

Carla Matteo copes with life by "tipping the bottle"--glass goddesses funneling perfume! During a midlife renaissance, the "juice" enables Carla to find her own niche, while the ominous rose note in Paloma Picasso forces her to confront the past.

## **UNDERLYING NOTES**

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# **UNDERLYING NOTES**

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## Chapter 1

The floodtide awakened me with an initial burst of heat, bracing me for the infernal rush of flames through my body. Sweat moistened my upper lip, pooled between my breasts, and licked my armpits. Wet tendrils of hair stuck to my pillow. My feet felt clammy and caught themselves in the chance fold of the sheet. My flannel pajamas were damp and musty smelling. Now the tide would ebb, slowly and gracefully waltzing away after having drenched and scoured the shore. The surf tossed me aside like debris entangled in seaweed. The digital alarm clock radio on my end table blared 3:21 a.m. in red numbers. Neptune would not allow me to crabwalk back to my sea of peaceful sleep. I would be outcast on the grainy sand left to inspect litter, shells, odd-shaped pebbles, and unresolved issues of the waking hours. These night sweats were rituals of passage into my fifties.

The house conducted its own discordant symphony to make sure I stayed awake. The grandfather clock in the hall chimed the notes of Westminster Abbey. The boiler from the bowels of the basement started up again to keep rhythm with the east coast's January cold snap. Joe's snoring was a legato snorting and whooshing; then a staccato sputtering.

My mind began exploring some of the debris that washed ashore. Thoughts of my mother pushed their way to the front. She was holding up at seventy-six, and I wished I could lock her inside a timeframe where hope and fulfillment were still freshly sealed inside the cookie jar. Someday she'd cash in her ticket to play blind man's bluff with the boogeyman and I wouldn't be able to stop her demise. Would she spin toward incontinence? Cancer? Dementia? Accidental death? Heart attack?

My younger sister, Paula, elbowed her way into my thoughts. She lost the lottery in the drawing for faithful husbands, but had the good sense to boot him several years back. She struggles to be a good mother to her son while holding down a banking career. That lovely mermaid in the dating pool was still reclusive and elusive, afraid of encountering one more slippery eel.

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Joe was a current running through my thoughts. Friend, husband, and lover for more than a silver jubilee, he has been a roguish pirate commandeering a spectral ship of fools containing the passengers of both our families. Close to a year ago I rocked the boat by escaping in the dinghy to do some exploring on my own, making the decision to quit my job as office manager for Matteo Rubbish Removal. In Joe's eyes I had committed mutiny.

Thus far I've just managed to stay afloat in a shallow harbor of domesticity, content to cook, clean, sort, organize, and redecorate—pavilions of a proud Italian housewife. Gusty winds of self-guilt and responsibility toy with my moral compass and hinder me from accessing the open ocean. Storms of turmoil rage against my will for independence and adventure in uncharted waters. My harbor isn't filled with tea leaves of protest—it is bloodied with tomato sauce!

Sable, our eldest cat, a Maine coon mix, climbed onto the bed, and curled up on Joe's side. Her purrs of contentment tempered the sonorous "1812 Overture" thundering beside me. The clock glowed 3:56.

A lack of girlfriends loomed in my horizon like jagged lightning. I had lost touch with buddies from high school and college so that the sand in the hourglass had run out. Well, real or imagined injustices severed some of those friendships. Neglect and priorities faded others to erasure. Destiny offered different paths, and those paths my friends chose didn't necessarily converge or overlap with mine.

Truth is, I prefer the company of men. I like their attention, the compliments, and the frank conversations without frills or artifice. To my satisfaction, not one female client ever crossed the threshold of Matteo Rubbish Removal in those twenty-five years of overseeing the office.

Maybe this attitude stemmed from my first day of school in grade one. Ma took me by the hand and introduced me to a girl with braids who was coloring at her desk in one of the front rows. Ma looked at the girl's nametag and spoke softly, "Alice, this is Carla.

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May she sit beside you?” Alice Greene and I became inseparable best friends throughout grade school and junior high.

Something happened during our freshman year of high school which I perceived as abandonment and betrayal. While I got swamped with homework from college prep courses and didn't have much time to hang out, Alice just about carried a notebook when passing to and from classes in general studies. She hung out with kids who got in trouble. I'd spot Alice exuding bravado, strutting down the halls, belted inside the armor of a black leather jacket, hair teased and sprayed into a starchy mold, eyelids weighted by green shadow. She hitched her skirts up mid thigh and flaunted those shapely legs of hers in fishnet stockings. Sometimes she'd say hello to me when we passed each other in the halls, but if I ran into her in the girls' lav when she ditched class to drag on a cig, she'd give me a menacing look and threaten to kick my ass if I said anything.

I soon learned to put on my own armor of indifference when it came to girlfriends. When I heard the rumor that Alice and her parents had moved out of Rhode Island because she got pregnant, I feigned shock and disgust, tsk-tsked, and rolled my eyes with my college-bound friends in their varsity sweaters. Small wonder I refrained from adding my two-bit hunch it could have been greaser senior classman Slicker Thomas, always surrounded by an entourage of fast girls at his locker or in the halls. I'd spot Alice getting into Slicker's souped-up Chevy after school, and together they'd speed by the line of buses that crawled out of the parking lot, smoke farting from the dual exhausts...but then again. Every now and then she bobs up to the water's surface flailing her arms for me to notice her plight. As if *I* could save her! She wedges her way into my thoughts like a throbbing toothache.

Joe turned and his knee jabbed my side. My immediate response was a retaliatory kick, resulting in his retreat toward his own side of the bed. This startled Sable who scrambled to the foot of the bed, stepped onto the chest in front of the footboard, and then sprang to the floor. She scratched on the closet door indicating she wanted moist food. She would continue to scratch until one of us obliged by following her to the kitchen.

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It was 4:23 when I clicked on the end table lamp to spill some light into the hall. I followed Her Majesty, barely visible, in front of me. Gladys, our senior pastel calico, had been curled inside the perch that stood in front of the sliding glass door of the kitchen. She blinked in annoyance after I flipped the switch to the light above the sink. I scooped a blob of tuna and egg fresh out of the can for Sable and put it on her placemat. She wagged her tail in appreciation and ate heartily.

Too restless to go back to bed, I closed down the kitchen and clicked off the bedroom lamp, not without noticing Joe's overture had played itself out and he slept quietly. Another sleepless night calling for liquid measures...I made my way down the hall in darkness and flipped the switch in the foyer so I could see my way down two landings into the basement.

I opened the doors of the cabinet to peruse the bottles of "juice." My ladies-in-waiting huddled together in various shapes and sizes, some nearly empty, some half-filled, and others hardly touched. Some bottles still languished inside their packaging, the names front and center. The "juice" beckoned with its spectrum of colors: clear as water, pale yellow, rich amber, and even pink or blue. On this cold day in January, I reached for the small amber bottle promising to soothe and impart warmth once I imbibed its spirits.

Delightfully intoxicated by this Floral Oriental fragrance, I gave a quick squirt to my wrists and inhaled. I knew the progression of its notes by memory. I sensed the sweet rush of caramel, champagne, and honey in the top register. The orchid, rose, and cinnamon in the heart would soon reveal this lady's demeanor. In time, underlying notes of cedar and sandalwood in the base would orchestrate a woody dry down, while the vanilla and musk conspired to convey sweetness and warmth. This masterpiece is *Spark*, composed by Liz Claiborne.

I don't consider myself an addict anymore than someone who fancies himself or herself a collector of fine art, wine, rare books, antiques, stamps, or comics. I view this pursuit as a noble enterprise to elevate my olfactory senses, satisfy momentary whims, relive memories, restore tranquility, or boost flagging energy. Above all,

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fragrance completes me. I'd no more forgo fragrance than skip brushing my teeth or showering each day. The juxtaposition of notes in each fragrance plays a symphony whose theme varies in accordance with mood, body chemistry, or seasonal change. If life is about unpredictability and unsettlement with its accompanying joy or sorrow, fragrance is a trusty companion providing cheer or solace. I crave the rose note to sustain a mood of nostalgia or quench a burning desire to feel chic, elegant, or feminine. Bergamot and citric notes lend sparkle and a burst of exhilaration if I'm dragging or want a clean scent on a sticky humid day.

I closed my eyes in reverence to the vanilla that engulfed me and wafted in childhood memories. Grandma Castelli, my mother's mom, fueled the passion by gifting me with a bottle of *Apple Blossom* when I made my First Communion. I loved drenching myself with the cologne, and constantly sniffed my arm for verification of its presence. That there could be other luscious fragrances lured me to my parents' bedroom where I never tired of exploring the bottles on the vanity tray. I'd loosen the caps and sniff without dabbing, thinking I pulled one over on them. Ma had to know by my vapor trails, but she allowed me this transgression.

One day I blurted out my secret, in tears, because I had clumsily knocked over the porcelain southern belle atomizer—a gift from Daddy. The overhead umbrella broke so that it lay over her back, no longer offering protection from the sun and no longer able to spray. The loveliest spicy fragrance was forever entombed because of the irreparable damage I caused.

Then Daddy bought me my own vanity tray for my bureau along with a blue bottle of *Evening in Paris*. About the time my breasts started budding, he gave me *Tabu*, which my mother disapproved of. In her mind, he granted a daughter license to wear red lipstick and nylons and go on dates. Incidentally, all three criteria would have been met “over his dead body.”

I could hear the water coursing through the overhead pipes, which meant Joe was showering.

If I lacked girlfriends, I made up for it by acquiring glass goddesses filled with nectar. They herald from all walks of life in the

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fragrance kingdom—Floral, Floral Oriental, Chypre, Citrus, Woody, and Green. I'm no fragrance snob either. I don't care about the designers who create perfumes nor the stature and reputation of perfume houses. I'll make purchases from the finest department store or from the corner drugstore. As long as the composition is pleasing to me and has staying power, it can be part of my brood, accompanied by the related layering products of bath gel, lotion, and powder. From the sublime skin scents to the exhaust fumes exuded by floozies—I love them all. And so my life continues to evolve through a series of one-night stands, passing romances and steady relationships with fragrance.

*Spark* would become my scent of the day. I performed my ritual of packing the *eau de parfum*, lotion, gel, and powder in my little transport box. Perhaps I'd favor *Spark's* company awhile longer if I remained enamored with her spirit. Heading upstairs to see Joe before he left for work, I passed the treadmill and cardio glider, two idle behemoths in repose before my morning workout. A thickening middle was another trademark of my fifties.

Just about finished shaving, Joe wrapped himself in a bath towel that strained to cover an expanding middle. His stomach had been conquered in a slow march around the boot of Italy. A surveillance team could easily keep tabs on Joe's whereabouts by tailing his odyssey of frequented restaurants on Providence's Federal Hill or the city of Cranston. Whether going it alone, schmoozing clients, or taking me out, Joe has a fairly predictable appetite. On and around Atwells Avenue up the Hill, Joe was one of the regulars at Angelo's, Cassarino's, and Casserta's Pizza.

At Angelo's he'd chew the fat with patrons while scoffing down veal and peppers or *eggplant parmigiana*. Formally dining inside Cassarino's and rubbing elbows with top bananas, he'd order an appetizer of *champagne zuppa*, stuffed little necks steamed in champagne with scallops and prosciutto, followed by a main entrée of *bistecca alla mamma* drenched in garlic butter sauce. When pressed for time, he'd charge out the door of Casserta's with a thick-crust pizza in hand or pig in the blanket made of Italian sausage and tomato sauce rolled in dough.

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Marchetti's and Twin Oaks were his stomping grounds in Cranston. At Marchetti's on Park Avenue, he always dunked his bread in *veal marsala*—veal scallops and mushrooms simmered in wine sauce with a side of pasta. He never failed with the Italian sausage, peppers, and fries combo plate at Twin Oaks on Sabra Street.

I could still look at him and call him a “hunk.” My mighty oak grew more rugged, stronger, and steadier with the passage of time. Like the long-standing tree, thickened bark made him impervious to gusty winds of crises. He stood his ground against opposition, garnering respect from those who challenged him. Gnarled roots of strong convictions and noble character gripped and anchored him to earth. Mighty limbs encircled and protected those he loved from harm or injustice. His hair, a thick crown of silver waves, made him look dashing.

During our social outings, Joe became the indifferent recipient of appreciative stares from women. Years of golfing and boating enhanced Joe's olive skin to a deep tan. Bronze stain and a confident swagger stereotyped my husband a playboy on the make. Animal magnetism exacted its toll of repercussions. Some gals interpreted his good looks as an open invitation to flirt. They'd sidle up to him with a cocktail in hand and utter something innocuous about him looking like the actor, Dennis Farina. He'd politely shrug off the unwarranted attention and draw me closer to him as confirmation of his loyalty.

I stood from behind as he groomed at the bathroom sink, put my arms around him, and sniffed the faint Irish Spring that still lingered on his skin. Nuzzling my cheek against his smooth face, I took in his aftershave. “Mmm, there's nothing I love more than the smell of bay rum in the morning.”

Looking at his reflection in the mirror, I caught a mischievous grin, though the hollows under his eyes were darkly pronounced these days and those brooding browns lacked sparkle. They were shadowed and veiled to keep trespassers from peering in, a telltale note something was amiss—a bitter note like galbanum, a spicy-green resin, otherwise camouflaged in a fragrance, but powerful

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enough to emerge so you could sense its influence. This wasn't the ideal moment to lift the shades and force the rays of sunlight to enter.

He gave the final brushstrokes to his hair and assessed me through the mirror. "You know I think I'm getting used to your hair like this."

I sported a chin-length pieced cut in tabasco blond, air dried and gelled for a casual look. It was one of the self-improvements I had embarked on a few months after I left the office. I felt that its tousled effect hid what I obsessed on as a widening part, though my stylist reassured me I had a crop of healthy hair. The shade evened out my skin tone and cast me in a more favorable light. Joe struggled with accepting the transformation from my shoulder length brown layers I'd worn for years. I discovered he viewed any change as an affront to his own equilibrium, needing anchors of structure, habit, and familiarity to feel comfortable in his own skin. This small concession was a step forward and I meant to capitalize on it.

"O-o-h, thank you, baby!" I cooed and lavished him with kisses.

He held me tight and I felt him growing hard against me. He whispered hoarsely into my ear, "Surf's up, let's hit the waves."

He dropped his towel and followed me into our bedroom across the hall. I stripped down and lay ready for him on top of the tangled mishmash of turned down sheet, blanket, and midnight rose comforter. I'd like to envision a scenario of steamy sex, but one needs water to make steam and, lately, the ritual night sweats and hot flashes seemed to deplete my chalice so it needed more priming to get the juices flowing—at least until my newly prescribed vaginal cream took effect. Foreplay is a seductive tango I look forward to, with its steps of romance, affection, and slow, loving pace in the arms of a skilled dancer. That morning's escapade would be a testament to Joe's skill as a lover since time was not an affordable luxury. No languorous lovemaking with servants fanning us with palm fronds and peeling grapes off the vine.

He sniffed my scented wrists and inhaled the underlying notes lingering there before tracing his lips along a path from my cleavage down to the brink of my erogenous landscape. He parted my

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legs, kissed my inner thighs, and swirled his tongue inside the folds of damp flesh. When he began to lick and nibble my clitoris, pleasurable sensations rippled from within and anointed the region with dew. I worked my hips, greedy for him to knead with greater pressure and faster tempo as I teetered on the edge of ecstasy. I was soon overcome by waves of orgasmic spasms that left me quivering. When my panting subsided and while I still simmered in my own juices, he glided inside me and pumped the old well until the final shudder of the tango and a moan of surrender.

He lay on his back and I cushioned my head against the damp curls of his chest. On cue, he cradled me in his arms and we became entwined with one another, silent and content, breathing in unison. I couldn't help thinking about how two clinging vines eventually become entangled and indistinguishable to the point of stifling and choking the other unintentionally.

"Baby, I hate to hit and run, but I gotta get to work," he said, eventually releasing me from his arms. I propped myself up and watched him grab underwear from the armoire and fetch his khakis and flannel shirt from the cherry valet, hastily getting dressed.

His voice trailed from the front door, "I'll see ya later. I don't know why my knee feels so stiff this morning."

## Chapter 2

Rodeo Drive of Beverly Hills may be jeweled with exclusive shops and boutiques frequented by the stars, but our very own Shun and Plainfield Pikes in Johnston are studded with private companies that collect and haul both residential and commercial trash generated from Rhode Islanders to the Central Landfill on 65 Shun Pike. Johnston is the waste management capital of Rhode Island. The sanitary landfill we locals dub *Mt. Trashmore* covers 230 acres and peaks over 560 feet, a testament to the roughly four thousand tons of waste compacted, dumped, and buried each day.

Headquarters for Matteo Rubbish Removal consists of a pre-fab steel office building and grounds for parking its fleet of trucks and containers. Vince Matteo, Joe's father, purchased the acreage in the sixties from a downtrodden pig farmer before the glut of companies sprouted like weeds.

Aunt Mafalda, my mother's sister, whom we call Aunt M, offers a back story. Somehow she is privy to the goings-on of shady characters in the underworld and doles out gossip the way she hands out torpedo rolls bulging with peppers, mushrooms, and juicy hot sausages for lunch. She claims my Uncle Gino, her now deceased husband, who was in Public Works at the time, got this information in confidence from one of the guys in the work crew whose brother-in-law's nephew was a pinch hit driver of the delivery van for Pronto Cleaners, owned by the senior Matteo. He alleged Vince and a couple of buddies convinced the pig farmer to sell by offering to pay back taxes and showing him ready cash, though the sum dipped far below the property's market value. I can't substantiate how Vince persuaded the poor pig farmer to sell in a hurry, but I can vouch that my father-in-law is a bulldoggish, cigar-wielding Johnny Rocco with Machiavellian tendencies.

Joe simply related to me how his father saw an opportunity to purchase a parcel of land with business potential. He encouraged Joe to earn a business degree from Johnson & Wales College, convincing him waste management had a promising future in this state—see. He bequeathed the parcel of land to his son, confident Joe would heed his

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advice. Why, if Vince knew anything from operating Pronto Cleaners on Academy Avenue in Providence, it was his theory of human consumption. Joe quoted his father many times and adopted the creed himself: “There’s a good living to be made by providing a continuous service to a throwaway society.”

Joe and I had been married for two years. He moonlighted by making deliveries for Pronto Cleaners while launching his own waste management company. He obtained a small business loan to purchase two garbage haulers. Customized lettering on the truck doors advertised MATTEO RUBBISH REMOVAL as drivers conducted our sordid business along their routes.

Both of us collaborated on our office design, a pre-fabricated 40 × 60 foot beige steel building with straight walls and a domed roof. The custom front end wall had a double door entrance with a bottom row of elongated rectangular windows one lifted to open—four on the left of the doors and six on the right. In addition, a top tier of nine matching rectangular glass panels imparted a layered-cake effect. We planned to surround the building with gravel and prop a few bushes here and there to give our headquarters a little panache.

I had been substitute teaching. Unfortunately, a shortage of teaching positions dampened my prospects after college graduation, so I hoped my diligence as a sub would result in a permanent position should an opening occur. I thought I had more than a fair chance after proving myself during recent long-term employment in a third grade classroom. The principal took notice and wrote a letter of commendation on my behalf. The superintendent interviewed several applicants and narrowed it down to three finalists.

I spent the rest of the summer tempering the interior of our steel structure into an office—essentially setting myself up. I worked on refurbishing an old desk previously used for storing paint down in Vince’s cellar. I sanded its scratched and paint-splattered surface by hand in preparation for a coat of apple green paint

By August an electrician installed two suspended fluorescent strip lights from the ceiling and positioned two Casablanca fans in the middle. Plumbers installed pipes for our lavette. The building supply store delivered a space heater and window unit air conditioner. Carpet

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installers laid a commercial carpet over the cement slab. Office furniture from a thrift store would arrive later in the week.

\* \* \*

It was one of those dog days of August. Physically exhausted from the daily grind, I schlepped to the mailbox at our apartment complex. I had contemplated a refreshing shower before Joe arrived home for dinner. I leafed through our mail, and one of the envelopes stood out with its return address—Office of the Superintendent of Schools. I fumbled with the key to open the door, anxious to get in and read the letter. I set down the rest of the mail on the dining room table and took a letter opener from the hutch drawer. I brought the envelope over to the sofa where I carefully slit the top of it with the dagger and pulled out the letter. I broke into a cold sweat from nervousness as I unfolded it. The paper shook in my hands as my eyes quickly scanned for content like an adolescent searching for tantalizing text in a porn novel. I sucked in my breath as I reached the words, “*After careful consideration, it is my privilege to inform you that you have been chosen to fill the third grade position at...*” The superintendent went on to state my appointment would be formally approved at the next school committee meeting.

I hugged the letter for what it symbolized. It signified I would be the first in my family to graduate college and have a profession. The letter had the potential to bring a measure of happiness to my mother after years of battling my overly protective father whose well-meaning intentions smothered us to the extent of spawning resentment and rebellion. This major achievement was a turning point in my life, and I felt so grateful to be blessed with such good fortune.

I thought Joe should be the first to know, and I wanted the ambiance to be just right. I showered and lavishly rubbed *Youth Dew* body *satinee* on my skin before patting myself down with a full body dust from the matching powder. Two spurts from the dark-colored *eau de parfum* on the nape of my neck would be plenty from this dame! I soon detected the reassuring notes of cinnamon and clove

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emanating from her. Estee Lauder's spicy elixir had become my signature fragrance by the time Joe and I exchanged introductions and shook hands. I gravitated toward this vixen with an hourglass figure knowing he liked the vapors she dispensed.

After putting on a fresh pair of shorts and a tank top, I set the table and placed two candles in their holders ready to light in celebration. It didn't matter that sunlight flooded the apartment or that we would be eating leftovers. I tucked the letter inside the hutch drawer, ready to whisk it out when the time was right.

Joe came home animated and energized despite the heat. He picked me up, sniffed and kissed my neck, and twirled me around the adjoining living room, eager to share his good news.

"Carla, I have so many great ideas for the business. It hit me on the drive home that I need a partner to research potential clients, handle PR, and take charge of the paperwork while I take a hands-on approach with clients. And I said to myself, I'm sleeping with the best partner I could have!"

"Who?" I joked.

"Come on, Carla! I want you to be my business manager. Just think...the two of us are going to raise the bar in waste management!"

"Joe, I have a teaching career. Your sister offered to manage the office," I reminded him.

"Teaching? You've been subbing for two years and let me remind you, not steadily. Mary Anne would be all right for filing and typing, but I need someone with organization and creativity. That's you, Carla! Plus, you have a vested interest in the business." He continued to point out, "Besides, my sister has two toddlers to drag around. I can't run a successful business with half-assed office management."

This should have been my cue to run to the hutch, pull out the letter, and wave it like a white flag saying, "Look, Joe, I have the winning lottery ticket to the American Dream in my hand! A regular salary with negotiable yearly raises, paid health benefits, and summers off! Woo hoo!" Or I could have reminded him of the considerable cash and time I'd already invested in pursuing a

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profession of my choice, and now more than half way to earning my master's degree.

Queasiness plagued my stomach as though I careened from the summit of a roller coaster. I thought I would throw up. Dumbfounded, sweaty, and seeing black spots, I sat down on the sofa. I took steady breaths to keep from fainting. Blinded by his own visions and ambitions, Joe circled the room, excitedly firing ideas that ricocheted off my brain. He was oblivious to my short circuiting. He eventually ran out of steam, and we sat down to dinner. I passed off the candles as a romantic whim to offset how hard we had been working lately. He chalked up my lack of appetite for apprehensiveness in our new venture. I promised myself I would bring up the letter tomorrow, for surely he would land back on earth.

But tomorrow didn't seem like the right time, or the next day either. Not after your husband takes you in his arms during the night and tells you in so many words that our merging would produce a prosperous brainchild. That forming this alliance could only strengthen our physical bond by deepening our mutual friendship, loyalty, and trust. He interpreted my tears against his cheek as a signed covenant.

I allowed myself a couple of days to secretly hang onto the victory of my appointment. I folded the letter and tucked it inside the envelope for safekeeping, though I would be throwing away a coveted opportunity. I berated myself for hiding the letter as if it were something to be ashamed of, instead of flaunting it with pride.

I was too scared to walk near the edge of a precipice to find out if Joe would have changed his mind and supported me had I shown him the letter. I couldn't lift my head from under the covers to face the shadowy wall monster because I knew only one alternative raised its ugly head under the circumstances. I would have to leave him. I couldn't live with a man whose arrogance diminished his wife's self-worth and dismissed her accomplishments. Perhaps I followed in my mother's footsteps after all in recognizing that an escape from a life sentence of subjugation would be my only recourse. However, I loved him too much to risk such a discovery.

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My decision to favor my husband's will over my own ambitions wouldn't square with a mother who crusaded for empowerment during her marriage of fourteen years and did her part to champion women's rights in the community. I made peace with myself and justified a decision to shape my destiny by embarking on a journey along an unbeaten path dusty with ambiguity. Like a pioneer, I summoned every ounce of fortitude and determination to establish a successful enterprise with my life partner. Love more than balanced the equation and gave me the courage to make that call to the superintendent.

\* \* \*

By September when yellow school buses made their runs, Matteo Rubbish Removal headquarters had made its transformation from a hull to a professional office building on a shoestring budget. Folding room dividers concealed a lavette in the back right corner on my side and separated my office from Joe's to the left of the entry. The refurbished desk and white dry erase boards furnished his Spartan dispatch station.

My L-shaped office on the right was homey, though cheaply furnished with minimal accommodations. Toward the front, facing the doors and windows, a thrift store oak veneer home/office desk with a side drawer hunkered down. A telephone and an old faithful electric Smith-Corona that had processed many term papers in its heyday anchored a blotter. One plywood storage shelf leaned against the room divider. A full box of files and some telephone books were not weighty enough to stop the rickety unit from drunkenly swaying when someone walked by. Close by, a metal vertical cabinet promised profitable days ahead with its four-drawer storage capacity. Amenities along the outside wall provided the comforts of home. We had a compact refrigerator. A brand new coffee maker rested on top of a cabinet stocked with a few nonperishable snacks. I reminded myself to bring in a radio to place on the countertop.

Our tacky furniture, a family of orphans, found a couple to adopt them. Stiff, awkward, and gawky looking, we placed these

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misfits along the last section of the divider and the rear wall. The bentwood arm sofa and its sibling chair sported thin back pillows and gingerbread-brown seat cushions. A simple wooden cocktail table and pole lamp completed the lounge area. I draped a fringed throw in bright autumn hues over the sofa to soften the gauntness of its protruding black metal elbows.

\* \* \*

Vince threw a small office warming with a few family members and friends on a Sunday afternoon. He made sure a reporter from one of the local newspapers set foot on the premises to interview Joe. We folded back one of the dividers to accommodate the occasion. Vince supplied a long table that sufficed for our buffet. Annette, Joe's mother, brought a large foil-covered tray of baked ziti. Aunt M and Uncle Gino arrived with fresh torpedo rolls from the LaSalle Bakery and two crock pots of her homemade sausage, peppers, and mushrooms. Ma set up her coffee urn on the cabinet. Paula, a teenager at the time, set down a tray of finger pastries from the bakery, and spent the rest of the afternoon on the phone gossiping with girlfriends. Small wonder my sister leaned toward a career in banking— as senior class treasurer, she organized a major fund raiser that turned a handsome profit.

Mary Anne, Joe's sister, and her husband, Jim, came without the little boys. She and Jim slid their gift of a rubber tree plant in an oversized terra-cotta pot back and forth in movements choreographed by Annette. Red, sculpted nails flashed as her fingers pointed and directed where to position the plant.

My mother-in-law always looked striking. I couldn't recall a time when she ever looked frazzled or unkempt. Joe inherited his mother's beautiful eyes and regal features. That day, she piled her salt-and-pepper hair in a loose bun with curly tendrils that framed her face and graced the nape of her neck. She wore a tasteful pantsuit, though too dressy for the event at hand.

My mother didn't care for Annette, though she behaved civilly and cordially toward her. She found the woman too uppity and

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a bit pretentious. Ma had no qualms about speaking her mind to me about her either. “For someone who stands behind the counter at Pronto's taking in dirty laundry, that woman fancies herself a queen,” she declared.

I admired Annette, but felt she patronized my mother and spoke condescendingly to her, so I often invoked my mother's accomplishments when I detected Annette's tones creeping in. I'd remind her how my mother single-handedly raised two daughters through adolescence and put me through college. I bragged about her “handymam” skills around the house, tackling paint and repair jobs. I pointed out how she channeled her energy and compassion by volunteering her time in the community to help the impoverished or disenfranchised.

Plain spoken, my mother dished out the truth without adding any sugar. *I never surmised she had swallowed the bitterest pill of all...* Compliments didn't roll easily off her tongue, so when she gave me one, I treasured it and tucked it into my heart. She shied away from dating, though several men found her quite attractive and charming. Reddish, curly hair enhanced a smooth, creamy complexion and emphasized hazel eyes that were fringed with long, curly lashes, which Paula and I thankfully reaped from the gene pool.

When the reporter concluded his interview with Joe, Vince wanted everyone's attention. “Does everyone have champagne?” he bellowed. He waved his arm, motioning everyone to gather closer. “I see Mafalda lookin' nervous about her sausage, peppers, and mushrooms gettin' cold, and I know everyone here is hungry, so let me propose a toast.”

I suppose a speaker is entitled to a comedic focus and Aunt M was “it.” The platinum femme fatale stood beside Uncle Gino, flamboyant as ever in an off-shouldered hot pink poncho sweater over leopard stretch pants. A peekaboo wave swept across her forehead, a painter's careless brushstroke offsetting a jagged pixie. She flashed a fuchsia smile and rolled with the punch. “You're right, so keep it short, Vince!” Several people laughed and chorused their agreement.

*EVA PASCO*

“Just as my lovely wife and I took a chance and started Pronto Cleaners together,” Vince put his arm around Annette and she beamed in the spotlight, “my son and his wife have ventured together in the waste management business. May there be a promisin’ future for Matteo Rubbish Removal! *Salute!*” After the toast, well-wishers pelted Joe with congratulatory back slaps. They in turn pecked my cheek or enveloped me in a hug.

In contrast to Annette, Ma buzzed the earth as a worker bee. Clad in jeans and a sweatshirt, she fixed sandwiches and spooned macaroni onto plates, unfazed by splashes of gravy. To her, this task came as naturally as feeding the homeless.

Our guests departed after getting their fill of good food and friendly conversation. Paula badgered my mother to leave so she could visit a friend and insisted on driving. Ma allowed her to pack up some pastries for the visit while she kissed Joe and told him how proud she was. My mother’s smile faded as she came over to say good-bye to me. “You know you’re over a barrel, don’t you?”

I knew exactly what she meant. Should Joe and I split, I’d have nothing to fall back on. I’d basically be starting over, trying to break into the teaching profession again or choose another field. She didn’t know I’d already tossed out my life preserver before the journey even began.

Ma patted my arm reassuringly. “You’re still better prepared than I was to take matters in my own hands. You’ve got a good education.” Her jovial mood returned as Paula tugged on her arm to get going. “And you can drive!” she added. “That’s a big advantage I didn’t have when I realized I was over a barrel.”

\* \* \*

After the guests had left, Joe and I dragged the divider back into place. I switched the radio on and fiddled with the dial until a pop station came in clearly. “He Ain’t Heavy, He’s My Brother” by the Hollies played as we swayed in each other’s arms. We stood transfixed in the moment, our eyes locked on each other. Then we kissed so softly our lips barely grazed. We slowly began undressing

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each other—unbuttoning shirts, unbuckling belts, unzipping pants, slipping out of, sliding off, and shedding clothes. It seemed natural to consummate our merge by making love on our new couch, further endearing and entwining ourselves with corporate vows. Our lovemaking was slow, exploratory, and venturesome in reflection of the uncharted journey ahead. Lust soared. As darkness fell, we reached a plateau and synchronized our rapture to a near perfect landing. We clung to each other with arms and legs interlocked, our pagan bodies shrouded in a veil of musk.

I kept replaying the song lyrics in my head that would leave their own imprints and ruts as I traversed or stalled over roads with winding turns, roadblocks, and detours leading me to who knows where.

\* \* \*

Joe fulfilled his promise. Together we delivered and parented a prosperous brainchild. The foundation of our company had been poured with perseverance, sophisticated public relations, and professional decorum. After a humble start with our first phase of residential waste, garbage, and rubbish removal, we took the profits and expanded our services.

In addition to processing client contracts and overseeing billing, I researched potential commercial or industrial prospects, contacted corporate offices, sent out information packets profiling our services, and followed through by scheduling appointments for Joe to meet with the top brass. I followed the same protocol for contacting restaurant owners.

As a result of our joint effort, several haulers and dumpsters in the state became a marquee for Matteo Rubbish Removal. It wasn't long before Joe gave me the go-ahead to contact local builders and renovators. Eventually our company provided demolition cleanup and removal services.

The office reflected changing times through advances in technology. A computer and companion printer retired the dutiful Smith-Corona. We acquired a fax machine and copier. In the

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beginning when things were slow, I'd pull the letter out of my purse to read it and contemplate the road not taken. As my work picked up momentum to a frenzied pace, I caught the fever of excitement in facing challenges and influencing our snowballing success. I no longer needed the letter as a pacifier to dwell on what might have been. I shoved the envelope to the bottom of several contract folders, entombing it inside the desk drawer for posterity, and eventually I forgot all about it.

Our sofa hosted several more amorous encounters highlighting our business partnership, some of which occurred during the Blizzard of '78 when Joe and I were stranded for a couple of days until someone from Public Works plowed our road. By then, a rustic framed picture hung above the sofa. I objected to its presence, explaining to no avail, how it seemed inappropriate for an office.

There were other subtle changes. I banished *Youth Dew* from my kingdom and exiled her to a sealed box, terminating a long relationship with this Oriental. Its ambery and spicy essence would only serve to trigger memories of a severed past. During the remainder of the seventies characterized by feminism, back to nature, and the gay movement, I had flings with *Ciara* and *Charles of the Ritz*, my two most noteworthy contenders.

The eighties heralded in a decade of strong sensations. Women wore power suits, and fragrances were blatantly strong. Though casually attired in a domain dominated by "trash," my sense of empowerment was no less diminished than that aired by my pantsuited counterparts in the corporate kingdom. I felt the power caged inside me unleash in triumph with every new client I helped Joe to score. I was the wind beneath his wings, and I too felt its turbulence.

I acquired many potent goddesses and reveled in their headstrong, commanding, self-assured, dramatic, lavish, opulent compositions. *Pheromone*, *Giorgio*, *Paloma Picasso*, *Ysatis*, and *Caesars Woman* vied for attention as my newest cabinet members. These alpha females were blood sisters in an office where women did not trespass. Their notes trumpeted an arrival long before they entered the room. A motley crew of divas with distinct personalities, they

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weaved their enchanting and intoxicating spells. They enveloped me like a cloak and warded off the stigma of garbage with its perverse notes of decomposition, putrefaction, rot, decay, and stench. These loyal friends would elevate my spirits as though I climbed the summit of Mt. Trashmore to bask in the warm sunshine.

As the Gulf War, AIDS, and the Internet permeated the nineties, I acquired *Angel*, my sweetest delight with her heart notes of chocolate and caramel, rounded with underlying notes of vanilla and patchouli in the base. The presence of vanilla renders her one of my most comforting scents. My angel is also a heavenly angora sex kitten with wings of pink marabou feathers—feathers that flew me down the mountain to the finish line of my career in waste management.

### Chapter 3

A blizzard followed the heels of that cold snap in mid January, menacing the Northeast for a weekend. Our coastal community of Narragansett received a bountiful two feet of snow, obscuring the shrubbery, front walk, driveway, the boulders that bounded the front yard, and the haphazard stonewall in our backyard. Gusty winds raced up to 61 mph, causing whiteout conditions and drifts up to eight feet. The wind-chill bullied the air into backing down to a frigid thirty degrees below zero. The limbs of maples and oaks, indistinguishable from each other without their cover, creaked and crackled in response to the bitter cold and hostile winds. Their stiffened joints stretched and bowed beyond their limits like arthritic occupants of a nursing home coaxed to bend and touch their toes, aching in the attempt, and only reaching as far as their knees. Some limbs snapped with the exertion and dangled precariously from splinters. Others were wrenched from their lifeline and hurled to the ground.

Intricate snowflakes compressed against the windows looked like stenciled lace curtains. We were snowbound. The governor declared a state of emergency and urged private businesses and schools to close on Monday. Joe called the crew to confirm his compliance. He had plenty to do via snow removal and worked the snow blower like an obedient workhorse in clearing the walk, driveway, and trash station. He plowed paths leading from our house to the barn where feed for the birds and deer was stored. I peered out the windows now and then to check on his progress so I'd know when to prepare hot chocolate.

Ma, Paula, and I habitually chatted on the phone with each other several times a day in short spurts. Our "teletriad" connection flourished as a mutual exchange of checking up, free advice, afterthoughts, opinions, gossip, messages, reminders, rehashing and analyzing past events, or just plain nonsense. I dialed Paula's number. Her weary voice greeted me and relayed an urgent message in the same sentence. "Hi, Carla...you and Joe are not to call or refer to

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John as *LJ* anymore—instructions from the kid himself. Ma already knows.”

“Why?” I asked.

“John said if *LJ* stands for Little John, then it logically follows that his father who is Big John, gets stuck with the letters *BJ*. And we all know what those stand for,” she clarified.

I chortled on the other end and sputtered, “Where did he pick that up?”

“Where else? At the Catholic school I pay a hefty tuition to. Not in the classroom, but the cafeteria at the third graders’ lunch table.”

I sensed she needed validation and reminded her again of how Ma was so proud of her independence and the wonderful job she did to delicately balance motherhood and a career. “She told you that recently?” she asked.

“Again and again,” I verified.

“*Quid pro quo*, Carla. Ma tells me how fortunate you are to have married Joe. She says he only has eyes for you. His eyes follow you around a room.”

“She told me she knew your marriage to BJ...sorry about the initials...wouldn’t last because his eyes constantly darted from one girl to another, thinking someone better would come along.”

“Now that was something she should have told *me*,” Paula emphasized. “I certainly bided my time, getting married at thirty-five. That’s what I get for marrying a guy I didn’t move in with first to see how things would work out. By the time I picked up on the symptoms it was too late. John was born. I wanted him to have an intact family. Instead, I’m like Ma raising a child by myself except for most weekends and holidays.”

“She knew you wouldn’t listen and that you’d probably marry him anyway. Advice isn’t always a preventive measure,” I said trying to console her. “How were you so sure he cheated?” I asked, curious. We’d always been privy to gossip and names of the duplicitous, but Paula never caught John in a compromising position. His job as *maitre d’* at an upscale restaurant up the Hill offered a perfect cover for the late hours he kept.

*EVA PASCO*

“Because the perfume I sniffed on his clothes wasn’t *my* scent!” she said with conviction.

“The fragrance left you its notes,” I said and hung up.

\* \* \*

The ground hog saw its shadow early February, predicting six more weeks of winter, if you believed in the validity of Punxsutawney Phil’s yearly publicity stunt in Pennsylvania. Nevertheless, we were gifted with several mild days as a gesture of lightening up on battered New Englanders. One only needed a fleece jacket to keep warm while running errands. I noticed the “For Sale” sign on the Hughes’ property next door. I barely became acquainted with the elderly couple, always too busy catching up with grocery shopping and housework when I got home from work. A wave or hello now and then and occasional superficial chatter at our mailboxes summed the relationship. Besides, neither Joe nor I encouraged neighborly rituals of borrowing garden tools, exchanging recipes, or attending barbecues. We weren’t keen on forging a bond akin to that of the Mertzes and Ricardos. Robert Frost said good fences make good neighbors, and our tall hemlocks offered a polite alternative for maintaining privacy.

One such errand during the energizing weather involved driving to Macy’s at Warwick Mall to fill out an application for a sales associate position at a perfume counter. It was a halfhearted attempt on my part to row a little further in the dinghy that was stagnating in the harbor of my domesticity.

Truthfully, I was actually content staying afloat in the tomatoey waters, garnering satisfaction out of cooking and making my sister’s life easier by dropping off lasagna, baked ziti, eggplant parmigiana, or risotto for her and John. I enjoyed doing things at my own pace and hanging out in sweats, albeit designer cuts.

It was precisely this lull of contentment that propelled me into action to do something noteworthy, no pun intended. I’d read about women who had an epiphany in their forties or fifties and utilized their hot flashes and night sweats to slip out of their shackles

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of the mundane to embrace the unconventional. I didn't envision myself embarking on any edgy or dangerous pursuits such as mountain climbing, windsurfing, skydiving, playing hockey, or seeking mysticism in Tibet.

Not me... I heeded the call of girly women. And what could be more feminine than pedaling perfume, I thought. I had chosen to wear *Tabu* for this occasion. Tipping the mini violin *flacon* a couple of times, I dribbled a few drops of perfume onto my finger to dab behind my knees, wrists, cleavage, neck, and behind my earlobes. Several sprays from the cologne concentrate misted my skin. M-m-m...vintage ads and commercials touted this classic Oriental launched in 1932 as Dana's "forbidden fragrance" and featured a violinist with his female student locked in a passionate embrace while engaged in "the longest kiss in advertising history." From my perspective, this *grande dame* sublimely communicates by whispering a soft powdery dry down wrapped in vanilla as she beckons one to come within nuzzling distance for a romantic interlude. The violin *flacon* suits *Tabu's* sultry approach.

I honestly couldn't picture myself hounding passersby to try the latest scents or shoving scent strips in their faces to entice them. However, I didn't think it was a rickety bridge I'd have to cross since I felt discouraged from the start. The woman who handed me an application radiated glamour as did the others behind the counter with manes perfectly slick, springy, or corkscrewed. Skillfully applied makeup dramatized their eyes and outlined pouty lips on palettes of flawless alabaster. I was out of my element with my rumpled hair and my face minimally adorned with mascara, blush, and neutral lipstick. I filled out the application, more concerned with the growling noise my car had been making during the long drive north. I'd have to tell Joe about it.

Paula had left a frantic message for me when I returned home. "Carla, have Joe call John when he gets home. I fished a progress report out of his backpack and he's slipped in three subjects. I want Joe to use his leverage and tell him if he doesn't bring up his grades he won't be allowed to sleep over during February break."

*EVA PASCO*

Poor Joe was called upon once more to keep the fools aboard his ship in line. My ex brother-in-law was useless at parenting and enforcing discipline. He preferred being a pal to his only son, indulging him and undermining my sister's authority. Joe picked up the slack by setting John straight when he went off course. He co-sponsored Paula in overseeing discipline, giving advice, assisting with school projects, and incrementally feeding morsels about the birds and the bees for an eight-year-old to handle comfortably. When John started getting chubby from a sedentary lifestyle of watching television and playing computer games, Joe interested him in playing soccer. While Paula worked, Ma and I took turns driving John to his games and rooting for him.

For cynical reasons, Joe and I decided before marriage we wouldn't have children. That love and marriage were compatible as a horse and carriage was all well and good, but it didn't necessarily predicate procreation. Not in the inevitability of calm before a storm or where there's smoke, there's fire. From our perspective, the entire parental walk through infancy, childhood, and adolescence was an arduous journey beset with too many unknowns. We upheld the dire premonition of the lullaby prophesizing the cradle's fall after the tree bough snaps and breaks. It was our Murphy's Law for the unforeseeable future of parenthood with all of its worst case scenarios. The only guaranteed returns on investments of hard labor and love were worry, stress, and exhaustion.

Sure, there were tender moments when an infant's tiny hand curled over our fingers. Of course, it was rewarding to wave and make silly faces at a baby in its high chair, squirming and squealing with delight. Parenthood knocked but we weren't opening the door to hear the sales pitch, though we might have been decent candidates for the job. Long before the exchange of marital vows, we'd shifted to fourth gear and vanquished it out of the realm of possibility.

The case wouldn't be closed until it became notarized for public record. An emphatic announcement historically took place at Pronto Cleaners just before our first anniversary. Aunt M had already spoon fed me distasteful bits about Vince. If a fraction of those rumors were true, accusatory fingers pointed to my father-in-law as a

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part-time collector and enforcer for a local bookie. The first time Aunt M blurted her warnings she sounded like a soprano belting out lamentations in a tragic opera. “Are you crazy? You’re dating the son of Vince the Convincer Matteo who’s a muscle for Check Molinara!”

The bookie earned his moniker in younger days when he relentlessly pursued a stunning hatcheck girl at the swank El Morocco Supper Club in Johnston. The club no longer exists, but the bookie is still married to the object of his affection.

Aunt M continued her aria. “You should have seen Sal Caputo’s hand after Vince slammed it in the steam press for getting behind in his payments!”

I stored all of this gossip in some convolution of my brain...Joe and I entered the cleaners to pick up my gray woolen slacks. He and Annette chatted at the counter. Vince yelled from the back. “Is that my new daughter-in-law who just walked in? Come on back. I’ll show you how the steam press works.”

Since my olfactory senses have been heightened and refined by their obsession with fragrances, I found the pervasive chemical odor of the cleaners overpowering and repulsive as the formaldehyde fumes of college biology lab. “Watch one of the greatest inventions at work, Carla!” instructed Vince with a cigar stub jammed to the side of his mouth.

The stench from his cigar locked horns with the malodorous chemicals, presenting a formidable match to reckon with. I found myself growing unsteady on my feet. The ash at the end of Vince’s cigar grew longer as he demonstrated the steam press. With the press’s jaws wide open, Vince arranged a pleated skirt on the padded table, which he called the *buck*. I listened to the steam hiss like a menacing dragon about to draw fire from its belly before it belched hot flames.

“I’m now goin’ to depress this pedal, see. That will lower the *jump iron* onto the garment to apply pressure. I’ll press this here lever to release steam from the iron.”

Black spots obscured my vision and crowded me the way a forest of close-knit trees locks arms to engulf lost trespassers. The only thing I could see was a macabre movie playing inside my head.

*EVA PASCO*

The footage showed Vince pushing Sal over to the steam press. Desperate pleas failed to spare Sal from the preordained torture awaiting him. Sal struggled with Vince, frantically jerking his arm back in a feeble stay of execution. Shadowy accomplices grabbed hold of the welcher while Vince worked the machine. Screams of anguish accompanied the swift lowering of the jump iron and the release of scalding steam to enforce the bill collector's creed—"Ya wanna play? Ya gotta pay!"

I remember hitting my head on the cement floor. When I came to, three pairs of eyes peered down at me as Joe, Annette, and Vince flanked my prostrate form on bended knees.

"It's this damn heat!" Vince declared, finally removing the nearly disintegrated cigar from his mouth. "Give her some room!"

Annette hung the "closed" sign on the door. I sat up, rubbing the lump that had formed on my head. Joe placed a cold wad of paper towel on the spot and held it there.

"Carla must be pregnant! That's why she fainted!" Annette announced, confident in her female intuition.

"She isn't pregnant," confirmed Joe.

"What, are you a doctor too?" snapped Vince.

"We're not planning on having a family. You may as well know now," said Joe for the record.

"Oh my God!" wailed Annette. "The two of you just got married. Give it time," she protested.

"Annette, let it go!" warned Vince. "This is not about us wantin' more grandkids. What they decide is none of our business or anyone else's. Don't interfere."

Joe helped me up and crooked his arm around my waist. Vince patted my back and kissed my cheek. As Joe and I walked out of Pronto Cleaners, I reserved a soft cushiony spot in my heart for Vince.

\* \* \*

As aunt and uncle, we were bestowed with an honorary degree in parenthood. We maintained our rank and authority without

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going through the rituals of passage revolving around diaper changing, sleepless nights, terrible twos, or tooth cutting crankiness. Our nephews most often were delivered to our front door for an anticipated pleasurable outing or sleepover. Before both parties grew weary of each other's company, we returned the boys from whence they came.

Since John aced both his science and social studies tests, Paula allowed him to spend a couple of days at our house during his winter break from school. We enforced only one rule when he stayed over—no computer. He spent enough time in front of the screen at home, and access had been strictly limited due to declining grades. We encouraged him to play Scrabble, Monopoly, or cards with us. He invariably packed his favorite DVDs, a stack of superhero comics, and a few chapter books for the road.

The front doorbell rang Saturday morning, announcing his arrival. He stood on the front step, toting a duffel bag. He had slicked his curly brown hair into place. A contagious smile spread into an impish grin, exposing a grill of silver. He was up to something!

I credit my sister for keeping this young man fashionably attired in designer jeans and sneakers. He already unzipped an L.L.Bean parka on his way up the stairs. "Hey, Auntie! I want you to meet Liberace, my new pet!" he proudly announced.

"Well, if it isn't Plain John!" Joe greeted from the top of the landing.

"You'll get used to it," my nephew assured him.

Paula left the car running and hustled up the walkway carrying an aquarium. Her spiral curls defied being tied back with a scrunchy and floated around her face. "Don't say anything!" she warned. "I bought the green anole, and Ma and Aunt M pitched in for the tank and accessories."

"Just what you need, another thing to pick up after," I said, closing the door behind her.

"John wanted to surprise you both. It's sort of a combination reward and early birthday present. The responsibility will be good for him," she reasoned.

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While John was out of earshot in the spare bedroom with Joe, I expressed my disdain. “And just what am I supposed to feed this a-hole?”

“Carla, please. *Anole*. Grab the tote off my shoulder. You’ll find containers of crickets and insects inside. John knows enough to feed it two or three insects dusted with vitamins every other day.”

John cleared a spot on the bureau for our new guest. The lizard clung to plastic leaves hanging from the top of the ten-gallon aquarium. Paula kissed her son good-bye and hurried out the door to an idling car. John wasted no time plucking the tiny reptile with black, beady eyes from the synthetic tree to cradle it in his hand, stroke its head, and formally introduce us to Liberace.

This exotic creature inexplicably conjured Aunt M whose current signature wardrobe palette centered on chartreuse. She went through phases of intense color eccentricities by way of fuchsia, tangerine, purple, and aqua. Only when Uncle Gino passed did she wallow for a time in black. One creature’s camouflage is another’s flamboyance. Whereas others like me emulate the skunk in using fragrance as a vehicle for self-expression.

“This flap of skin is called a *dewlap*. That shows he’s a male,” John informed us. Liberace’s tail spun his body out of control inside John’s hand so he placed him on top of bark strewn over the black soil at the bottom of the tank. “Look you guys! He’s turning brown because he’s stressed from being handled. You know, he’ll grow to about eight inches as an adult and that includes his tail!”

“Yeah, well, can he earn his keep by doing somersaults and back flips?” Joe teased.

John played along. “I don’t see why not. Anoles are intelligent, lively, and have great personalities. He’s just shy right now.”

While he educated us about our new boarder, I studied this rugged, handsome lad who was undeniably my sister’s kid. His hazel eyes fringed with dark spidery lashes cast long shadows. He inherited Paula’s aquiline nose and his father’s square jaw and full lips. I hoped he wouldn’t parlay the composite to become a gigolo. A keen sense of humor often afforded him impunity from punishment. He could be

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mischievous and act on impulse without first weighing the consequences. My sister got a few calls from his teachers at St. Rocco's about his behavior, though they assured her that John was respectful and polite. All of us mentored him on the use of coping mechanisms, namely counting to ten or walking away to chill out before acting. It seemed easy enough advice for him to follow until actually confronted with a catalyst.

John pointed out the special bulb placed over half the aquarium so Liberace could hide in the shade when he wanted to cool down. A timer turned the light on and off so the aquarium wouldn't overheat. "Uncle Joe, could I please have a bottle of water so I can wet down the leaves and sides of the tank? Anoles don't like to drink water from dishes. And could you put his food in the fridge?" he added. My nephew obviously mastered the art of catching more flies with honey than vinegar, as he had Joe right in the palm of his hand.

\* \* \*

After a full day of bowling, taking in a movie, and going out to dinner, John sat up in bed reading his comics. We'd enjoy two more days of his company before he spent time with his mom and then lodged with his father. I went in his room to say good night. He held a dog-eared *Spider-Man* comic whose cover had become detached from the staples that once held the magazine intact. He put it down. Something bugged him.

"Auntie, do you think my mother is still hot at 44?" he asked.

"If you mean pretty—absolutely! Women don't have to fall apart just because they get older, you know. Why?"

"Because my dad's new girlfriend is twenty-four and she's got long blond hair and big hooters! I *know* she's smokin' hot!" he proclaimed.

"What do you know about hooters other than owls?" I needed to find out.

"Good one, Auntie! You know, big cans...big boobs," he replied. I held up my hand to signal enough already. "Uncle Joe said

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I'm very observant, but I should check out the legs too. He's a big leg man."

I was quite amused. "I see the two of you are on the same page."

"Oh, is Uncle Joe reading *Spider-Man* too?" he joked.

I rubbed John's head and kissed him good night. I peered into the aquarium and could barely detect the anole snuggled on a leaf. "Do you know who the real Liberace was?" I asked.

I wasn't surprised by his matter-of-fact response. "Yeah, some gay dude who played the piano in weird costumes". He picked up his comic book and flipped the pages.

\* \* \*

Shortly after John's visit, winter tightened its grip. During the final days of February we were clobbered with two more snowstorms in one week. Joe performed his compulsive cleaning and clearing rituals. The three red cardinals that regularly flitted about our backyard looked even more majestic against a white backdrop. Hemlocks shook in the breeze, discarding snow clumped like fleece. They too were anxious to rid themselves of winter coats now that the sun's warmth intensified with the approaching vernal equinox. I noticed a "Sold" sticker embellished the For Sale sign on the Hughes' property.

I assumed the sales associate position at Macy's had been filled and didn't care to inquire. I continued my vigilant exercise routine, watched my carb and fat intake, ate at least five servings of fruit each day, and snacked on nonfat dairy products. It entailed denying myself the erotic pleasure of foraging through a box of chocolates on Valentine's Day. It meant abstinence from cheesecake desserts when dining out. All for the meager reward of losing five pounds! The big payoff? Shapelier arms, slimmer hips, firmer thighs, and a contoured butt. However, my abdomen retained its own dewlap resembling Liberace's extra flap of skin. I blame gravity for wreaking havoc on a woman's body by redistributing everything like a lava lamp until her waistline eventually resembled Mother Earth's bulging

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equatorial region. If I had denied myself munchies and sweets, I made up for it by rewarding myself with splurging on new spring clothes from the home shopping network channels.

The last days of the month cloaked me in sadness by yet another reminder that life is too short. One evening Joe and I came home to find a deer crawling along one of the snow paths. The following morning it crouched against the stone wall in the backyard, having left a trail of blood to mark its progress. We placed a call to the Department of Environmental Management and a ranger came by to shoot the deer dead—one bullet fired long range and another so close up he looked into its woeful eyes to finish the deed. The ranger informed us the doe most probably had been hit by a motorist, because one of its hind legs was badly broken. She would have been rendered incapable of surviving in the wilderness. I wept and pondered about the chance mishap that cut short this swift creature's otherwise carefree life amidst nature with its siblings. It wasn't fair.

This made me sad for my beloved geriatric cats. These two madams spent most of their days napping, and I wondered just how much longer I would be blessed with their companionship. I grew more fastidious with accommodating their needs and making them comfy. Loving talks, scratching behind their ears, kissing their heads, stroking, and petting were daily rituals I engaged in to feed my maternal instincts as well as nurture their sense of well being. I loved to fondle the mottled, leather underside of their warm paws that smelled of breadcrumbs. Their kneading and purrs of contentment reminded me that happiness was all about enjoying and appreciating the simple pleasures in life.

Yet, I sat on the recliner in the living room composing nasty notes about Joe who relaxed on the couch six feet away, staring at the television screen while seemingly preoccupied with his own thoughts. Otherwise, he appeared perfectly content to loll about on the weekend in plaid drawstring loungers and a holey T-shirt with two days' worth of gray stubble covering his face. He had just scoffed down his own homemade Italian grinder drizzled with olive oil and vinegar and stuffed with provolone, mortadella, salami, lettuce, tomatoes, and pepperoncini rings. He paid no attention to the errant crumbs that had

EVA PASCO

settled on his stomach and must have been unaware of the oil dribbling down his neck.

What started off innocently enough as a grocery list turned into a relentless diatribe of annoyances precipitated by Joe's foray in the kitchen where he proceeded to saw off a generous grinder from a loaf of Italian bread. Crumbs spewed over the counter and inside the open utensil drawer. My pen became a whirling dervish intent on maligning this man who knew all my erogenous zones. He filled my car with gas and backed it in the driveway for me. He tolerated my peculiar grooming ritual of rubbing a masque through my hair and wearing a plastic bag over my head to seal in the heat. He...

I took perverse pleasure in scribbling the word *sloppy* followed by *inconsiderate*, *arrogant*, and *self-absorbed*. My notes progressed and my writing accelerated in proportion to mounting anger. *Meddlesome*, *critical*...

"Working on your grocery list?" he asked, interrupting my vindictive tirade. "Add a half pound of Genoa salami, will ya?" He took a long swig from a can of Coke and belched. "I'll take your car in for service next week. I think that noise has something to do with the exhaust system. Hey, it's five years old and to be expected." He brushed crumbs from his T-shirt onto the rug.

Something burdened his mind the way he had been wolfing down food in front of the TV and staring at the screen without processing the program. He was shutting me out and I needed to elbow my way in. I knew full well how direct questioning would only sabotage my effort. Joe mastered the knack of bottling his woes until the cork popped and everything spilled out. He would either have to leak information as he saw fit or blow. I treaded lightly, hoping to gain some insight. "Joe, how is Mary Anne working out for you?"

I thought I detected a twitch. "Good." He hedged, "A few weeks ago she couldn't find our land purchase agreement but I finally located it in the desk drawer inside your file for property taxes." He paused and looked at me as if waiting for further enlightenment on my part.

"Why didn't she call me?" I asked. "I could have saved both of you the trouble. Why did you need the land purchase document?"

*UNDERLYING NOTES*

“No big deal. Something might be brewing and I want to get everything squared.”

He cut off further inquiries by steering the conversation elsewhere. I added the words *evasive* and *tightlipped* to my notes. I also thought it odd that Mary Anne didn't call me as she never hesitated to do so for the most inconsequential matters when I was on leave recuperating from surgery. How often should she fertilize the plants? How many boxes of manila file folders should she order? And, the most preposterous, what should she tell the security company that called about installing a surveillance system?

“By the way, Frankie stopped in. He was asking for you,” he mentioned sounding none too pleased.

Carla Matteo copes with life by "tipping the bottle"--glass goddesses funneling perfume! During a midlife renaissance, the "juice" enables Carla to find her own niche, while the ominous rose note in Paloma Picasso forces her to confront the past.

## **UNDERLYING NOTES**

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