch, or you could sleep here tonight."

"That's okay. I've got a room already paid for up in Anaheim."



Had she offered him the vacant side of her bed he would have gladly agreed to stay the night. But she deserved some time to sort out her feelings and he was willing to wait a little longer—he owed her that much.

Before going out however, he gave her a warm hug and a generous kiss on the cheek. She offered no resistance this time. In fact, if his senses could be trusted, she seemed to welcome his embrace.

After a fitful sleep in which her mind whirred half the night, Julie awakened with a new perspective on her future. In her mind's eye she beheld a tranquil vista of hope, dotted with sparkling possibilities like a regatta of bright white sailing ships on a peaceful sea. And, in contemplating the panorama, she sensed exhilaration. She appeared to be on the verge of arrival at that elusive place called happiness, a state she had coveted for a lifetime, one that had consistently evaded her over and over again. Now, fortuitously, like on those rare occasions when Neiman's puts its good shoes on sale, happiness seemed within her grasp.

Thinking back on the years when she was both mom and homemaker, she remembered feeling cheated. Of course no one had deliberately denied her happiness and contentment. But neither had she ever truly experienced the personal satisfaction that comes through interaction with one's adult peer group in an occupational setting. Consequently, she longed for what she lacked—a full-time career—and for adults with which to relate. More recently, of course, she got a taste of the career-oriented life and, like most things, the reality of it came up far short of her glamorized ideal. Just like in her marriage and family, flaws appeared in the fabric. To say the least, this was a major disappointment. But then again, she was definitely learning how to cope with such let downs. She'd had her epiphany. And woven into the whole cloth of her discovery,

in twisted yet recurring fashion, was the black thread of disappointment. Seeing it in her work situation, so plainly recognizable, so tightly integrated with the product of her life, Julie recognized that failures and setbacks were not anomalies. Nor were they cruel punishments for her attempts to extract happiness and satisfaction from this life. Nor was she being unjustly singled out as one who should suffer more grievously than anyone else. On the contrary, disappointments, like rainy days, were merely a part of the natural order of things.

Fortunately for Julie Baker Predmore, her life—going all the way back to childhood—had prepared her quite adequately to deal with the difficulties and setbacks that came her way. So it was not surprising that she suddenly felt good about taking Danny at his word. Not because he had proven trustworthy in the past, although for the most part he had always been honest with her. Nor was it because she had acted rashly and prematurely when she cast both him and their marriage aside, even though she probably had been somewhat impulsive in that decision. And it was certainly not because, with his newfound charisma, he suddenly appeared more charming than she could remember. But rather, it was for the happiness and contentment that she somehow sensed there for the taking with Danny in her life once again.

Plus, she wanted the shaking to stop and the ground to become solid under her feet once more. She wanted one person to depend on, and when she thought about all the people she has ever known, she could not remember anyone more dependable than Danny. Sure he has his faults, but who doesn't? And even so, after she divorced him and left him in her dust, here he was—back again, right when she needed him most.

She had a second chance at him and she did not want to blow it, especially since she was discovering all over again how deeply she loved him. The simple truth of the matter was—though she had not realized it until just yesterday—her feelings for him never died out at all.

They had just gone dormant for a season. And now, after being with him for only two days, they were back, warming her from the inside out.

In addition, she perceived that she had just arrived at a crucial fork in the road of life. Fortunately, she knew instinctively which way to go. Only one clear choice lay before her. It was the same choice she had made all those years ago when she was still too young to know anything with certainty. But this time she had a much better reason for making that choice. Considering all the anger and frustration she has directed his way, her incessant moodiness, her many faults, known most eminently by Danny, he still loved her, and he had come all this way to say that he wanted her back.

In retrospect, perhaps she should never have let him go in the first place. Thank God he at least had come to *his* senses before it was too late, and one or the other of them got sucked into another ill advised but committed relationship. She could very easily have made such a mistake, having been in too much of a funk lately to see anything with objective clarity.

She now recognized that neither of them had a ghost of a chance to succeed by starting over with someone new. They weren't starry-eyed teenagers anymore. They had poured half a lifetime into each other, invested themselves heavily in their marriage until it was worth more than either of them dared to calculate. They had already climbed many of life's heights, achieved more milestones than most—making a home, raising their kids all the way up through school, building a decent family life, keeping the bills paid. They'd had a good partnership, but somehow she had missed the most obvious point—missed it until now, that is. After coming so far together, it was ludicrous to go back to a zero-balance situation with someone else.

After he left last evening she cried yet again, but the tears came forth from a well of happiness and relief this time, not from despair or regret. She was thinking about how lucky she was that he

had come back to her now, when she was at her lowest emotional ebb. She could just as easily have lost him forever.

She tried to remember what she had been thinking two years ago, although naturally those thoughts were long gone, having evaporated along with her anger toward Danny. Nevertheless, upon hearing about his affair with Lisa, she should have taken him by the hand and led him into the bedroom for the best time he had ever had in his entire life, though admittedly, that had been out of the question in the face of such an insult. Still, she knew what he liked. She could have stopped his restless wandering in a heartbeat, turned him around and eventually won his affections back; she just did not feel like it at the time. She was too tired, too worn out from life and raising kids, then teenagers, and too angry with him for neglecting her. But mostly, she had been oblivious to what they had possessed together, to the real value of their relationship. Even though their walk through life had not been without its uphill climbs, it was nonetheless a good land where they put their roots down to dwell together, one which neither of them should have been ready to abandon.

But alas, they now had a second chance. Danny was back, and this time she was not going to let him slip away again. She whispered a prayer as she thought about going to the health clinic later this morning: *Oh God, please let everything come out okay. I'm sorry I messed up so bad. I just couldn't handle some kind of incurable disease right now, even though I probably deserve one. And thanks for bringing Danny back to me. I hope you can work something out to get us together again. I guess I'd move back to Michigan if that's what it'll take. But, isn't there some other way? I'll leave it one up to you—you've done a good job so far.*

\* \* \*

When Danny awoke, the message light was lit on his telephone. His mind flipped through the possibilities as he dialed the number to connect to his temporary voice mail. Only a few people knew where he was staying, among them were Vic, Gillian and his staff at Base Line, Valerie and Julie. Who would be leaving a message this early on a Monday morning? He hoped it wasn't anyone from work. On further consideration, he decided it could only be Julie.

But, as the message began, he was arrested by Gillian's resonant alto voice, "Danny, sorry to bother you out there, but I wanted you to hear it from me first that one of the candidates we hired for the Chrysler job backed out of his offer over the weekend. This puts us in a real bind. Unfortunately, it doesn't look like we have anyone to replace him. Naturally, we'll be going over the possibilities at the meeting this morning but I'm not real hopeful. Cook is going to be very upset, and Vic, well, what can I say about him?"

"Anyway, I thought you should have a *head's up* in case Vic decides to get in touch with you. If you get a chance, maybe you could call me later. Hope you're having a good time on the 'left coast.' Sorry to be the bearer of bad news. See ya."

"Shit," Danny said to himself in a half-whispered, fully aspirated fashion, though no less harshly than the message had struck him. But then, there was another message. He continued listening.

Julie's voice smiled at him over the line, sounding surprisingly cheerful for six-thirty on a Monday morning, "Hi, Danny. I hope you slept well even though it's hard to get a good night's rest in a hotel bed. But, well...I woke up this morning and remembered I owed you an answer on Las Vegas. I've never been there either, you know. The problem is, I'm supposed to be in my sociology class Thursday evening. But I've thought it over and, call me crazy because I'm going to have to make up a lot of work to get through this class, but I would love for you to take me to

Las Vegas. Especially since it will give me something to look forward to while I'm out job-hunting. After three days of pounding the pavement, I'll definitely be ready for a break. Oh, and one other thing: When you make the reservations, I don't think we'll be needing more than one room. I love you, Danny. I'll be looking forward to seeing you tonight. Bye."

Danny hung up the receiver and audibly let out a *Yes!* He was nearly there. And it had only taken him two days. Someone must be smiling down on him, clearing away the barriers from the road ahead. He knew there was no way he could have gotten this far on his own.

There was just one little hurdle left to jump—the matter of their homes being half a country apart. Well, on second thought, maybe that wasn't such a *little* hurdle. Too bad he was the only one with an income.

He wondered if she really meant what she had said yesterday: *I'm not moving back to Michigan!* Maybe it was something spoken out of frustration or merely a reflection of her sense of loss, evidencing itself in the form of predictable, Anglo-Saxon obstinacy.

He could however sympathize with her need to grab onto something for security, something that had not already failed her. He was doing the same in his attempt to win her back. Besides, it was well within the margins of plausibility that she would choose to take her stand right here, with her feet planted firmly on California's sacred ground, however prone it may be to shaking from time to time. For as long as he has known her, she has fantasized about this place, building it up in her own mind into something more than it could possibly be, a kind of utopia, heaven on earth, so to speak. To her, California's myriad of problems—the over-population, the high real estate prices, the traffic, the bad air, the mudslides, wild fires and earthquakes—were as much as invisible. She could simply ignore them along with their potential negative impact on her quality of life. Her love for this place seemed so vast that even if a quake swallowed half of Newport

Beach, she wouldn't leave. No, she would be one of those who stayed on to reconstruct her life and existence. Resolute in the aftermath, she would appear on the evening news, "You can shake the ground but you can't shake me..." Clearly, it would not be easy to tear her away from the land she now calls home.

So, where did that leave the two of them? Danny was having difficulty imagining a solution. Perhaps he would have to be the one willing to relocate. Yet, such an option was laden with uncertainty and sacrifice, and probably lots of other baggage he had not yet taken time to consider. Besides, it was much too soon for him to offer an opinion on Southern California living, even to himself, having less than forty-eight hours worth of experience under his belt. If pressed, he felt he *could* admit to one thing however, maybe even two. There was a certain mystique about the Southland, as Julie preferred to call it. And the climate seemed every bit as pleasant as she had advertised over the years; something even he could get used to.

But clearly, two thousand miles was too far to commute.





## Chapter Twenty Four

Having begun under a canopy of thick low clouds, Monday officially became a rainy day by mid-afternoon. Around two o'clock, a cold drizzle came ashore and spread eastward. In Southern California hardly anyone ever comments on the weather when it is good (which it is most every day). But when it's bad, everyone gets to whining. Natives and tourists alike go on a campaign against Mother Nature: "*No bad weather welcome here.*"

But Danny went against the grain. Caught without an umbrella, soaked-through from the short walk between the Convention Center and the hotel, he remained completely unperturbed. His mind, after all, was elsewhere—had been all day long. Besides, he planned to put on clean clothes anyway.

After showering and dressing he dialed his voice mail at Base Line. Having spoken to his travel agent during the lunch hour, he was pleased to find her message confirming reservations at Harrah's in Las Vegas for Thursday and Friday nights. But there was another message too, a brief but stinging admonishment from Vic DeSalvo concerning the hiring debacle Gillian mentioned earlier, not entirely unexpected, but not a welcome development either. Perhaps he should have injected some sanity into the situation this morning with a phone call and some encouraging words to let everyone know he was *on top of things*. But what could Vic honestly

expect him to do about the problem from out here? At some point, the organization should be able to function without him there to take all the beatings, however cathartic such sport may be for power-crazed bullies like Vic.

After a moment's consideration Danny punched the DISCARD button. *Bye, bye, Vic...*

His position was indefensible anyway. For the time being at least, he was safely outside of the retaliation zone, beyond the reach of the boom, should Vic choose to lower it, which he probably would before week's end. Danny silently rejoiced at being temporarily free of the brutish and vindictive Vice President of Technical Services. Gillian, on the other hand, would definitely be earning her salary this week. Perhaps she would discover that the overly large VP was a misogynist as well.

Danny's thoughts turned to the recruiting conference. Though the first day's speakers fell somewhat short of awe-inspiring, the sessions had proved interesting, mentally stimulating and thought provoking. A review of the tried and true every now and then can be refreshing and even helpful. Plus, Danny picked up one or two new techniques that, if used properly, might mean the difference between success and failure in a hiring situation. His mandate was clear; he had to make the most of every opportunity. If this seminar helped them hire one or two more candidates a month, it will have been worth the investment.

In addition, Danny was getting a chance to network with other professionals in the business: head hunters, H-R types, recruiting managers like himself. He particularly liked comparing notes with recruiters in non-competitive industries. They were almost always willing to share a secret or two. And he especially enjoyed participating in the role-plays like they had in yesterday afternoon's session, entitled: "The Job Interview—How to Sell Your Company." He came away with a taped critique of his own performance and had some good fun as well.

\* \* \*

For Julie, going back through the doors at SunBurst would be a nerve-racking experience of the highest order. But, since it was unavoidable, she planned to do it with a flourish. At eight o'clock sharp, dressed in her expensive linen suit and highest heels, looking like the consummate businesswoman, she sucked in her pride along with a breath of ocean air and proceeded straightaway into the office building along the Mariner's Mile. With any luck at all, Mike would not be in yet this morning; she was not exactly relishing a confrontation.

Without speaking a word to anyone along the way, she headed straight for Mike's secretary Margaret's desk. Julie greeted her with a crisp hello and handed her a sealed envelope marked CONFIDENTIAL containing her resignation and the letter threatening Mike with a lawsuit if he did not agree to pay her two year's severance. He would naturally see it as blackmail but she knew his reputation was important enough for him to actually consider paying her to go away quietly.

"Please see that Mike gets this as soon as he comes in. It's been nice working with you, Margaret, and everyone else, especially Spence, but most good things do eventually come to an end. I'm officially resigning."

Leaving Margaret speechless, she turned on her heel and walked over to her desk. She quickly gathered up her few belongings, placing her desktop items and personal files into an empty hanging file box. On her way out of the building, she spoke to no one else. Christy Blankenships's vacant eyes followed her down the hall from the strategic vantage point of her administrator's cubicle, the very spot where Julie had cut her own career-ripping teeth. Julie managed to throw a sardonic smile her way before exiting to the gloomily lit parking lot.

In her heart she wished Christy and the others *all the best*. But she knew it would have been pointless to say anything one way or the other. She was the enemy now. The other women had

their own careers to worry about first, regardless of how humdrum their jobs or how meager their incomes. Any concern they might have for Julie and her predicament would drop right off the bottom of their respective priority lists. And she certainly did not want to hear any disingenuous encouraging words spoken her way. She was much too jaded for that.

It felt good to pull out of SunBurst's driveway onto the PCH for the last time. Regardless of how Mike responded, whether he paid her the money or not, she was now officially free of him and the prison he had recently constructed around her. How foolish she had been to allow him to isolate and marginalize her, to make her his latest conquest. Thankfully, she was beyond all that now.

Another chapter in her life had ended—a rather dark and disappointing one, to be sure. But it had not been a total bust. At the very least, she had gained a wealth of experience that could only help her succeed in future endeavors. Next time, she would be miles closer to a successful career before even getting started. Quite rightly, she had known all along that getting involved with someone at work was dangerous business. Too bad she did not stick to her guns, or better stated, her “rule.”

She headed her car toward the downtown health clinic. Though she had never had occasion to use it in the past, she had often noticed the signs on busses and heard the radio spots advertising that walk-ins were welcome and test results could be obtained the same day. Frankly, it had not dawned on her until just recently why such a service might be valuable. Now of course, it all made perfect sense. Thank God for the impressions a good ad campaign can make, even on the unsuspecting.

\* \* \*

After a weigh-in, blood pressure and heart rate check, she got to see the doctor who performed a digital exam, a visual inspection of her private parts, and the extraction of four vials of blood. Before leaving, Julie made arrangements to phone the attending Physician's Assistant after four-thirty for the test results. She could not get out of the building fast enough, the mere smell of the place nauseated her. But at least everything looked okay—according to the doctor, anyway. Getting molested by health practitioners was a small price to pay for peace of mind, she reasoned. Fortunately, the “doc” was a woman.

She was one day into—and already a day behind—her campaign for a new job. Basically, she had done nothing so far, except for bringing her resume up-to-date. To get herself on track, she would stop at the library and borrow a copy of the local business directory, then go home to pour over the Sunday HELP WANTED ads. Perhaps later this afternoon she would get on the Internet and see what she could find in the way of local job openings before Danny showed up. He was expected around six-thirty. Fortunately, she had lots to keep her mind busy until then. Still, she found herself constantly beating back thoughts of uncertainty about the future, and what it actually held for her now that she was unemployed again and almost to the point where she might be willing to sacrifice her life on the West Coast, if that's what it would take to get her marriage back. And her peace of mind.

By five-thirty she was ready to put the job search aside until tomorrow. She had worked straight through, somewhat mindlessly, got twenty-some query letters written and stuffed into envelopes along with fresh copies of her resume, took a short break to call the clinic for what turned out to be good news (what a relief!), and then spent a relatively fruitless hour on-line. Apparently, her skills were not in extremely high demand in Orange County. At least companies did not seem to be posting open secretarial positions on the Internet like they were jobs for

engineers, data processors and management personnel. *No big deal*, she thought. *I've run this gamut before. With a little patience, the right opportunity will come up.*

Fortunately, her bank account was in pretty good shape so she had no real worries over keeping the bills paid. She still had almost all the money she got from the sale of the cottage in Northern Michigan. She hoped not to have to dip too heavily into those funds though; they constituted her entire life savings. Danny's offer to help her financially was generous and no doubt sincere, but she did not necessarily want to tap him for money either. The last thing she wanted at this stage of her life was to be a debtor. Borrowing money was a clear indication of weakness, and she did not want to appear *weak*. If she and Danny were to get something going again, she wanted it to be on an equal footing, especially in the area of earning potential. Of course she had no clue as to how to elevate her fiscal standing quickly enough to make things come out that way, but it was her goal, nonetheless.

Her lifestyle was far from extravagant and her expenses were minimal. When it came right down to it, she did not need that much money, nor was she inclined to worry about finances. Danny had always been better in that department, quite capable really. Moreover, her level of happiness and contentment had never been tied to financial status. Realizing this, she wondered why she had been so taken with Mike's wealth and the prospect of sharing it with him. Maybe it was just another appealing part of the package that she saw herself getting with a guy like Mike, a bonus of sorts. Yet, in the end, there wasn't much else she could say actually attracted her to him, except for maybe his looks. He certainly wasn't a good listener, or much of a conversationalist for that matter, unless he was talking about himself. So, why had she been willing to play the game with him, to let things go as far as they had, short of the moment when

he revealed his true nature? It made her wonder whether she was capable of ever understanding her own needs and desires.

She was certain of one thing, however. Considering her track record for romance, her screw-ups with Danny and Mike, the fault had been just as much hers as theirs. The blame rested equally upon her shoulders. In truth, her gradual estrangement from Danny, his cheating on her, the divorce, the disaster with Mike—each of these had been imminently preventable, and she, even more so than the man involved, could have single-handedly prevented them. And, though self-incriminating, more importantly this meant that she, for the first time in her life, recognized that her destiny was in her own hands and no one else's.

But she was just as convinced that she did not want to live out the rest of her life alone, no matter how safe and insular a strategy independence might be. Such a safeguard against future calamities would be a cop-out. Besides, she had already experienced the independent life and found it hollow. It only tended to make her more self-absorbed than she was by nature, and she hardly needed help in that department. Consequently, she was now more persuaded than ever that she would take another chance on love and, considering all she's learned of late, in all likelihood, the little tremors of everyday life would no longer upset her equilibrium or throw her involuntarily into depression or restlessness. So, from this day forward, she swore to herself that she would remain in complete control of her thoughts and feelings—and especially her reactions. Just then, as her mind was beginning to entertain the rekindling of her love for Danny, the doorbell rang.

With a quick glance at the clock, she moved toward the door. She wasn't expecting him for another hour. She hadn't even had chance to clean up and get dressed. But it wasn't Danny standing there. It was Trace.

“Hey! Come on; open up. I’m getting soaked out here.”

After removing her coat, Tracy took a moment to shake the water out of her hair and smooth it with her hands. Then she told Julie she had been worried about her, saying that she’d half-expected to hear from her by now, and when that didn’t happen, she decided to stop by after work. She wanted to know what her “best friend” had chosen to do about her job, and her boss, and what she had been up to all weekend.

“Well, besides getting my head on straight, I’ve been entertaining an old flame.”

Tracy’s eyes widened. “It’s your ex-husband. Am I right?”

Julie said she was, then proceeded to tell her how they spent the weekend, doing things together.

“Is he still in town; am I going to get to meet him?”

“Well, if you hang around till six-thirty, he should be here.”

“Oh, no. I look like something the cat drug in. Maybe I better use your bathroom to freshen up.”

“You’re welcome to it. But don’t take too long; I’ve got some work to do in there myself.”

“Are we trying to impress someone?”

“I just want to look my best, that’s all. And that takes some effort. Unlike you, my youth has gone and left me.”

“I don’t know about that. You look pretty good to me.”

“You think so? Because that’s what Danny says too.”

“Uh-oh. Looks like you’ve gone and done it again.”

“Done what?”



“Fallen for another guy, that’s what.” Trace shook her head and smiled a coy smile. “I can’t leave you alone for two days, can I?”

“I guess not.”

Danny arrived to find the Camaro in the driveway. It gave him pause as he wondered who its owner might be. This, he reasoned, was a decidedly masculine car—black on black. He prepared himself to find Julie entertaining a suitor, maybe even the guy she had written about, Rene or Revy or whatever—some Frenchman. His stomach somersaulted during the walk to her door, and not from hunger either, though he surely felt that as well.

Needless to say, he was relieved to discover that the car belonged to a pretty platinum blond Julie referred to as her “best friend.” Instantly he made the connection—just like some people and their dogs resemble each other, that car was made for Tracy Wendell.

There were three beers in the refrigerator from yesterday so Julie served them up. Danny quickly saw why Julie and Tracy got along so well. He, himself, felt an instant affinity for the blond spitfire. For her part, Tracy proved she knew how to hold court with a man in the room. Julie, the odd person out of the discourse on cars and point spreads, the Lakers and Kings, finally nosed in. “Trace, would you mind not monopolizing my husband a minute so we can decide what to do about dinner?”

“Sorry, Jul, but I didn’t know you two were married. Is there something else you haven’t told me?”

Danny chuckled.

Julie tilted her head slightly to the right and gave Trace a look.

“If you girls know of a good Mexican place I’ll spring for dinner,” Danny said, trying to spare Julie any further embarrassment. He smiled inside over the two words Julie had just uttered—*my husband*. This was more than he had expected.

“What do you think, Jul? Is there any good Mexican food in California?”

“Silly question. A better one would be, ‘how *hot* is it?’”

“Well I like it hot,” Danny replied, mainly for Tracy’s benefit. After twenty years his tastes were well known to his wife.

“Somehow that doesn’t surprise me,” Tracy said, giving him a sultry look of her own. To save herself, she added, “That must be why you and Julie hit it off so well. She’s one hot tamale, you know.”

“Is that a fact?”

After dinner, Danny suggested they go bowling. “Great idea,” Trace replied. “I’d just be going home to college reading anyway. You have no idea how boring polytheism and the Hindu caste system can be. It’s all so repulsive. I’m sure if I were born over there, I’d have the *dharma* to be an Untouchable, out there begging on the streets of Calcutta.”

Julie gamely interjected, “You mean soliciting, don’t you?”

“No, not at all, smartie. Untouchables don’t make good prostitutes. None of the other castes will have anything to do with them, that’s why they’re called Untouchables.”

Danny asked what *dharma* meant.

“It’s kind of like your destiny for a particular incarnation,” she told him. “See, the Hindus believe that after you die the *karma* you built up in your previous life determines your *dharma* for the next. Plus, if you’re good, you get reincarnated into a higher caste. But if you’re evil,

well, you drop down the totem pole a notch or two, if you know what I mean. So you can see how easily *I* might end up as an *Untouchable*. It would only take one or two short lifetimes and I'd be right there, at the bottom of the heap.”

“Trace, don't be so hard on yourself,” Julie said. “You're really a good person. One of the best people I've ever known.”

“You really believe that?”

“Yeah,” Danny added, “if it were up to me I'd put you right on top of the pole.”

“Well, just give yourself some time to get to know me, Daniel. I could screw up a one-car junkyard.”

“Join the club,” Julie threw in.

“Yeah,” Danny said, “we're both charter members.”

Three games were more than enough to prove that none of them could bowl. Danny's best score was 128. Trace actually got lucky one game and rolled a 133. She almost shattered his eardrums when she got two strikes in a row. Julie barely broke a hundred, even with some coaching from Danny, who was rooting for her all the way. But they all had fun.

Before leaving, the ladies went to the washroom together. While there, Tracy called her friend up short, “Will you just tell me why on earth you ever let that man go?”

“He cheated on me so I thought I had a good reason.”

“And now, you're thinking...?”

“I screwed up, Trace. And you don't know the half of it. But I have a good feeling that things are going to work out between us again. I'm hoping we can both put the past behind us.”

“Well, you better snap him up fast because if you don't, I'm taking a shot at him.”

Julie gave her “the look” one more time.

“Just kidding, you know that. Besides, I’ve seen the way he’s been gawking at you all night. If you know what’s best you’ll reel him in before he gets away again. I can’t believe you were going to throw your life away with that yuppie-snake from work. Danny’s got him beat ten times over. He’s a real person—not some pretty-boy-centerfold with an inferiority complex.”

“Aren’t you quite the psychoanalyst tonight?”

“Look, Julie. If there’s one thing I know in this life, it’s men. Besides, I had PSYCH 101, remember?”

“How could I forget? I had it with you...and you know what?”

“What?”

“You’re exactly right.”

Back at Julie’s villa, Trace took her leave with hugs all around. Once in Danny’s arms she squeezed him hard and whispered in his ear, “Go for it, Daniel. She wants you bad.” Then she kissed him smack on the lips. As far as he could tell, knowing her for all of three-and-a-half hours, Tracy needed to revise her opinion of herself. From his viewpoint, the karma she put out seemed pretty damn good.

As it was dark, Danny grabbed Julie’s hand and insisted on walking Tracy to her car. They stood holding hands and waving as the resonant sound of Tracy’s car faded into the distance. It was still spitting rain and quite chilly, but under the soft glow of the corner streetlight, Danny took his wife’s hand and put one knee down onto the damp concrete. “Julie,” he said. “I love you more than anything in this world. Will you marry me?”

She studied his eyes for a moment, then replied, “Isn’t this a little sudden?”

“Well, I’ve already lived too much of my life without you and I don’t want to screw-up my next incarnation because I was stupid enough to let you get away. From now on, if you’ll take me back, you are going to be number one in my life.”

“All right, *Daniel*. I’ll marry you again. But not for any of those reasons.”

Danny stood up with a broad smile on his face. He took both her hands. “Why, then?”

“Because I want to, that’s why. Besides, if I wait too long, Tracy will go after you and there’s no way I’m going to let *that* happen.”

“Too bad I’m not able to handle two women at a time, or I’d marry you both.”

“Not in this lifetime, you won’t.”

“Maybe in the next one then.”

“Don’t count on it.” She pulled him to her and kissed him smack on the lips.



## Chapter Twenty Five

There were no visible stars in the sky that Monday evening over the Southland; they had all fallen into the eyes of Danny and Julie Predmore. Love-struck and eager as they had been once before, half-a-lifetime ago, they collapsed into each other's arms. Neither was thinking about the one "little" problem that remained between them as together they made their way into the bedroom and onto Julie's queen-size bed. Danny made a vow to himself to take it slow. Julie, who less than a week ago felt her loins seize up and her desire for sex extinguished like a candle in a sudden summer storm, now felt hotter and hungrier than ever.

They kissed and Danny could feel her ardor. It was as though she wanted him with even more pent-up longing than he felt toward her.

She pulled at his shirt and it came loose from his trousers. Quickly her hands were exploring him, reacquainting themselves with his body. Danny allowed her to take the lead though it was completely out of character for him. Perhaps he had changed more than even he realized.

Before long, her taut muscular legs entangled with his and she rolled him over onto his back, all the while planting sweet little kisses on his face. Next, she sat up and put her knees onto his thighs, pinning him down while she unfastened his belt. It came loose with a *clank*. After unzipping his pants she undid her own. She then pulled her shirt loose and reached back to

release her bra. She kissed him on the lips one time, then smiled and lay down next to him, taking his hand and sliding it up onto one of her breasts. Danny sighed with delight.

“Now, I’m ready to enjoy you a little,” she said.

They lay there together on top of the covers, kissing and caressing until they were lost in each other’s sway. It didn’t take long. Danny had to ask her to slow down twice. She bit into his lip once to stop him from finishing her. “Your touch is too stimulating,” she told him as he winced and took a breath. “You’re going to push me over the edge if you’re not careful.”

Finally, when he could no longer stand it, he asked her if she would allow him to make love to her completely, saying that he wanted it to be her decision too, not just his. “After all, we’re not yet legally married.”

It *was* what she wanted, she said. She could not remember ever wanting anything more.

He gently removed her clothes and she, his. They pulled back the comforter and sheet and together slid underneath, side by side. Almost instantly they became united as one.

As he breathed in her scent and felt the sleekness of her body against him, firm and slender as it had been so many years ago, all at once his senses became overwhelmed.

Julie giggled as she pushed him onto his back again, clinging to him. “Can we just lie here together for a while? I’m having fun,” she said.

“I’m in no hurry. We have all night and it seems like you’re the one in charge here, anyway.”

“Then let’s take the whole night; let’s use every bit of it.”

“You know what I’ve missed most?” he asked quietly.

“What?”

“Your friendship.”

“Come on.”



He interlaced her fingers into his own and gently squeezed. “I’m never leaving you again, Julie. You’re the only one for me.”

“Is that so?”

“That’s so.”

They were in complete harmony. Danny could hardly believe how wonderful she had become. Or maybe he had forgotten, but he doubted he could have forgotten something as memorable as this. Clearly, tonight would remain painted onto his memory forever—in living color and multi-sensory 3-D.

After catching his breath he apologized for neglecting her, and then again for hurting her.

“Shh,” she said. “That’s all forgotten now. Love me some more.”

He laughed.

“What?”

“I don’t know what’s gotten into you,” he said, “but I like it.”

“Just keep treating me the way you have been and you’ll see a lot more of me this way.”

“You’ve got a deal.”

It was well after midnight when they fell asleep at peace with their rekindled love. Then, around four A.M., Danny awoke first; he still had not completely adjusted to the time change. Finding her there next to him, he was exhilarated afresh. This was better, he realized, than the best of dreams. He had no desire or need to go back to sleep. He sidled up to her again, and drew her close to himself.

“Do you still love me, Danny?”

“Forever, Jul. You’ve made everything brand new, like we were young again.”

“Yeah. I feel it too, only I like you even better the way you are now.”

“I could say the same thing about you, you know.”

The kissing started all over again.

It was just after six o'clock when Danny left for the hotel. He had to shower and dress before heading over to the seminar for the morning session at eight. From his room he would phone Valerie at work and fulfill his promise to contact her this morning. He also planned to pack up all his things and check out. Julie wanted him home when she arrived back from school tonight. She gave him his own key.

Once alone, Julie did not feel much like going out into the cold morning, but she dressed and stretched for a run anyway. All the while she kept thinking how nice it would be to crawl back into bed for an hour or so. She figured her lack of motivation had probably stemmed from too much lovemaking, or then again, maybe it was a result of insufficient sleep. Either way, the run would do her good.

Once she was on the road, her mind found its own rhythm and began to outpace her. She mentally questioned why she had told Danny she would marry him again without taking even a little time to think it over. And, why in the world was *he* so anxious to jump into a commitment after only three days with her? What made him think things would work out better this time? Where would they have the wedding? Would it be a private ceremony or would they invite their friends and relatives? And, if they did get married, where would they live?

She did not have a single answer, only questions, questions, and more questions. Seemingly, all this uncertainty had been set into motion with that one small statement: “*Yes, Danny...*” He

had gotten her at a weak moment, after charming her all evening and then practically French-kissing her best friend, who had fallen for him like a duck.

She did love him though; there was no use denying that. And he loved her, so it seemed. Could that possibly be enough? It hadn't been the last time around.

She ran harder, trying to steal oxygen from her brain. Passing through Cannery Village, she accelerated, breathing hard and audibly, slapping the pavement with her feet. She turned south toward the beach, not slackening but pushing, pushing, nearly up to a sprinter's pace. As the ocean vista opened to her she set her mind to dashing across the beach and down, the equivalent of two blocks, to the nearest jetty. *I am a machine; I am a machine*, she repeated in her head like a mantra. She pushed herself harder, straining, flailing her arms wildly, her legs burning with pain. *What doesn't kill me can only make me stronger. I am a machine!*

Finally there at the foot of the jetty she allowed her body to collapse, down onto the hard-packed sand. She gasped for air. Her chest heaved. While the tide pounded the surf and the nearby rocks, she watched a fisherman out at the end of the jetty casting a fly line into the water beyond the breakers, then yanking it back and casting again. Over and over he performed the ritual, as if in perpetual motion.

There was another man fishing too, a little further down the shore. She could see him silhouetted against the brightening horizon. He had angled his long pole into the sand and was simply standing there effortless and blissful, watching the line while smoking a cigarette.

She concluded that both men must be dedicated to their pastime to come out alone on a cold morning like this and go through their respective rites. Both must feel confident that they could be successful. But one seemed to be working so hard while the other simply remained calm and watchful—two distinctly different approaches to the same objective—catching fish.

She was much like the fly-fisherman, she realized, always casting and yanking and casting and yanking, letting out line, pulling it in. Life for her was always so damn much work, and yet, that was evidently her style—never finding time for a moment's rest.

Danny, on the other hand, was like the shore fisherman, content to simply wait, to watch for things to happen. Then, when they did, he would do his bit. She always resented him for that, even called him lazy once or twice, but he went on to prove that life could be lived successfully with his *laissez-faire* method. And she has proved what?—that you can tire yourself out with work and worry. And just when the fish is about to bite, you can yank the bait away and end up with nothing whatsoever for all your effort.

Now, what was it she kept telling herself? *I'm the one in control; I can make it work.* What was that about, and where was it going to get her in the end? Somehow, she had to learn how to let go, to relax, to allow life to come to her. And maybe she *was* learning. She hadn't done one thing to try to get her husband back, but sure enough, come back he had. *That must be the solution. I've got to quit all this worrying,* she told herself. *It won't get me anywhere, anyway. The only question that matters is—do I want it to work?*

*And the answer is—yes, yes, a thousand times yes. We're going to be all right. Everything will work out. I've just got to stop trying so hard.*

But she knew: for a natural fighter like her, fishing in the manner of the second man was easier said than done.

Danny looked up Valerie's number in his day planner and punched it into the hotel room phone. She picked up almost immediately.

“Peninsula Title. May I help you please?”

“Valerie? It’s Danny.”

“Danny. Thank God you called. I was afraid you’d forget.”

“Forget? No way.”

“How’s it going out there...with Julie and all?”

“You won’t believe it. Everything’s coming back together for us.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. We’re going to get married again.”

“Married?!”

“Yeah. And I’ve got you to thank. None of this would have happened without you. I’d still be sitting home in my living room eating stale pretzels.”

“Don’t thank me, Danny. I didn’t do a thing. You two were obviously meant for each other. If you want to thank someone, Thank God.”

“Believe me, I have.”

“That’s great...I’m really happy for you, Danny, but what happens next? Is she coming back here to Michigan?”

“I don’t know. We have a few details to work out yet—our home, our jobs, little things like that.”

“Well, I hope you can convince her to come back because, as happy as I am for you two, I’m not anxious to see you move away. I would miss you, Danny.”

“Then maybe you can say one more prayer for me. It’s going to be pretty hard to get Julie to leave this place. It’s too much like home to her.”

“Tell me what it’s like; I’ve never been there, you know.”

“Well, you can’t help but like the weather. January here is more like what we get in April and May. Plus, there are loads of young people.”

“What about the earthquakes and mudslides and things like that?”

“We actually had a little quake on Sunday. It wasn’t any big deal though. Besides, Julie says you have about as much chance of a severe quake as you do getting hit by a tornado in Michigan.”

“I don’t worry about tornadoes.”

“Exactly. Most people out here don’t worry about earthquakes either—or anything else for that matter. They just go with the flow.”

“It sounds nice.”

“Yeah, it is.”

“Maybe I’ll get there someday... Well, I better go. Two other lines are ringing. Call me when you get back, will you?”

“I will. Promise.”

“Bye, Danny.”

“Bye.”

He cradled the receiver but Valerie’s image remained in his mind’s eye. He would miss her too if they were separated. He should have told her so. Then he laughed to himself over the specter of having two dominant women in his life, both attempting to lead him around like a trained seal. That would be interesting, to say the least. But clearly, Valerie has been good for him, a true friend, and friends like that are not easy to replace. Plus, he had already created a special place in his heart for her that he did not want to relinquish anytime soon. She was his

most ardent supporter and perhaps the only person on earth who could help him with the one remaining miracle he needed before week's end.

He didn't get back to Julie's place until almost seven thirty at night. Earlier, he sat through two ho-hum lectures on prospecting: "The Search" and "Overcoming Objections," then adjourned to the lounge for a couple of drinks with a person he met during one of the breaks, Chandler Morningstar. Chandler, or "Bud," as he referred to himself, was a big shot of sorts, President and CEO of a small company in Costa Mesa called Transtaff Accounting and Technology Partners. Mainly, the company supplied computer temporary services to business and industry, but it also did some third-party data processing of small business financials. Bud and a good friend quit Arthur Anderson eight years ago to start a small accounting practice then quickly recognized the market need for temporary staffing. Sure enough, that side of the business has been growing like meadow grass in June ever since. This success, Bud explained, was why he took three days out of his already jam-packed schedule to attend the national recruiting seminar (plus the fact that it was in his own back yard).

It was terribly ironic, Bud said, that they were on the verge of explosive growth, with placement opportunities out the wazoo, yet his H-R people couldn't manage to get anybody hired. Thus, his customers were beginning to get steamed, and he was losing business to competitors right and left.

"Tell me about it," Danny said, sarcastically. "It's been the same back in Michigan for over a year. Like trying to draw water out of a dry well."

When Bud asked what Danny's company was doing about it, Danny described their team approach to recruiting that operated on the process they had designed to get offers to candidates

within two to three days. He also explained how the company had responded by focusing on employees, helping them see Base Line as a great place to work and make a career. It wasn't easy, Danny said, but they'd been hiring an average of sixteen people a month.

"Good people get you more good people," Danny told him. "And I've got four of the best recruiters anywhere working for me."

Still, he was here because his boss did not think they were doing enough. Danny swore the owners were dressing up the company for a merger or an acquisition, primarily because, with the current demand for services and Base Line's hundreds of able bodies, the owners could pull down some serious cash if they sold out now.

"Then what happens?" Bud asked him.

"I don't know. To tell you the truth, I'm pretty fed up with the way things have been going lately. The execs are making hideous profits but we're still being held with our feet to the fire.

"Plus, I'm about to get married again to my ex-wife—we've been divorced for over a year—and *she* lives out here in Newport Beach. So, I guess you could say I'm at a crossroads in my life. I've got some decisions to make."

"Do you have a resume with you?" Bud asked him.

"Well, I haven't updated it for a while but I could put one together by tomorrow morning. Why do you ask?"

"Well, Danny, in coming here this week I was hoping to learn one or two things. You see, even if there was a simple answer to improving our hiring picture, I'm not so sure my H-R director would find it. He's never done any serious recruiting before and it's clear he doesn't have much interest in all the prospecting and networking successful recruiters have to do to compete. Not that he's a bad personnel manager. If that were the case, I'd have gotten rid of him



long ago. He does have his strengths. But, after two days of sitting through this conference, my assumptions have been confirmed. I need to hire somebody to focus one-hundred-percent on recruiting, somebody who knows the *services* business because that's where we're growing right now, which of course eliminates most of my competitors' people from the candidate pool since they're all tied up with non-compete agreements. They'd be totally useless to me here in Orange County for at least six months, and that is where you might fit in, Danny—if moving out here is something you're seriously considering, that is.”

“I'd have to say it is,” Danny replied, rather assuredly. “I can get a resume to you first thing in the morning. Any chance we can meet for lunch tomorrow?”

“No problem. How about right here, if that's okay with you?”

“I'll be here.”

The ride down to Newport Beach went quickly. Danny's mind was busy sifting through possibilities. After eating a large burrito he snagged at a drive-through, he drove the last leg of the trip to Julie's house.

When he got inside, finding himself alone, the first thing he did was get down on his knees and thank God for what looked like the final miracle coming his way in this, the most bizarre three weeks of his life.

It had to be Valerie, he concluded. She must have been praying for him again. He had done nothing more than help her out of a little jam when her car needed a jump. And now, she had seemingly put all heaven and earth into motion to turn his sorry life *right side up*. And she didn't even want any credit.

Not knowing how to officially go about it, he just prayed out loud and then made a silent vow to himself to do one more thing. He would put some energy into helping Valerie straighten out

her finances and ultimately make the break from her parents' house. He certainly owed her a favor or two, plus he wanted to remain in her life. He could hardly imagine his life without her. To Danny's way of thinking, any God who could create such a wonderful creature as Valerie Robinson was worth knowing, and knowing well.

By the time Julie got home from class, he had typed his resume on her laptop and printed it off. He knew she wouldn't mind him using her computer, but he decided not to tell her about the potential job opportunity with Transtaff, not yet anyway.

He put on a James Taylor CD (one they had selected together some years ago), nuked up some hot chocolate and filled the tub with steaming water just prior to her expected arrival. Julie beamed at finding him home when she arrived. She had been coming home to a dark and lonely house for so long, she had almost forgotten about this most basic benefit of partnership.

They sat in the tub listening to folk music and sipping hot chocolate. The last lingering doubts in Julie's mind began to ebb away. Life was beginning to come to her and, for a change, she was going to let it. Curiously enough, what she and Danny had effortlessly rebuilt over the past several days seemed somehow stronger and more beautiful than that which she had struggled for years to obtain from their marriage. All her striving had put them both under an enormous load of pressure that, when finally released, produced an earth-shaking, marriage-shattering tremor.

Yet tonight, she came dangerously close to beginning the destructive process all over again, though doing so was neither her aim nor her express desire. Fortunately, once she arrived home and saw Danny as happy as a sea otter, and felt his tangible love for her again, the plan she had conceived earlier seemed patently ridiculous. So, instead of confronting him like she had planned with questions about how he could be so confident that their second marriage would work out,

and where on earth might they end up living, she bit her tongue and put every single uncertainty out of her head.

For once, she would simply relax and watch her fishing line angled into the ocean of her future. She had a strange feeling that, somehow, things would work out better this way. Her hopes and dreams could be realized without any labor or maneuvering on her part. Like the shore fisherman, with a touch of faith and a little patience, she would get her catch. The fish would come to her.



## Chapter Twenty Six

Before leaving for the final day of the seminar, Danny reached into his wallet and slid out his Visa card. Then, while kissing his wife good-bye, he slipped the card into her hand. “Here, take this and go get yourself some clothes for the trip to Las Vegas—no limit. Find a new dress or two for the night life. Sorry I have the seminar or I’d go with you.”

“Come on Danny. Are you serious?”

“Of course.”

“Can I get shoes and a purse too?”

“Whatever you want. My clothes budget is way under-spent.”

She hugged him around the neck. He would try to be home by six, he said. She promised to have dinner ready.

Over lunch with Bud Morningstar, Danny quickly became the interviewer. He wanted to know about Transtaff’s business plan and customer base, its sales methods, how the company was organized, and especially, whether they had an employee development budget. Bud laid the answers out for him in painstaking detail.

If he were responsible for recruiting, Danny speculated, would he be able to build an adequate team and get the company's support to make changes and amend processes? Could he influence salaries and benefits in order to make Transtaff more attractive to highly desirable professionals?

Bud remained unruffled while feeding Danny the answers he sought.

Danny liked Bud's demeanor and open-mindedness, and especially his honesty. This man did not seem even remotely capable of telling a lie. He was simply tell-it-like-it-is *transparent*—someone Danny felt confident he could both admire and work with amiably.

"Who would I be reporting to?" Danny asked.

"Well, I don't see any point in putting you under H-R, and this is definitely a strategic initiative, so I guess you'd report directly to me. I don't think it would be wise though to give you a VP title right off the bat."

"No problem, titles aren't that important to me."

Next, Danny went into a mini-presentation on the approach he planned to use to organize an in-house recruiting process for Transtaff, explaining some of the steps he would take to assure that enough of, and only the right people made it onto the payroll. He then described a tentative time line indicating what results Bud could expect over the first six months. This was obviously not something new to Danny.

Bud's only concern went to Danny's motivation to function as a recruiter again instead of purely in a management role like he currently did with Base Line.

"I actually would welcome that," Danny told him. "To me, recruiting is challenging, stimulating and fun. Plus, I've found that management can be a little stifling when that's all you do. I think what you are proposing would be the best of both worlds."

"Well, Danny, there's just one more thing."

“What’s that?”

“If we offered you the job, when could you start?”

“You could have me within two-and-a-half weeks if you want, the sixteenth of February, I believe. Or, if you prefer, we could wait until the first week of March.”

They discussed salary and benefits. The graduated incentive plan would easily get him over one hundred thousand for six hires a month—child’s play to him. Bud said he would call his secretary and get a formal offer put together by the time the seminar wrapped up later this afternoon. Danny got directions to the office in Costa Mesa and promised to meet him there around four thirty.

They shook hands and headed to their respective break out sessions.

With a bottle of chilled California Champagne under his arm, Danny used his own key to let himself in through Julie’s security door. He stepped across the sun porch but stopped at the living room door and knocked. Julie opened it and found him standing in the semi-darkness, grinning like a kid on Christmas.

She kissed him. “You didn’t have to knock, you know.”

“This will be the last time. I promise.” He handed her the bottle. “Here, I got us something to celebrate with.”

Julie eyed the label. “I thought you didn’t like Champagne. Besides, what’s the occasion?”

Danny glanced around the living room, then answered somewhat facetiously, “I don’t think there’s room enough in here for all the other furniture, do you?”

Her eyes sparkled. “What on earth are you getting at, Daniel?”

“I’ve got some big news.”

“And that would be...?” She tapped her foot and feigned a look of impatience.

“I got a new job up in Costa Mesa. I start February sixteenth.”

She squealed loud enough to be heard in Dana Point. “You’re kidding?!”

“No, and I even got a raise. Meet the newest transplant to the coast.”

They hugged and kissed and mussed each other’s hair until Danny took a step back and suggested in deadpan fashion, “Nothing against this little hideaway of yours, but maybe we should start looking for a house to buy, something with a dining room and a larger tub.”

“Promise?”

“Promise. Now, what do you say we open the Champagne?”

“In just a minute. I’ve got some news too.”

“You do?”

“Yep. I got a legal document in the mail from SunBurst today—some kind of *Affidavit and Hold Harmless* something or other.” She grabbed it off the snack bar. “Here, have a look. What I think it says is—if I sign away my rights to sue him, Mike will agree to pay me an entire year’s salary—forty thousand dollars.”

“Wow!” His eyes dropped to skim the document. “That sounds like a pretty good deal to me.”

“Pretty good, nothing. It’s fantastic.”

“It says here among other things that, ‘EMPLOYEE...,’ which is you, of course, ‘agrees that any and all activities in relationship with MANAGER, both professional and personal, were of an entirely and mutually voluntary and consensual nature, and therefore not actionable under any Federal or State, civil or criminal statutes; and EMPLOYEE further agrees to hold MANAGER entirely harmless in any and all matters relating to EMPLOYEE’s term of employment at SunBurst, Incorporated...yadda, yadda.’ So, in other words, he’s making sure you can’t get the



District Attorney to bring him up on rape charges or criminal sexual harassment, which is, by the way, a *federal* crime. This guy's slicker than synthetic motor oil."

"Tell me about it. But I'm sure if I don't sign that agreement, he won't pay me a cent."

"Of course not. But then again, you weren't going to have him charged either way."

"You know that, but it's not what I said in my letter."

"Remind me never to mess with you again." Danny hugged her again and stole another kiss. She tasted like coffee. It was a taste he had grown to love over the years. "You won, Julie; do you know that? You beat this guy at his own game."

"I know I did and it feels pretty damn good. But I wish I'd never played at all if you want to know the truth."

"Shhh. That's all history now. Do you think it's time to open this bottle yet? There's nothing worse than warm Champagne, you know."

"It's time. It really is."

After making love for what seemed like hours, Danny slept hard and long for the first time since crossing the continental divide. It took the smell of fresh coffee to bring him back from dreamland. Julie had put a pot on to brew and left for her run, so her note indicated. It also said this was the last time she was going to let him laze away the best hour of the morning. If she were going to marry him again, she expected a running partner in the deal. She did, however, sign the note: *With love to my one and only... —Julie*

Danny smiled at that and poured himself a mugfull of Tracy's special blend of Arabica Coffee. In addition to being about as rare as pure gold, Julie's best friend obviously had good taste. He was looking forward to having her among his circle of friends.

They had packed their suitcases last evening so they could leave for Las Vegas while the day was still young. It was a fairly long drive but they were not in any particular hurry. And since he and Julie were getting on so well, he didn't have the slightest apprehension over springing his last few surprises on her. In fact, he was actually looking forward to watching her react.

He sat at the snack bar and thought back over the past few days. So much had happened to alter life as he knew it as recently as one week ago. And there were more disruptions and changes ahead, what with a new job and a new home and a *new* wife. But Danny wasn't worried about any of it. He'd learned over the years how to weather the storms of life, and how to survive the tremors that move the very earth itself. He'd discovered that, when the wind and rain stopped and the dust settled, there was often more good to be found in the aftermath than evil. Take his marriage, for instance. Had it not been for the divorce, he and Julie would most likely not be as happy as they now were. And then there was his career. His new job exemplified the same extraordinary phenomena. It was just like someone had once described the theory of evolution: akin to a tornado blowing through a junkyard that somehow manages to build a Boeing 747. Too amazing for words he realized—totally inexplicable. But, whether happenstance or not, this principle was clearly operating in their lives of late.

He heard the squeak of the front grate. A couple moments later Julie emerged through the door. She looked flushed and windblown. Danny went to greet her with a hug.

"I don't think you want to do that. I'm all sweaty."

He squeezed her anyway. "I can't miss an opportunity. Eighteen months of abstinence is a lot to make up for."

"Just so you don't get tired of it from doing it too much."

"That's not going to happen."

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

When they reached Barstow, Danny pulled the Taurus off the Interstate and stopped at an Indian jewelry shop near the exit. Julie looked at him funny. “What’s up?”

“I thought we’d make a little stop here to pick out some rings. You can’t get married without rings, you know.”

“Daniel...”

He could see gears turning in her head.

“I don’t know what you have up your sleeve but I’m not marrying you in the Chapel-O-Love.”

“Aw, come on. It’ll be fun, especially since you’ve got a brand new dress and shoes for just such an occasion. We can always have another church wedding if you want. But at least this will settle the legal question, and make a virtuous woman out of you again. Unless, of course, you prefer to go on shacking up with me.”

“I’m not shacking up with you. You’re my husband and have been since I was a mutton-headed teenager and I promised to love you until *death do us part*. Do you remember that?”

“Yeah. I remember. Which, the way I see it, is all the more reason to renew our vows in the Chapel-O-Love, as you so graciously referred to it. Besides, we’ll be making a memory. Oh, and there’s one more reason too.”

“And what might that be?”

“You have to first get married if you’re planning to go on a honeymoon.”

“What honeymoon?”

“This one. The one which begins here in Las Vegas and then continues in Lake Orion, Michigan for the next two weeks. The one I’m sure you won’t want to miss since you’ll be able to see your kids again and all your old friends, and you can help me decide which stuff is worth moving out here. Besides, I’ve already put the cost of your plane ticket on my AMEX card.”

She remained speechless with her arms folded, looking right past him and out the driver’s side window.

He went on, “All right, I know you might have to drop your classes at Cal State. But, come next semester, you can enroll full-time if you want.”

She rolled her green eyes at him. “Danny, you’re a little shit. Do you know that? When are you going to learn that women like to be consulted about things like when and where they get married or take their honeymoons or what they’re going to do with the rest of their lives?”

“Probably sometime in the next incarnation, I suppose.”

“Not if I have anything to say about it.”

“Maybe sooner, then.”

“Definitely sooner.”

“Okay, then, sooner. I’ll work on that. Now come on. Let’s go pick out some rings for the big ceremony.”

“Only if you kiss me first.”

“That, I think I can do properly.”

## Epilogue

Later that evening, in a cozy chapel within walking distance of their hotel, Danny and Julie Predmore got married for the second time. They exchanged sterling-silver rings purchased earlier at the Indian novelty shop in Barstow. The brief ceremony was about as tacky as a wedding can get. Still, when Danny answered the smiling old man with bad teeth by saying, “I do,” Julie could not help shedding a tear.

To celebrate afterward, they drank a bottle of wine in their room before retiring and making love on the king-sized bed. Danny told his new wife she was insatiable. Julie said, like him, she was making up for lost time.

They slummed around the casinos on Friday. Julie “hit” twice on the roulette wheel while Danny watched. They tried the slots and some blackjack, and when they quit to relax over dinner, they were down about fifty dollars. But they had made priceless memories in the process.

That night they caught Billy Crystal, along with a Vegas-style dance review—very showy, lots of thigh. Danny said he thought the girls were quite talented. Julie liked Billy. He was really funny, she said, not like some comedians these days who couldn’t *buy* a laugh from her. But then, she had always been a tough customer. Some things do not change.

Before they left on Saturday, Danny bought a sweatshirt for Valerie Robinson, white and heavy—very high quality. On the front there was a full color picture of the Vegas strip taken at night, along with the caption: *Life is a Gamble*. On the back, a picture of Harrah's hotel/casino and the words: *Improve your odds!*

Back in Michigan, where winter's grip had tightened over the past week, they went through Danny's possessions, deciding what to throw out, what to give away and what to move once the house was sold and closed. Julie took charge of finding a real estate agent and getting the property on the market.

On Monday morning, Danny handed his resignation letter to Vic DeSalvo. He thanked him for all the opportunities and experience Vic and Base Line had given him. Vic said he was sorry to see him go, but he could understand Danny's reason for leaving.

On Tuesday, his staff bought him lunch at Charley's Crab. He thanked them for all their hard work and support over the past couple of years. Later that night Danny took his father to Hockeytown to see the Red Wings skate while his mom and Julie caught up on old times.

Daniel and Clarrie both came home for dinner the following Sunday. It was like Christmas, but over a month late. The kids were thrilled to see their parents back together again. Once a new home was acquired in the Southland, they would be visiting.

The following evening, at Danny's insistence, Valerie came for dinner. She wore her new sweatshirt with a pair of black jeans—very chic. And though things were a bit awkward at first, it only took her about an hour to win over Julie's heart as she had previously won Danny's. After the table was cleared, while they were sharing some conversation and each a glass of wine, Danny promised to work out a budget so she could see her way clear to her own apartment. He would have it ready before leaving for the coast. He also promised Valerie a job if she felt at all

inspired to relocate to California. There was no question she could make an excellent assistant or recruiting trainee. She said she would seriously consider his offer. In the meantime they agreed to keep in touch through e-mail.

Before leaving, Valerie gave Danny a gift to remember her by. It was a custom-designed golden medallion on a chain, inscribed on both sides. On its face, written with tiny letters, were these words:

*Go with God, always.*

And on the back:

*With love and affection,*

*Your Friend,*

*Valerie*

Danny told her it was the nicest gift he'd ever been given; he would treasure it forever.

The following Saturday afternoon, Danny and Julie Predmore arrived back in California. A land predisposed to seismic and atmospheric phenomena, the Golden State had been further ravaged by El Niño-driven winter storms during their two week absence. Nevertheless, this was the place they chose to live out the rest of their years together. No longer blind to the powerful and destructive forces in nature, nor immune from further victimization by the incidents of life, they entered a new season of their relationship in complete devotion to one another. Their marriage, having once been completely decimated by divorce, now marvelously renewed. And they, themselves, after remaking their priorities, loved each other in greater dimensions than ever before.

As a result of their experiences, love, honesty, mutual respect and happiness had become their most cherished possessions.



D. J. Vallone is an American novelist. He uses fiction as a means of examining the human condition and societal values.

Also by D. J. Vallone: [For the Love of Freedom](#), a political novel.

Comments and reviews are welcome. Send to: [djvallone@yahoo.com](mailto:djvallone@yahoo.com)