

In Friday's Child, Flora and Shamus match wits with a maniac who is killing aged owners of Victorians on historic Brick Row. In Saturday's Child, they sort out the tangled skeins of deceit linking Ace Towing and Club King College.

**CRIME TIMES TWO: Friday's Child & the Five of Diamonds
and Saturday's Child & The Sad King of Clubs - Two Flora &
Shamus Large Print Mysteries**

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Rosalie Stafford

Crime Times Two

Friday's Child &
The Five Diamonds

Saturday's Child &
The Sad King of Clubs



Two Large Print

Flora & Shamus Mysteries

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Notwithstanding the fact that these calendrical mysteries are set in real places – National City’s historic Brick Row and in various San Diego neighborhoods – these novels are works of fiction, comical tales of imaginary people doing imaginary deeds. With the sole exception of my dear friend Winford Perry Enox, a tow truck driver known by his work name Golf, any perceived resemblance to any person, living or dead, is entirely fortuitous.

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The Five Diamonds*

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Friday's Child & The Five Diamonds

Week One

*Friday, 28 April
Holy & Great Friday*

Holy and Great Friday, the Friday before Easter. In her reverent devotions at Vespers that evening, Flora Dimopoulos would join the Greek Orthodox congregation of St. Lucia's in lamenting *Why do evil and iniquitous people concern themselves with what is in vain?* and, while taking part whole-heartedly in the liturgy, while worshipping, while venerating the holy shroud, Flora Dimopoulos would forget for the nonce the events of the previous two weeks.

Everything had happened so quickly – just two weeks before, handsome Shamus Fitzmorris, private investigator, had entered her life, and all those things, those terrible and wonderful things, had happened. Now, because of handsome love-smitten Shamus Fitzmorris and the way one thing leads to another, Flora was to be, for the month of May, Folklorist-in-Residence at the Historical Museum of National City.

The position was unprecedented; Marva Jankowsky, *doyenne* of the National City clubwomen had invented it impetuously, specifically for Flora.

Flamboyant clubwoman Marva Jankowsky was high-energy and high-profile: President of the National City Historical Society, Madame President of the Victorian Ladies Society, Chair of the National City Chapter of the American Historic Preservation Association, spearhead of the Brick Row Neighborhood Committee, and a bossy gadfly, constantly goading and guiding the National City Planning Commission. The vociferous redheaded real estate agent pushed historic preservation and strenuously promoted gentrification of her small border city.

For years Marva had battled Club Cheetah, a loud and gritty neighborhood bar just across the alley, whose backdoor debouched drunks at the very gate of her historic backyard. Recently, she had hired private investigator Shamus Fitzmorris to dig the dirt on the obnoxious joint.

When, just days before, Marva had met Flora by happenstance at Shamus' office, the promoter had immediately appreciated the folklorist's useful qualities. Flora's readiness to speak on her subject was impressive, as was her physical appearance – her dark, glossy, upswept hair, her shield-shaped glowing face and amber-flecked blue-green eyes, the

color of Monet's lily ponds at Giverny, her hour-glass figure, her friendly smile, her effortless poise and simple silk-linen dress and Italian sandals – all this whispered *class*, and Marva, recognizing in Flora a priceless historic preservation public relations resource had, on the spot, concocted the National City Historical Museum Folklorist-in-Residence position for her and her alone.

Marva had insisted that Flora accept the appointment: Marva would *not* take *no* for an answer.

That was the secret to her habitual success.

Not that Flora had needed much convincing. Flora, still seeking a *recherché* topic for her folklore master's thesis, had a hunch that within the yet-to-be-catalogued archives of the National City Historical Museum dwelt folkloric riches and the elusive thesis topic.

During her tenure as Folklorist-in-Residence, Flora would be the honored house-guest of Frieda Kimball Lee who lived next door to the Museum in New Kimball House built in 1885 by her great-grandfather, Frank Kimball. Cozily, Marva lived directly across the street, on Brick Row. Marva had volunteered the loan of the Mayor's scanner and Frieda Kimball Lee's big arthritic son Jumbo for fetching and carrying. It was all very cozy.

2

"Don't you worry about a thing, girlfriend," Raj had assured Flora when she told him of the Folklorist-in-Residence offer, "I'll be fine here all on my lonesome. I don't need a baby-sitter, Flora. If you like, I'll stay right here, keep an eye on your apartment while you do your thing in National City."

Raj had been Flora's houseguest for the last few weeks, and the one-bedroom apartment in Point Loma had at times felt over-stuffed. Flora hadn't minded one bit giving up her bed to big-bodied Raj and sleeping on the sofa, but the opportunity to live for a while in a three-story gingerbread Queen Anne manse on National City's historic Brick Row was very inviting. In fact, Flora panglossically considered the entire impromptu arrangement nothing short of miraculously serendipitous.

"You know you creates your own reality, girlfriend," Raj had said. "You go, girl!"

And so she had gone – her old Volvo station wagon crammed with her hanging camera for photo-documenting small items such as broaches and daguerreotypes, her tape-recorder for oral history interviews, bags of blank audio tapes and 35 mm b&w film, bundles of notebooks, her laptop computer, three suit-cases, a couple of garment bags, stacks of hat-boxes and shoe-boxes.

Flora loved dresses, simple frocks of silk or linen

– cut and draped in the styles of the 1930s and 1950s, decades which appreciated the feminine form, celebrated it in design – loved feminine shoes and silky underthings and understated hats and jewelry, loved necklaces, earrings, broaches, hairpins. Flora loved being a girl and had not a single pair of jeans in her wardrobe.

Her destination, Brick Row in National City, was just a few exits down the 5 from her Point Loma apartment: she could easily pop home for more gear if that minimalist wardrobe contained in her few suitcases did not suit either the changeable springtide weather or her official duties as National City's Historical Museum Folklorist-in-Residence.

3

Blocked by a low brick wall on the south end, the tree-arched *cul de sac* curved in wide green scallops between National City's Ninth and Tenth Streets. This chimerical block of Avenue A was adorned with meandering redbrick sidewalks, well-maintained municipal flower-beds of daylilies and hollyhocks, and, behind spiky Victorian cast-iron fencing, various exotic flavors of Victorian gingerbread. It was unlike anything Flora had ever seen in Southern California: an incongruously elegant block of the nineteenth-century East Coast transported to a border city south of San Diego (and just a short walk from Wal-Mart).

The west side – the shady side – of Avenue A was Brick Row proper: a block of ten attached two-story redbrick rowhouses constructed in 1885 by railroad owner Frank Kimball, modeled on a block then standing in Philadelphia. As originally designed, each 2,500 square-foot unit had four bedrooms and a minuscule bath upstairs, a large foyer, living room, dining room, and country kitchen downstairs. Frank Kimball had wanted to make his transplanted railroad executives feel at home in the outback. The entire deluxe row was built at the cost of \$23,000 in 1885 dollars.

The east side – the sunny side – of Avenue A between Ninth and Tenth was anchored by two exuberantly-towered three-story Queen Anne mansions, one at each end of the block. Between them was a little story-book cottage – the curlicue-encrusted Eastlake-style Old Kimball House, now the National City Historical Museum. New Kimball House occupied several acres of the southeast corner of the historic block. It was all very picturesque.

Impulsively, Flora navigated her old Volvo down the alley between Avenues A and B. The backyards of the Queen Anne mansions and the story-book cottage composed one long, sweeping expanse of grass and trees, punctuated by a few quaint gardener's cottages or antique carriage-houses, protected from the alley by continuous, tall

wrought-iron fencing topped with outward-curving spikes.

If good fences make good neighbors, Flora wondered, what kind of neighbors are these, the people who live in the two Queen Anne mansions?

On Tenth, Flora pulled up to the curb, New Kimball House on her right. Directly ahead, one block to the west, beyond the serried charm of Brick Row, busy National City Boulevard teemed with traffic, rap and ranchero music hotly burbling from low-rider cars and hiked-up trucks; the sweet, overly-ripe fruity stink of solvent was carried on the sea breeze from the auto-body shop at the corner. The 1950's pseudo Frank Lloyd Wright ersatz stone façade of the notorious Club Cheetah jutted triangularly upward two stories, a barbaric yawp over the rooftops of Brick Row.

What a remarkable interface! Flora marveled at the paradox. On the one hand, noisy bustle and wind-blown grime and the odor of solvent, on the other, verdure, civility, and settled Victorian order, an oasis of calm gentility in a rough sea of 21st century anarchy. *There's amazing folklore to be documented here!* Shivering happily in every fiber of her being, Flora exulted, glad to be alive: she would find a thesis topic here, on this anachronistic street.

"Come in! Welcome!" Frieda Kimball Lee looked

pleased as she blinked at Flora standing on her doorstep in the tremulous April afternoon sun. An orange tabby coiled sinuously about her ankles. "You must be Flora. Come in! I do hope you're not allergic to cats – in this house, that would be *catastrophic*." Holding Flora's hand, the hostess pulled her houseguest into the historic New Kimball House, home to generations of Kimballs for more than a hundred years.

5

"You're mom's got company," observed Vera, Psychicdivine.

Jumbo grunted. He was scrutinizing the growth of mold on the tortilla. If he tilted it and squinted, it looked a *little* like the Virgin of Guadalupe: they were making progress.

"Everything is proceeding as I have foreseen," muttered Jumbo.

6

Frieda Kimball Lee ensconced Flora on a tufted settee in the parlor and pressed a short sherry in her hand. She lifted her little crystal glass in a pretty toast: "Personally, and on behalf of National City, I want to welcome you, Flora." She coughed, a dry raspy cough like old leaves crunching.

Her bony face, still beautiful in its planes and its proportions, was heavily lined and framed with a silvery pageboy. She was wearing pedal-pushers.

Her legs were slim; under her artistic linen tunic, her frame was slender. She stood very erect as she continued her toast: "I am delighted that you accepted our invitation. And I fully intend to make you very comfortable during your sojourn here: my home is your home." She lifted his glass and quaffed ceremoniously.

Flora smiled and quaffed. Goodwill reigned graciously in the parlor of the New Kimball House. A family of kittens emerged from somewhere and disported themselves throughout the room. Frieda sat next to Flora on the sofa slip-covered in chintz, the pink roses faded to apricot.

"I've put you in Tourmaline; it's on the north side of the house so you won't be bothered by the morning light. My great-grandmother Frieda whimsically bestowed names on all the rooms: there's Topaz and Turquoise and Tourmaline and Tangerine and Cadillac and Kodiak and Kayak and so on – dozens of them."

She coughed, and continued, "I'll take you on a tour of the house and you'll get your bearings soon enough. Breakfast and lunch are catch-as-catch-can, generally in Calcutta. The kitchen. Eat anything you can find in the pantry or icebox. Dinner is always in Kodiak – the dining room – at seven, with cocktails at 6:30 in Kumquat. The library. I'm having the neighbors over tomorrow night for a mystery party.

I've written in a part for you. I do hope you'll enjoy your stay." She coughed.

"I'm absolutely thrilled, Mrs. Kimball Lee! I'd like to get started cataloging the archives right away. I'm sure it's a treasure-trove." A plush tuxedo cat had found its way onto Flora's lap. It purred while the two women beamed at each other.

"Please call me Frieda. First of all, I am very curious about your project. What kind of folklore do you intend to uncover in the Museum? Folktales? Folksongs? Quaint rituals? I do hope you won't be disappointed."

Flora, whose goal was to become a full professor of folklore, loved it when she could dispel misapprehensions regarding the nature of her chosen discipline. The intended academic dove into her element: the words poured out.

"Songs, tales, and rituals were recorded by the nineteenth century folklorists, but the modern discipline has a much wider scope. The modern folklorist doesn't study quaint villagers. Nowadays, folklorists study the cultures of all kinds of folkgroups – *occupational folkgroups* such as bounty-hunters, for example, or *recreational folkgroups* such as computer gamers. Folklorists record *oral history*, but the informants don't necessarily have to be elderly." Flora smiled at her hostess. "And folklorists write *ethnographies*: detailed analyses of the worldview, the

culture, the history, the jargon, of any particular folkgroup, including neighborhoods, such as Brick Row." Flora paused for breath.

"Excellent!" Frieda exclaimed, clapping her hands once, briskly truncating Flora's educational lecture. She arose. "If you're up to the task, my dear, I have boxes and boxes of old photographs which I have been planning to donate to the Museum. You can't take it with you, and I am at that point in my life where I have to start divesting. I'm eighty years old, you know; I'm not so spry as I was." She coughed.

"I have interstitial lung disease, my eyesight is – poor – and I can't sort the photos out any more than I have already. My husband, Lee, was a photographer. So was I. And my mother. And her father. Over the last century, my family has produced tons of photos." Frieda stopped to catch her breath and cough dryly.

"That's how I met him, when I was living in Hawaii right after World War Two. James Kimball – my son – needn't be saddled with all those photos. They belong in the Historical Museum."

Frieda's monolog was somewhat periphrastic, but Flora knew she would eventually sort it out. Analysis of data comes after collection of data.

"Aside from ourselves, there's my ..." Frieda closed her faded grey eyes and paused a moment

considering, “well, I never have quite decided whether Nixon is my late husband’s great-nephew or second-cousin once removed. Lee is such a common name among his people.”

Nixon? Flora was bewildered. Kinship charts had long ago been claimed as the purview of anthropology, leaving folklore the snazzier elements of folklife such as art and oral history, but Flora knew that she had to wring order from her hostess’ breathless geneology. Kinship relationships and friendship alliances constitute the very bedrock of folklife, and it is impossible to comprehend the dynamics of any group without understanding that particular group’s paradigm of interpersonal relationships: Flora had to know *who* was *what* to *whom*. “His people?”

“Lee was ethnic Chinese. I met him in Hawaii. We came back to San Diego in 1951, soon after James Kimball was born. Lee passed on in 1980. Smoking. Lee always did smoke too much. Thank goodness, Nicky doesn’t smoke.” Frieda coughed.

“Nicky?”

“Nixon Lee. Nicky. His branch of the family lives in Taiwan. He’s here polishing his English at a language school in Mission Valley. I’ve forgotten most of my Mandarin and, frankly, Nicky is not very advanced in his studies. So frustrating, not being able to communicate. Do you speak Mandarin?”

Frieda asked hopefully, and coughed.

7

Mentally reviewing the day's vocabulary, Nixon Lee got off the Blue Line trolley at the Eighth Street stop and walked the few blocks homeward, past the high-rise hotel housing Katrina evacuees and the steatopygous streetwalkers in minis who teetered boldly on their spike heels back and forth along National City Boulevard between the speed motel on Sixth and Club Cheetah at Tenth. He reminded himself for the ten thousandth time to think in English. *It was so hard, so frustrating.*

At the corner of Ninth and A, Nicky saw the old man sitting on the porch. As usual, the old man was holding his head between his two hands. Nicky felt sorry for the old man. When, as he often did, he got excited and gesticulated and let go of his head, it would flop over and dangle awkwardly on one shoulder or the other. Out of politeness and respect for his venerable age, Nicky would always immediately do the same – let his own neck go limp and his head flop sideways, until the old man righted his own head, whereupon Nicky would respectfully mirror the action. It always gave Nicky a crick in his neck.

Old Mr. Loomis waved him over to chat. He always discussed the same subject, although Nicky could never grasp enough of Mr. Loomis'

conversation to know that.

"Nice day. Or it would be if those people weren't in my house. Fine state of affairs when strangers up and move in, take over a man's home. Beats everything. Supposed to be a man's castle."

"Casser?" repeated Nick, his stylus poised over his hand-held electronic dictionary. "Can you spell, please?"

8

Ruby Bailey collected the mail and closed her front door, carefully locking it behind her.

"Anything interesting?"

"Just that young Chinaman, Frieda's kin, standing there, talking to himself again. Gives me the creeps. That boy's not normal."

"Poor Frieda," said Opal Bailey. "There's a lot of that insanity in her family. Just look at that hippie son of hers, and his weird gypsy girlfriend in her painted-up gypsy wagon. I lay the blame on that Chinaman she married."

Her sister nodded. "An apple don't fall far from the tree."

"Yep," agreed Opal, "Jumbo has too much of his father in him. Crazy artist! And foreign, to boot! Poor Frieda."

"Poor Frieda," agreed Ruby Bailey, congratulating herself on her excellent son, Jasper. Never gave her a moment's worry, not Jasper. *A gem*

of a son.

9

Flora had seen the downstairs: the parlor, the drawing room, the library, the morning room, the dining room, the kitchen, the butler's pantry. She had admired the woodwork, the stained glass, the Morris wallpaper, and a tumbling litter of kittens clumsily stalking one another. Upstairs, she had seen the many bedrooms and boudoirs (Topaz, Turquoise, Tourmaline, Tangerine), the nooks and foyers and landings (Opal, Onyx, Obsidian, and Sardonyx), the narrow seldom-used servants stairs (Kangaroo). She was standing in Celestine, the small circular room created by the high story-book turret, the fish-scale-shingled three-story tower of New Kimball House, with her hostess.

"Is that Nixon Lee?" Flora asked, pointing out the window.

Frieda smiled ruefully. "I couldn't say, Flora. Didn't you know? To me the world is a smudge – I'm nearly blind."

10

Ferna Prescott put down her shuttle, pulled down the shed, and combed down the woof. She stood, stretched, strolled to the window, her Maltese at her ankles. She picked up Tassel and, meditatively scratching him behind his ears, contemplated the scene across the street. There was Frieda's nice

nephew, Nicky, engaged in a bizarrely non-contiguous, non-productive conversation with old Mr. Loomis.

Poor old Mr. Loomis. Why didn't he just give up and go on to the Other Side? He could complain 'til the cows come home, and he would never get his body back.

Or his home. Those dreadful Castillos had that now. There was nothing Mr. Loomis could do about that. Those people were too insensitive even to notice a haunting. Someone should explain to poor Mr. Loomis that you just can't take it with you.

Ferna sat, and resumed her weaving, Tassel close by her feet. It was such a pleasure to work with this nubby silk. The color, the texture. Ferna smiled at her weft. Her fingers moved the shuttle through the shed. Ferna swam in an ocean of bliss.

11

"I'm so sorry! I hadn't realized!" Flora felt a fool.
"You ..."

"I get around pretty well on my stubs?" Frieda coughed. "Please don't worry about it. I've lived here a long time. And I know exactly where everything is. As I always say: *a place for everything, and everything in its place.*"

12

The ramshackle motorhome had been manufactured *circa* the Summer of Love. Roller-painted an exuberant all-over gypsy-tartan plaid of blue,

magenta, violet, orange, yellow, and green, Rasputin stuck out like a sore hippy thumb.

Rasputin's toilet was primitive: a plastic bag lining a bucket. Candles provided a dim, dangerous light. Vera, Psychicdivine, lived in Rasputin – illegally and transitorily, here and there on various industrial backstreets of San Diego. The Psychicdivine cherished her freedom.

"May the Force be with you," Jumbo yelled, waving *see-you-later*.

Vera, Psychicdivine, sprayed the carburetor with starter fluid and the engine roared to life. She backed Rasputin out of New Kimball House's shady backyard, wrenching several shrieking branches from inconsiderately situated trees, and fell off the curb with a frame-rattling *thunk*.

Slowly laboring, with shivers and belches, toward National City Boulevard, freedom-loving Vera, Psychicdivine, saw Flora standing in the middle of A, camera at the ready. With the afternoon sun at her back, Flora was photographing the sunny side of the street: at the north end of the block, the Prescotts' blue and lavender Queen Anne, a mansion almost as ornate and rambling as the orange and apricot New Kimball House at the south end of the block, book-ending the quaint white gingerbread cottage which was Old Kimball House, now the National City Historical Museum, in the middle of

the park-like block.

Flora made a mental note to photograph the shady side of the street some morning soon when the spring sun was shining on the warm red façade of Brick Row. Flora felt full of the wonder of life: here she was, plunked down in the middle of a beautiful street which teemed with history, charged with the task of documenting generations of folklife. *Life was good. Very, very good.*

Mrs. Myrtha Huff, shuffling along in her stringless tennis shoes with the toes broken out, coming back from Big Ben's at the corner of Eighth and Avenue A, said hello to the nice shiny-haired young lady who was standing in front of her old house, snapping pictures of the Prescott place.

"Hello! Do you live here?" exclaimed Flora, and quickly explained that she was Mrs. Kimball Lee's houseguest for the month of May and would be writing a long report on the history of the area.

"Isn't that nice?" Myrtha Huff said, and immediately invited Flora in to see her home. She explained to her interested visitor that the Huffs had lived there since 1945. Aaron Huff had bought it with his GI right after the war for \$2,500 – a good purchase price because, at that time, most young couples wanted a new stucco rambler with central heating and a carport.

The two women entered, and Flora had her first

glimpse of a Brick Row interior: a foyer as large as the bedroom in her Point Loma apartment. On one side, the staircase with a curving mahogany banister and balusters swooped gracefully and, on the other side, pocket doors were open to an immense parlor, whose ceiling soared twelve feet overhead.

Myrtha Huff shut the front door with alacrity. "So Gobbles don't get out," she explained. Goebbles was her son Leonard's pet ferret. "Don't ask me why that boy can't just keep a nice normal pet like a dog instead of that stinky ferret. Gets out and kills chihuahuas. He's a predator, is what he is. *Gobbles's* a good name for that stinky little critter." Directing Flora to make herself comfy in the front room, Myrtha Huff trekked off to the kitchen with her bag of groceries.

The furniture was manifestly less grand than the room itself, with its tall windows, marble fireplace, and faces peering out of twining foliage in the *bas relief* plasterwork medallion of the central ceiling decoration twelve feet overhead. An ornate and very dusty gas-jet chandelier, as well as a greasy network of spider webs, hung from the medallion. Flora perched herself on an ancient slippery Barcalounger; under a garish crocheted afghan, its vinyl was cracked and scratchy.

Myrtha Huff shambled back a few moments later, bearing a recycled quart jar and two smudgy

glasses on an old tin tray. Momentarily, she looked appalled.

“Omigosh! Sweetheart, if you don’t mind, I’m going to ask you to sit over here on the couch. The Barcalounger – no one ever sits in the Barcalounger. The Barcalounger was my husband’s *throne*. He just sat down there one day and fell asleep and never woke up. And besides, Gobbles has his nest in it, in the stuffing. If we was to sit in Aaron’s Barcalounger and lean back, just a matter of time ‘til Gobbles’d get squashed, all mangled up in the springs. Terrible mess, that would be. Break Leonard’s heart.”

Flora carefully lifted herself from the fatal Barcalounger, apologizing profusely, and her hostess assured her: “No harm done, sweetheart. You didn’t know. Would you care for a sip of brandy? Made it myself, with fruit from my own apricot tree. My husband Aaron planted a fruit tree in the backyard when each of our three was born. Course, the older two died in 1952, from the polio epidemic, but the trees are still alive. Pecan and avocado. Pies and salads. Leonard came along quite a bit later, 1960. Apricot brandy. Aaron didn’t live long enough to see Leonard grow up, poor boy.”

Flora felt that she was floating, whether from the high-octane apricot brandy or from the thrill of hearing such fascinating oral history, she did not know. She promised herself that she would come

back as soon as possible and tape-record Myrtha Huff's life story. *Life was good. Very, very good.*

"That's a beautiful chandelier, Mrs. Huff."

"Thank you, sweetheart. Gas, just for show. My husband never had time to wire the whole house for electricity." Myrtha Huff gestured toward the fat yellow extension cords which snaked along the wide mahogany base-boards, feeding the dusty television set and various battered table lamps. "Just the kitchen."

The front door opened and shut quickly, and a tall wiry man in levis and loosely-hanging, torn tee passed through the foyer, scooping off his rebel cap and placing it on the conveniently head-sized mahogany globe terminating the newel post at the bottom of the stairs. He strode toward the back of the house. A hideous cacophony of screams rent the air. Flora was aghast.

"That's Leonard," Myrtha introduced her son *in absentia*. "Apricots."

"Leonard? Is he all right?"

Myrtha considered the question. "Oh, you must have heard the birds. Suzanne's parrots. I don't even hear them anymore." She lifted her smudged glass. "Bottoms up. Have another, sweetheart."

Leonard re-appeared, holding a can of beer. "How you doing?" he said, nodding when he saw Flora. He set his beer down on the mantel and

extended his hand to shake. His arms were long and thin, his elbows and hands big and bony. Then the tall thin man dropped to his knees and crawled behind the Barcalounger. He inserted one long thin arm through a rip in the vinyl and pulled out a writhing tube of fur. As Leonard scrambled up, cradling a long thin feral mammal, Flora noticed a large blue-black swastika tattooed on the back of his head, barely obscured by his buzz. "Hey, Gobbles, buddy." Leonard stroked his ferret affectionately.

"I was just telling Miss Flora here about how you've lived here since you was a baby."

"This used to be a decent place to live," Leonard Huff informed Flora. "Now it's been taken over by the beaners, both ends of the block. Even the mayor of this town's a beaner – and he has to park his carcass right next door. And that mouthpiece for the mud-people, Winchell on the other side. We're fucking surrounded by – sorry, Ma! My bad. But you know how they breed: *we got hobby, it called breeding, welfare pay for baby feeding*. It's just a matter of time 'til they take over. The way they breed, they're not in any danger of extinction. Us whites is an endangered species."

Flora was enchanted. This really was her lucky day: *could Leonard Huff be a bona fide neo-nazi? That crude tattoo on his head must be significant. Leonard Huff could be a valuable source of fascinating information re the*

Aryan Brotherhood. There's a thesis topic to knock your socks off! But Flora immediately reined in her runaway thoughts.

She knew that her department head Dr. Deborah Zimmerfish would not look kindly on Leonard's views. Although committed to the rainbow ideal of cultural diversity, the professor's loving embrace of diversity encompassed only the left side of the spectrum. Realistically, Flora knew that any academic paper she wrote which documented statements such as had just issued from Leonard Huff would be radically expurgated – and that she, Flora, would catch the wrath of Dr. Deborah, merely by recording the informant's words. Flora chafed at the discipline's adherence to political correctness. It felt restrictive, even stifling: politically-incorrect ethnographies were *verboden*, dead aborning. *What a shame – really it's a crime against academic honesty*, thought Flora sadly.

"What lovely Victorian moldings," she exclaimed brightly, adding: "And what delicious brandy! I would love to know how you make it, Mrs. Huff."

Leonard, neo-nazi and social pariah, dropped the conversational ball Flora had tossed his way. He continued his diatribe. "It's a damn crime, that's what it is, the way Marva moved them beaners in. Old Craig Loomis would turn over in his grave if he

knew what become of his place. It's a damn crime."

"Shame what happened to poor old Craig Loomis, falling down like he did and breaking his neck," murmured Myrtha Huff. "And his poor grandson that got done out of his rightful inheritance." Myrtha Huff shook her head and drained her brandy. "Let's have another," she suggested hospitably.

Flora quickly slid her hand over the top of her jelly jar, wondering how Myrtha Huff managed to navigate her stairs without breaking *her* neck.

13

Holding his head on straight, old Mr. Loomis went inside his home and tried to find a place to sit. *Furniture all different. Where was Jeremy? Why had his grandson let those people take away his furniture? And why were they always making all that damn racket?* The unending cascade of electronic explosions, punctuated with the frantic barking of the pink-nosed pit bulls in the back yard, disoriented him and made his head hurt. *Life was hell.*

Julia Castillo wrinkled her nose. "Foochie! There is that bad smell again. Like mold!"

She sprayed Lysol air sanitizer in Mr. Loomis' face, a good long blast of toxic aerosol. Then she upped the volume of her sound system.

On the other side of the twelve inch thick solid brick wall, Jasper Bailey hyperventilated as the

sound socked him in the entrails, again and again and again and again. Bette whined, and put her muzzle in his palm.

"Poor baby," Jasper consoled his little white dog.

Life is hell, thought Mr. Loomis.

Life is hell, thought Jasper Bailey.

14

Suzanne Molinari was hand-feeding one of her sun conures. The small parrot, with its green wing tips, yellow wings and back, and peachy-tangerine front and face, was flamboyantly, gorgeously beautiful. Suzanne bred sun conures. Her entire flat – the bottom floor of the unit next door to the Huff residence – was devoted to her passion. Cages and nesting boxes were almost her only furnishings. Marva had even let her screen in a room-sized area just outside her kitchen door in the rear so as to allow her feathered jewels a flight room.

Suzanne and Marva were related, sort of: they had both, at different times, been married to the same man. Tony Molinari. *What a man. What a piece of work.*

One sun conure screamed, and the whole flock joined in. Suzanne smiled fondly.

15

"God damn turkeys," muttered Wayne Winchell upstairs. "Like a god-damn buzz saw right through

my brain."

To regain his concentration, Wayne Winchell, Professor of Communication at Southwestern College, snorted another line of crystal and returned to the task at hand. He was writing his sixth book on the subject of American malevolence which included rampant genocide, racism, specism, and repression, and the need to adopt an indigenist rainbow life-path, such as exemplified by his own exemplarily spiritual life.

Prof. Wayne Winchell re-read the sentence on which he had been laboring when the god-damn bird had disturbed him: *The World Trade Center, the rotten Belly of the Beast Amerikkka, rightly hated and righteously reviled around the world, and the mindless polyester-suit fascist lackeys who met their doom that day got just what they richly deserved, little red-white-&-blue Eichmanns servilely laboring mindlessly for the leather-winged Great Satan, evil deity in the burning Bush, presiding flatulently over the land of microwavable Pop-Tarts.* Prof. Wayne Winchell smiled. This was good stuff. *Beyond good: it was fucking brilliant.* It would clinch his reputation as America's greatest spiritual indigenist visionary. He ran his fingers through his dusty long brown hair, which bore a wide skunk-stripe of dirty white at the forehead, and rewarded himself with another line of crystal.

Downstairs, Suzanne's birds screamed

cacophonously, while down the street Bette whined and Jasper Bailey nervously sloshed another jigger of gin into a fresh glass, as the Castillos' pink-nosed pit bulls leapt and yelped and poor old Mr. Loomis wandered his familiar and inexplicably altered rooms, holding his head with both hands, moaning silently.

16

Flora returned from Vespers at St. Spyridon's just in time for preprandial cocktails in New Kimball House. As she walked up the front-porch steps, a man exited his anonymous dark-blue car and approached her rapidly. His arms were full of flowers, a riotous bushel bouquet of spring flowers in each arm. His face beamed pleasure. "Miss Dimopoulos!" he called.

The object of his abject adoration turned and smiled upon the detective, admiring his smiling round eyes, the color of new blue-jeans, his crisply curling hair, the color of ginger-ale, his air of authority and abject devotion. "Mr. Fitzmorris!" The two stood, smiling at one another.

Mr. Fitzmorris drank in the sight of his beloved: in the soft golden evening air, in her subtly striated olive and amber linen sheath and simple unlined matching coat, the natural silk scarf she had covered her head with in church now knotted loosely around her neck, she appeared to him, as always, seraphic,

celestial, pure. He fervently approved of her natural modesty. A girl as stunning as Miss Dimopoulos had no need to flaunt her attractiveness.

Smiling, she accepted one armload of flowers, and he noted that his angel was wearing the gold bracelet of amber, citrines, topazes, smokey quartz, and wild champagne-colored baroque pearls that he had given her. That was another thing he fervently approved of: his angel never gushed when he bestowed upon her his gifts of jewels and other bright tokens of his ardour. His angel merely accepted his homage with a simple "Thank you, Mr. Fitzmorris." His angel embodied perfection itself. He sighed gustily.

"I'm on duty tonight," Shamus cocked his head in the direction of the disreputable Club Cheetah which Marva desperately desired closed down, "and I was hoping to have the pleasure of your company for a moment." He jiggled the big bouquet still in the crook of his arm. He wished it were his angel he was holding. "These are for your hostess."

"I'll introduce you. Come in, Mr. Fitzmorris."

The Lees were gathered in Kumquat: Frieda Kimball Lee, James Kimball Lee, Nixon Lee, and their cats, casually draped over couches. Introductions were made. Emily accepted the flowers and placed them and Flora's bunch in an antique chinese blue and white porcelain umbrella stand.

Flora accepted a gin & tonic, teetotaling Shamus a ginger ale.

Frieda was delighted to meet Marva's detective. "Club Cheetah has been a thorn in Marva's side for years, decades. Unfortunately her backyard is just an arm's-length from the Cheetah's backdoor." Frieda stopped to cough, and continued: "And I'm sure that every unsavory bit of scuttlebutt you hear about Club Cheetah is absolutely true – if not worse."

"You will never find a more wretched hive of scum and villainy," announced James Kimball. *Call me Jumbo*, he had directed, echoing Ishmael, when Flora first met him, and had yodaically intoned: *Size matters not. Look at me. Judge me by my size, do you?*

Jumbo was huge: a barrel-shaped man with calves as large as pony-kegs. His long coarse black hair was twisted in a knot and piled on his head, secured with several chopsticks and fresh twigs. Jumbo had inherited his father's black asiatic eyes, and they twinkled at Flora from behind lens-less spectacles constructed of two dissimilar old German camera lens ring mounts soldered together.

Wretched hive of scum and villainy – Flora enjoyed Jumbo's limited repartee and riposted cheerfully: "Jumbo, in my opinion, George Lucas is one of the greatest artists of all time. His employment of archetypes is astounding."

"The Force is strong with this one," observed

Jumbo.

"Wretched hive of scum and virrainy? Can you spell, please?" Nicky's stylus was poised over his handheld electronic dictionary.

17

Jasper Bailey snapped shut the silver Nokia clamshell, one of his few concessions to the twenty-first century, and turned to his significant other. "On the menu tonight, my dear: wilted dandelion greens and celery salad with hot bacon dressing, tuna noodle casserole, creamed carrots, and banana pudding."

"Your mother," said Philip North, straightening his collar, "is simply fabulous."

"A pearl of great price," agreed Jasper. "And let's not forget divine Aunt Opal."

"A perfect Friday night: authentic Depression-era comfort cuisine." Philip snapped his fingers, and Bette fell in. Arm in arm, the couple and their platinum-blond pooch jauntily exited their kitchen door, walked a few steps across their shared concrete kitchen yard, and entered another kitchen door, home of the divine Aunt Opal, and her sister, the fabulous Ruby.

18

Shamus accepted Frieda's invitation to have a bite to eat (*it's merely mulligatawny but there's plenty to go around – I'll just add some chicken stock and more frozen*

peas) and then excused himself, apologizing, "Delicious! I hate to eat and run, ma'am, but I got to get to work. Marva's expecting me."

"I'll walk over with you," said Flora. "I'd like to have a few words with Marva, tonight. You'll leave the dishes for me, won't you, Frieda?"

"If you insist, Flora."

Flora and Shamus left together, arm-in-arm, into the soft spring air, floating. The moon was the merest silver sliver. Flora's left hand was on Shamus' arm, and his left hand was cupping hers, feeling the emptiness over her ring finger and the fullness of his heart, filled with love and longing.

"Hard to believe I've known you only two weeks, Miss Dimopoulos." Shamus stopped in mid-stride, in the middle of the street, half-way between New Kimball House and Marva's home on Brick Row. "But I knew, from the moment I first saw you – Miss Dimopoulos – would you – I can't live –."

"Don't you two look sweet!" yelled Marva from her doorway, waving extravagantly. "Come on in!" Shamus set his jaw, grimly. This wasn't the time or place anyway. He would pop the question when the setting was perfect. His angel deserved no less than that. "You're probably anxious to get started on your stake-out now, Shamus." Marva ushered the couple into her cenotaph to the Victorian age.

Stepping into Marva's foyer was like entering an

immense velveteen bouquet of cabbage roses. Every surface expressed Marva's unrestrainedly floreate Victorian aesthetic. She gave Shamus a little shove toward the back of the house. "Go right on out to the backyard, Shamus. Just do your thing and get the evidence for me."

Marva manifestly believed there was no possibility of any other conclusion to Shamus' surveillance. She turned to Flora, who saw with a shock that Marva's heavily mascaraed eyelashes resembled mud-caked little tarantula legs. Marva reveled in the attention and dramatically batted her cosmetically-augmented lashes.

"Don't you love my eyelashes?" she asked rhetorically. "Julia Castillo did them for me. She glues the lashes on, one at a time. Real craftsmanship. You should get yours done, Flora. Only twenty-five dollars per eye, and they last two weeks."

"They're ... stunning," Flora agreed cautiously.

"I'll tell Julia to book you, then. And just *look* at Simon Diamond." Marva enthusiastically hoisted aloft a large limp cat. The lilac Persian had been buzzed; beauty-operator Julia Castillo's tonsorial art had created a lion's mane and fluffy tail-tip. The rest of Simon Diamond's once-fluffy coat had been shorn almost to the skin.

"Golly!" Flora exclaimed diplomatically.

“Amazing!”

“Simon Diamond wears a lion’s cut every summer. Keeps the hairballs down.” Marva cradled her lilac lion and launched into further directives. “Now Flora, you’ll come, as my guest, to the Victorian Ladies Society Pre-Prom Fashion Show and Luncheon at Granger Music Hall next Saturday. And, of course, you’ll join the Victorian Ladies Society. It’s invitation-only. *Anyone* can join the Historical Society, but it’s quite an honor to become a member of the Vickies. I’ll present you as our newest member at our next monthly meeting.” Marva pushed Flora through the pocket doors, into her parlor, down onto a loveseat. “How are you settling in, Flora?”

As in the Kimball Lee home, companionable cats were pooled in pillows. In Marva’s home, however, crowding cabbage roses everywhere made Flora feel squashed, claustrophobic. Marva’s floorplan was a mirror-image of the Huff’s, but her living room bulged oppressively with voluptuously curvaceous furnishings, a riot of Victoriana: balloon-back occasional chairs with needle-point seats; little tables standing on their tiptoes, looking as if they were just about to jump up and dash away; fringed and tufted loveseats, offering a plethora of pillows bearing needlepoint portraits of appealing pug-dogs amidst nosegays of roses and pansies. Too much, even for a

large room.

"What a beautiful room!" exclaimed Flora, in a sprightly conversational tone. "You've done it up so differently than Mrs. Huff."

Marva drew her breath with a sharp hiss. Her spine stiffened. Her eyes narrowed. Her tarantula-leg lashes quivered. "So you've met the hillbillies?" she accused Flora. "Those people!" Marva *tsked*, like a cobra spitting. Flora politely attempted the correct facial expression: agreeably blank. "*White trash!* Totally shiftless white trash! They've lived here fifty years, and have never gotten around to installing electricity." Again Marva *tsked*, even more venomously. "They run an extension cord to the power pole. Like – like they do in Tijuana, for godsake. And that jailbird, Leonard! He's spent more time locked up than he has on the outside." Again she *tsked*. "And they have the nerve to live here – on my street! *On Brick Row!*"

19

In Tourmaline, Flora tapped at her laptop for an hour; her journal entry for Friday (Holy & Great Friday), 28 April, ran many pages, single-spaced. Flora went to bed happy, filled with wonder at the ineffable richness of life. *Life was good*. Her last waking thought was of handsome Shamus Fitzmorris, his blue eyes, the color of new levis, and the heartfelt expression in those beautiful indigo-

blue eyes of overweening, consummate devotion. Her handsome detective. The folklorist drifted into happy sleep.

20

"Hell!" muttered Jasper, standing by his rear bedroom window. The slim sliver of a moon had disappeared from the late-night sky. But next door, Armando Castillo, US Customs Agent, was hard at work, directing a crew of men who were off-loading plastic-wrapped parcels from an unmarked truck and stashing the contraband in his free-standing garage. For once, the pit bulls were silent, their snouts securely muzzled.

"Hell with bells on!" snarled Philip, standing beside his constant companion.

"What do you think, Phil?" asked Jasper.

"What do *you* think, Jazz?" replied Philip.

"Can't a body get a moment's peace around here?" lamented old Mr. Loomis next door holding his head. "Where's my old easy chair got to? I just want to sit down."

"Foochie!" exclaimed Julia Castillo, and hit him with a blast of Lysol spray.

Saturday, 29 April

Frieda's larder was well-stocked. Calcutta was deserted, and Flora fixed herself a fortifying three-

*Saturday's Child &
The Sad King of Clubs*

*Saturday's Child &
The Sad King of Clubs*

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Saturday's Child & The Sad King of Clubs

Saturday, 21 June

Saturday, bright mid-morning, the longest day of the year. Riding a high thermal, the red-tailed hawk wheeled over the dry canyon near Balboa Park, skirling a thin, mewling cry like bright aluminum wire unfurling from a spool in the white sky. Seeking a meal for her fledglings – a rabbit, a squirrel, even a little pocket mouse – the raptor was playing out in earnest the age-old relationship between keen-eyed predator and hapless prey.

Below, earthbound, other earnest hunters were likewise hard at work.

As another cool gray day of June gloom unfurled in San Diego, sedulous predators spied out and studied the vulnerabilities of their victims. These human hunters were motivated not by the hawk's natural hunger, but by various primal desires: the lust for power, money, prestige, sex.

Whereas the hawk's arsenal is limited to keen eyesight, speed, and piercing talons, human

predators' arsenals include that most-human attribute: *the ability to deceive, the talent for telling lies.*

A hawk's eyesight is eight times as acute as the most clear-sighted human: eight times better than 20/20. But even the blindest man has 20/20 hindsight, and the deceived sees well enough in retrospect.

2

A quarter-mile north of Balboa Park, up Park Boulevard, inside the immense high-ceilinged dining hall of St. Lucia Greek Orthodox Church, Flora Dimopoulos was working behind a row of tables, busily helping a bevy of old ladies arranging trays of sweet and savory pastries: melomakarona, karidopita, spanokopita, tyropita, baklava.

In the large church kitchen, savory trays of moussaka. and pastitsio were baking while, outside in the parking lots, the menfolk were tending the open fires which would roast lamb and barbeque chicken for gyros and souvlaki, and ignite flaming saganaki. Other members of St. Lucia Church were erecting and stocking the booths offering games and Greek souvenirs; groups of Greek musicians were readying their stages; and young people in colorful ethnic costume were congregating and discussing their dance programs.

In a few hours, every parking spot in the neighborhood would be taken and, throughout the long summer day – the longest of the year, jitneys

would shuttle back and forth between the San Diego Zoo's parking lot and St. Lucia, ferrying endless bustling throngs of festival-goers. It was a very popular festival, in its fortieth year, and always drew thousands of merry-makers, adding to the coffers of the church.

While the pious members of St. Lucia Greek Orthodox Church were innocently hard at work for the mutual benefit of the congregation and the public, throughout San Diego, others also were also busy. Loners – *lone wolves* – cunningly hunted the gullible and skillfully worked their scams. It would be a busy weekend for both the devout and the profane, the hunters and the hunted.

3

Shannon Hollister double-checked her camera and tape recorder, making sure she had extra batteries. She was on her way to the Greek Festival. It was to be her first byline article in the *Union Tribune*.

Shannon had just graduated from SDSU with a BA in journalism. The job market was, in these dark economic times, dismal even for highly experienced journalists, but Shannon was a go-getter and she believed to the core of her being that this summer internship at the *U-T* was her opportunity to shine.

Shannon was dead-set on shining so brightly that she would be offered a real job there.

The rookie journalist smoothed her sleek

pageboy, a shining 18/22 Frosted Cool Ash Blonde. The neat sterling-bright swinging cut was very simple, very professional, very cool. Sunny was a *genius* of cut and color, and Shannon didn't mind paying the aesthetician's high rates: it was worth every shiny dime. The cool ash blonde tone was expensively understated, just right for Shannon's graphite-gray eyes under their subtly-applied iridescent pearl-grey eyeshadow. Sunny's line of mineral cosmetics was perfect for Shannon, giving her a silvery-moon glow, her lips a silvery-pink, her fresh cheeks a silvery-blush. Sunny understood that Shannon was a *bright* girl, neat as a pin, sharp as a tack. Like a magician wielding a sparkling magic wand, using little brushes and pots of cosmetics, with color and sheen, aesthetician Sunny had created a face for the world which, while improving it, managed to exactly match the interior girl: *what you see is what you get – a bright and bubbly go-getter.*

Shannon double-checked herself in the mirror and, with her habitual bright ebullience, exhorted her silvery reflection: *You go, girl – take on the world!*

4

In Rancho Bernardo, Barry Jay Schwartz was dressing quickly and quietly. Barry didn't want to wake Melanie who was dead to the world, still sleeping it off.

Barry and Melanie had lived together almost

forty years, since his grad-student days at MIT, and the only way he could have any sort of a weekend of his own was to dose her night-time Diet Coke with roofies, to give him time in the morning to get out of the condo before she awoke, muzzy-headed and tediously clinging.

Didn't that bagged-out old barnacle with the deep bra-troughs and the droopy breasts know how terminally boring she was to live with? How could the old cow with the facial hair not care how grotesquely off-putting she was? Why should the wretched eyesore expect anyone other than a blind man to tolerate her?

Melanie's mom had been an impressionable teenager when *Gone with the Wind* had come out and she had determined to name her first baby girl Melanie after the incomparably good and sweet Southern belle, the paragon who had won Ashley's noble heart. Happy evidence of her mother's prescience, Melanie Collins was every bit as long-suffering and passive and high-minded as her namesake, however, Barry was no Ashley: Melanie Collins' peerless qualities were not appreciated by her man.

If he didn't know for a fact how totally the wretch would go to pieces, Barry would dump her in a heartbeat. Really, he was doing her a big favor, keeping her around like he did, out of habit and pity: no one else could possibly have any use for her, all 300 quivering pounds of her.

And, he didn't have the energy to start anew, training a replacement live-in girlfriend. He'd invested years into training this one to run the household the way he preferred, like his mother had: sheets ironed, socks lined up in the drawers, white tablecloths and challah for dinner Friday, Hebrew National kosher franks with sauerkraut on Saturday nights.

Barry Schwartz liked his Friday night routine, his Saturday routine, like when he was a kid at home with his mother. *Life's too short to not do what you want.* He would take a week off in August, as usual, go back east and vacation at home with his mother, who would make him babka and fuss over him. Melanie would stay in Rancho Bernardo, go to her little dead-end county job, keep the house-plants watered. *And not complain.* Melanie loved Barry Schwartz, her MIT-trained scientist-boyfriend with degrees in philosophy and mathematics and chemistry, loved him abjectly and absolutely: the greater his disdain, the greater her devotion.

Barry patted the pocket in which he kept his pharmaceuticals: little oval white tablets of flunitrazepam – *roofies* – and little diamond-shaped blue tablets of sildenafil citrate – *viagra*. He was loaded for bear, hot to trot, ready to roll. *Unplug the phone. Shut the door quietly. There. Free for the day.*

All work and no play makes Schlomo a dull boy.

Outside, a mockingbird was mimicking a cell

phone's ring. The white oleanders fringing Barry's carport were shedding their sweet fragrance in the morning air, this first day of summer, and green June bugs were clumsily buzzing around the flowers. Barry grinned. With his long nose and grizzled auburn hair, he looked like a sidelong laughing fox when he grinned. He contentedly patted the pocket containing his pills, thinking of the proverbial birds and the bees.

Sex makes the world go round.

5

She was sitting in a sunny, plant-filled room which faced the ocean off Del Mar, sipping green tea from a diminutive stoneware bowl bearing the potter's fingerprints. Hope Elphinstone was willowy, with delicate light bones, clear light violet eyes, fine light hair cut in a wispy pixie the color of cobwebs.

Hope Elphinstone looked exactly like what she was: *the last desperate resort of people who needed information which could not be obtained through normal channels*. The willowy woman who appeared as insubstantial as a ray of light shining through gauzy mist made her living by providing information which she obtained through *paranormal* channels.

The interior of the egg-sized bowl was a celestial blue, and gazing into her little blue stoneware bowl as she sipped her green tea was simple bliss in cyan blue-green. Swirling through the otherworldly vistas

observed by her mind's eye were glowing diaphanous fogs of lucid sea blue, cool twilight-shadow blue, distant desert mountain blue, turquoise blue-green, tile green, Nile green, limpid sea green; the psychic felt as if she were floating in a cool calm sea of pellucid cerulean, floating above the blue-green globe, part of a wispy scrap of filmy cirrus cloud, the gauzy grains of her body intermingling with the blue-green earth swathed in pearlescent glowing cloud, the globe and clouds and gauzy grains of her body all bearing the imprint of the Maker's hands. Thus did Hope Elphinstone commune with the Divine Intelligence, Divine Source of all there is.

She set down the little blue bowl, empty, and it rolled onto its side, like half an eggshell.

Now to work. She picked up the object which she had been called upon to read, held the Juicy Couture shades between her sensitive palms, her slender, elegant fingers tingling with the life-vibrations of the object's owner. Closing her light violet eyes, she relaxed back into the cushions of the rattan recliner, breathing meditatively, and let the images and feelings wash through her clear mind, like water trembling in the bowl of an abalone shell.

6

Golf was doing what he liked best: working. At the moment, he was sitting in his air-conditioned tow

truck parked next to a palm tree in the Old Town parking lot, watching a metallic green June bug crawling across his windshield and listening to the scratchy little voice of the Guano Bird.

The dispatcher's name was *Gwen*; the drivers called her the *Guano Bird*. The Guano Bird had just given Delta, the Druid, a lock-out in at the PO on Midway. Preacher Victor was up next, then Oscar, then Tango, then Golf. In due course, the call came: a flat on the 5, just north of the Sea World exit. Golf was on his way. *To the rescue*.

Golf's name was really *Leland Parrish*. Whenever a client – someone whose flat tire he was replacing or someone who had stupidly run out of gas on the freeway – called him *Golf* (the name which was embroidered on his blue uniform shirt), he would peevishly correct the person: "My name is Leland," Golf would say. He resented being called *Golf*. The Alpha Unit acted like he was Adam, the way he insisted on calling his workers by whatever handle – Bravo, Echo, Hotel, Kilo – he felt like. *Zulu* he reserved for the occasional black driver, and drivers who happened to be named Charlie or Mike or Oscar or Victor were, as a matter of course, assigned that handle. But it was always the Alpha Unit's call: he had naming rights.

Juliet's name, for instance, really was Mike Rasmussen – *Viking Mike*, he was called back when

he rode with the Mongol Brotherhood, in his glory days before the smuggling conviction and the reformative nickel in Leavenworth – and by rights his work name should have been *Mike* (flanked by *Lima* and *November*), but the Alpha Unit unkindly had assigned him the sissy name *Juliet*, insisting that the Viking wear Ace Tow's equivalent of the Scarlet Letter: the uniform with the name patch on the pocket reading *Juliet*.

Naming Viking Mike *Juliet* was the Alpha Unit's snide way of punishing the Viking for his serial fuck-ups.

Fifty odd years before, the Viking had been a beautiful baby; he had briefly flowered into a beautiful youth with high cheekbones, Nordic-blue eyes, and an eagle's profile, and, but had, eventually, in the gross fullness of maturity, transmogrified into very large mammal – 350-plus pounds – with a hatchet-nose and a ferocious squint caused by some facial paralysis suffered in a long-ago bar-room bust-up. He wore his long faded red hair in Viking braids; the braids and the back of the Viking's blue uniform work shirt were white and crusty with bird droppings habitually and casually deposited by Loki, the tame raven who rode on the Viking's massive shoulder like a pirate's inky parrot.

Before the Viking had gotten himself fired the first time, the Alpha Unit had graciously allowed

him the work name *Mike*, but the Viking had forever lost his rights to that name when he thoughtlessly entered a parking structure in Mission Valley with a Lexus LS loaded on the flatbed and carelessly sheered the top off the car. That slip-up had cost Ace Tow, and the Alpha Unit had been steamed. Of course, he fired the Viking on the spot.

The second time the Alpha Unit fired the Viking was when he had rear-ended a car stopped in rush hour traffic on the freeway, causing a mile-long pile-up. The Viking had merely gotten out, locked the keys in the tow truck, slid down the ice plant on the freeway, and disappeared for a few weeks. The third time the Alpha Unit fired the Viking was when he'd heedlessly backed over a Mini Cooper; the effect resembled a topographic map or an early Julian Schnabel construction. The Viking had driven off, supremely unconcerned: he simply *had not noticed* this particular exemplification of the physical law which forbids two solid bodies from simultaneously occupying the same space. Fortuitously, the driver had been inside a Starbucks, not inside the car. When he returned to his two-dimensional car, gaping witnesses had excitedly fingered the tow company. That accident, also, had cost the Alpha Unit plenty and the Viking his job.

In the Viking's defense, it must be noted that his habitual drug use was not entirely responsible for

these calamitous lapses of attention. The Viking was an *artist*, and the sight of something as banal as sunlight on leaves was enough to completely captivate his entire attention, to focus his full attention on the object or effect. *Colors, contrasts, textures* – these aesthetic phenomena enchanted the Viking, irresistibly took him out of the here-and-now, transported him to some delightful interior wonderland where time stood still.

The miracle was that *more* metal wasn't abruptly bent and mangled whenever the Viking took the wheel.

Every time, after his ire had had a few months to cool, the Alpha Unit had ended up taking the Viking back, swearing that his *next* fuck-up would be his *last* fuck-up. The Alpha Unit always ended up taking fuck-ups back: *who else could he get to work for Ace Tow?*

At least once a week, the Alpha Unit had to send a truck out to kick butt on drivers who had snuck over to Golden Oak Casino near Mirage, an hours' drive out the 8 and then north up the back-country Rattlesnake Canyon Road, to play the tables when they were supposed to be idling close to the towyard, near the 8 and 5 merge, waiting for a call. Often as not, the driver he sent out to collect the dogs ended up spending half the night at the Golden Oak, too.

The Alpha Unit didn't know it, but he needed

the Viking more than the Viking needed Ace Tow. The only reason the Viking with the frozen scowl drove for the Alpha Unit was because, like all the drivers, like all gallant men, he enjoyed *rescuing* people: the rescued motorists' gratitude warmed his heart. Money entered into it only insofar as tips formed a tangible expression of their gratitude.

The Viking with the white shoulders didn't care that he'd more than once plucked the Alpha Unit's last nerve: the artist had a sideline which, if he wanted to, could pay more than his wrecker's wages and tips ever could.

7

Viking Mike adjusted the cranes-neck light, shining it more brightly on his work, straightened the magnifying goggles perched on the hawk's-beak of his nose and calibrated the optical settings so as to more perfectly focus his fierce squint on the gold leaf he was painstakingly applying to the background of the small Byzantine panel. It was a Madonna and Child.

Lots of gold leaf, and lapis, blue as heaven.

He had been working on the icon for more than a week. Tomorrow, he would deliver his latest project to Pendennis, proprietor of the Hillcrest shop *Le Flambeau (Interiors: By Appointment Only)*. This was his first Byzantine icon. A generalist, he had produced *faux* van Goghs and Gauguins, Klees and

Monets for the mincing little Hillcrest decorator whose clients, he said, liked hanging well-executed copies. The Viking particularly liked doing Moreaus and Kandinskys— *lots of gold leaf – he loved working with gold leaf.*

Using a delicate brush, holding his breath, minutely squinting, he carefully tamped down another tiny, fly-away patch of the precious metal. *Finish that bit and then time for a break: a fat line of crank, well-earned.*

8

Jessica Edwards, the former possessor of the Juicy Couture sunglasses which Hope Elphinstone was holding in her slender hands, had vanished six days before, on Friday the thirteenth.

The SDPD considered it simply a missing person case: *Jessica was over 21; girls have been known to take off with a boy-friend; they had a lot of serious crimes to contend with, and this was not a serious matter. The best they could do was open a file on the girl.*

The frantic Edwards family feared that Jessica had met with foul play. *Why should she run off? That didn't make sense. Jessica was a student at Point Loma Nazarene College, a private Christian school: she was a serious student, a good girl, carefully raised, sheltered. She was a virgin.*

Her sister Jennifer had said that, the last time she had talked on the phone with Jessica, she had

been on her way to a date. It was a blind date; Jessica had told Jennifer that she had met the guy online. Jennifer tearfully insisted to her parents that she had urged her sister to be careful, and that Jessica had assured her that it was just a coffee-date at a little bistro not far from the Nazarene College. *The guy was a professor of philosophy, there was nothing to worry about at all.*

Hope Elphinstone held the sunglasses in her hands, breathed in and out, slowly, deliberately, as the images flickered across the screen of her mind's eye and emotions churned in her chest. *Movement, rhythmical movement, like the rocking of a cradle, or the sea. A dark place. Touching. Struggling. Anger. Fear. Smothering. A dark place. Sadness. Sorrow.*

Hope Elphinstone was very sorry: the Edwards family would never again see their missing Jessica. Jennifer would never again talk with her sister Jessica. All that was left of Jessica's short life were various objects still resonating to her life-vibrations: dark sad items such as sunglasses, dim mournful items such as family photo albums. Jessica herself was no more: the spark of bright life in her lithe body had flickered out.

Cases like this – missing persons, desperately sought for by their frantic families – almost always turned out to be sad cases. Hope Elphinstone readied herself to make a difficult phone call to the desperate

Edwards family.

9

Rancho Bernardo behind him, Barry Schwartz slid down the wide 15, the 163, smoothly into Hillcrest, the heart of San Diego's gay quarter. Barry had a coffee date with a smoking-hot foxy lady he'd connected with through craigslist. Peet's Coffee in Hillcrest was a helluva long way to drive just for a date, but Barry preferred to let the young lady select the location: let her stay well within her comfort zone. That would let her feel relaxed, at ease. And almost always the place she chose for the coffee date was just around the corner, so to speak, from her pad. For the price of a couple gallons of gas and a cup of coffee, he could get laid: a bargain.

He wasn't going to take a girl out to his boat, never again. *That awful experience with that girl ... He was too intelligent to be superstitious, but Friday the thirteenth really had been an unlucky day for him – although, actually, he'd been very lucky that no one at Southwest Yacht Club had seen the two of them embarking. That surprising, fatal reaction to the roofies could have resulted in a terrible fiasco – the end of his whole way of life, his freedom. He would have been punished for something which really wasn't even his fault. From now on, he would go to the girl's place.*

If it went according to plan, after the roofies wore off, *Schlomo* would be just a hazy memory: *the*

brilliant professor. Sexy Rita wouldn't even know his real name. Not even his phone number. *Brilliant*.

Barry's Jewish name was Barak, *lightning*, and was absolutely apposite: his mental processes were swift as lightning. *Brilliant*, indeed.

He was going to get laid and it wouldn't cost much more than a twenty.

10

St. Lucia's large dining hall was very crowded; a long line of people slowly snaked along the steam tables. Flora Dimopoulos was dishing up pastitsio.

Shamus Fitzmorris was holding two plates of Greek food. His smiling blue eyes, the color of new levies, met Flora's amber-flecked blue-green eyes over the tray of pastitsio. He indicated the left-hand plate, and then the right. "This one's for me," he said, "and this one's for you. Pile on the goulash, Miss Dimopoulos, and hang up your apron. It's time for your lunch-break."

Flora beamed at her handsome detective, her shield-shaped face glowing with pleasure, then glanced at the Cartier wristwatch he had given her for her birthday soon after they had met, just two months before, and protested ruefully. "Oh! But I can't just desert –."

"Go! Go and have your lunch, Flora," urged the old lady standing next to her in the serving line, brandishing the spatula she was using to dish up

spanokopita. "Us old ladies got nothing better to do than serve the food. You go and eat and visit with your young man."

The church's dining hall was jammed with tables, friends and strangers rubbing elbows. Flora sighed with relief as she sat down. Under the table she surreptitiously slipped out of her Italian pumps and rubbed her feet together.

Shamus smiled. "Are you part cricket, Miss Dimopoulos?"

Flora laughed, feeling silly and inordinately happy to be sitting next to her handsome detective with plates of good Greek food on the table before them. "How did you know, Mr. Fitzmorris?"

"Footwork, ma'am. I'm a detective." They both laughed at their private joke. The presence of one's beloved invests every glance with ardor, every witticism with merriment, every serious comment with deep meaning.

"The old ladies certainly have tremendous stamina," observed Flora, picking up her knife and fork. "They make me feel *wimpy*."

Flora Dimopoulos, a Junoesque and zaftig size 16, never gave the *impression* of wimpiness. In the ruffled v-neck of her peach-colored silk sweater, knit with fine needles, light glinted off her golden pendent: the little Greek cross set with five rubies which Shamus had given her two weeks before. She

wore it always, nestled in her capacious decotellage.

“Good sound stock,” agreed Shamus and suddenly saw, in his mind’s eye, his angel – no longer the untouchable *Miss Dimopoulos*, but a radiantly maternal *Mrs. Fitzmorris* – cradling a baby in her arms. The iconic vision was galvanic, like sheets of electricity running over his arms and legs, making his heart jump. Flora noticed the start. With anxious visage, she put down her knife and fork, and leaned toward Shamus, the rubies nestled between her mounded breasts winking madly.

Every move she made caused little sparks of crackling static electricity to leap from her silk sweater, knit with fine needles; every movement of the fine peach-colored silk sliding over his angel’s perfect-peach skin caused a hundred correlative nibbles on the detective’s nerves.

He shivered. He couldn’t help it.

“Is it the malaria, Mr. Fitzmorris?” she asked solicitously. Once again, Shamus mentally kicked himself for having told the convenient white lie – *just a touch of malaria*, he had once impetuously and unwisely prevaricated when the near presence of his angel and her earthly charms had thoroughly confusticated him – the inconvenient white lie which now haunted him. *His valiant goddess had been had been standing over steaming trays of Greek home-cooking for hours: she must think him a poor excuse for a man.*

"You poor man," she said tenderly, touching her hand to his forehead. "You need taking care of."

In mingled agony and ecstasy, Shamus mutely nodded. His heart was racing. His mouth was dry, his lips tingling like he had hives.

"M-m-m," he tried to form the words *Miss Dimopoulos, will you marry me?* but all he could do was mumble: "M-m-m-m."

"Malaria? Moussaka? Melomakarona?" Flora hazarded. "*This* will do you good, Mr. Fitzmorris," Flora promised maternally, loading his fork with good Greek home-cooking. She leaned forward holding the fork, smiling into his blue eyes. Shamus moaned.

11

The coffee-house at the corner of University and Third in Hillcrest worked hard to achieve an artsy-funky effect, which reminded Barry Schwartz of his student days back at MIT in the swinging sixties. The expressionist paintings on the walls could have come from a Cambridge yard sale. One painting in particular – a bulgy abstract with crude figures, in lurid orange and purple – reminded Barry of something he'd seen before, maybe on a poster in someone's student pad. *If it were the real thing, it would be worth big bucks.* Less interested in art than in its resale value, Barry peered at the corner of the painting, trying to make out a signature. It looked

like *Elmyr Herzog* and he made a mental note of the vaguely familiar name, intending to look it up. *If Herzog's work were valuable and the dumb barristas running the coffeehouse didn't know, he might be able to make some money off it.*

Barry was pleased with himself, the way he was always observant, looking for opportunities.

Then he spotted Rita. He watched her, looking bored as beautiful women do when they are in a public place waiting for a blind date to show up. He'd seen her uploaded pic, but had skillfully parried her requests to see a picture of himself. He'd told her that he'd be wearing a *pink crustacean*. She hadn't gotten the joke. Stupid women turned him on – if they were beautiful. As was Rita – long, lean, slim in the hips, big in the breasts, with nice nails and pouty pink lips. She looked like she'd stepped right off a catwalk. Or a centerfold. He caught her eye.

"Rita?" he mouthed, as he maneuvered his way toward her, a tentative tingling in his loins informing him that there was a good chance that, when the moment was right, he would become aroused and not even have to resort to the little blue diamond-shaped pill. *Good: that was ten dollars worth of meds that he wouldn't have to spend on this date, ten bucks that would stay in his pants,* he thought hopefully, unconsciously patting the pocket which held his

armament of roofies and viagra.

"Rita?" Barry smiled winningly, putting a deliberate twinkle in his dead grey-green eyes. "I'm Schlomo. Schlomo Einstein."

Her beautiful black eyes widened as she looked at him. Seeing that, Barry preened, congratulating himself that he had made a killer first impression.

12

Big Rex Pelfitt always made a good first impression. Rex was a very likeable man, easy-going, always smiling with cheerful bonhomie, big square red hand out in a firm, friendly, hale-fellow-well-met shake, and the twinkle in his faded baby-blue eyes told you unmistakably that he genuinely *liked* you.

Rex was warm-hearted and warm-blooded, always comfortably dressed in clean khaki shorts of elephantine girth (*Big & Tall 46W*). His curly, once-coppery hair had faded pinkish-grey, his big sun-reddened jowls hung slackly, and his hugely rotund, hairy pink belly strained against his tentish Hawaiian shirt, but the big-bodied man carried himself as if he were still the handsome, smiling, star high-school athlete of South Boston High and super-salesman of yesteryear.

This Saturday morning, as most mornings, Rex was headed for the links in his Saturn loaded with his expensive collection of southpaw golf clubs. Rex Pelfitt loved golf, and the best part of playing at the

Golden Oak Golf Course was that no one ever asked him to pony up. Rex knew a guy who worked at the casino, so he never paid green fees.

He thrived on something-for-nothing. It was a game for him, like poker. If he made out, he won.

Rex almost always won. And the other guy, the one that got taken, always came away thinking: *that Rex Pelfitt sure is a nice guy*. It wasn't until later, after the glow cast by Rex's friendly presence had dimmed, that the guy who got snookered would suddenly flash: *I got rooked*. But by then, it would be too late. Rex would have won again. It was all a game for Rex, even better than golf.

13

Rita's lustrous black eyes widened as she looked at him. *The fucker had told her that he was, quote, very good-looking. Right, a real movie star – he looked like Dustin Hoffman at the end of Midnight Cowboy when he croaked on the Greyhound Bus. Fuck! This had better be worth it, ten bills at the very least.* Rita smiled slowly and gloriously, her plump pink lips curving as a deep dimple miraculously appeared in her left cheek. "Hi, Schlomo."

"Would you like to sit while I order us something?" Barry offered. Rita told him that she preferred to stand in line with him and get to know him (*and make sure the schmuck didn't slip a roofie in her drink.*) So the two new friends stood in line together,

waiting to be served. Barry mentioned that the coffee house reminded him of cool hang-outs back in Cambridge and talked about his student days at MIT with droll wit. That was how he mentally described to himself his performance: *with droll wit*.

Although silent, Rita seemed impressed: she never took her eyes off him, lustrous eyes, black, like whirlpools a man could get lost in. Barry was glad Rita didn't try to make conversation. He hated listening to beautiful stupid women talking, trying to be interesting. *Being sexy was interesting enough*.

14

The rookie reporter with the shining ash-blond pageboy approached the table at which Flora and Shamus were finishing up their lunch and introduced herself to the handsome couple, smiling as she identified herself as a *Union-Tribune* reporter.

She smoothed her hair a trifle nervously (a bad habit she was trying to break) and asked, "Would you mind – may I interview you?"

The beautiful, glamorous young woman with dark glossy smoothly upswept hair was wearing a matching sweater-skirt set in what looked like real silk, and Shannon felt suddenly shy and insecure – she hoped her serviceable silver lamé jumpsuit and boots projected sufficient mature *gravitas* and professional competence to inspire confidence in her journalistic abilities. But both Flora and Shamus were

as nice and friendly as could be and were happy to oblige Shannon.

Afterward, as she rushed off to file her story on St. Lucia Church's Greek Festival – *her very first story as a real reporter* – Shannon was over the moon, no longer shy or insecure. *Her journalistic sixth-sense had led her to choose very interesting couple to interview: a private investigator and a folklorist who was actually a member of the church. She would definitely keep in touch with them.*

Their contact info – Flora's landline number (*funny, someone in the twenty-first century actually not having a cell phone*) and Shamus' office and cell phone numbers – was already stored in her Blackberry for future reference. Shannon Hollister was sure that Shamus Fitzmorris and the glamorous Flora Dimopoulos would be valuable contacts in her upcoming sure-to-be illustrious journalistic career, her shining career.

15

Sipping his *latte*, effortlessly exuding intellectual brilliance and sheer animal magnetism, Barry knew he was charming his gorgeous blind date, who sat sexy and silent, her black eyes glittering. He said: "A penny for your thoughts, Rita."

Rita sinuously squirmed in her seat and bestowed on a Barry a slow, sexy, admiring smile. "I was thinking," she said, "you are so interesting,

Schlomo," and returned to her private, unbuyable thoughts: *that hard pot-belly under that nappy nylon Christmas sweater – his liver must look like a big chunk of pumice. Jeez! The things she had to put up with to make a buck.* She tapped the tabletop with her faultless fiberglass nails, and suddenly a big hand was on her shoulder.

"Girlfriend! Lovely Rita, meter maid." Raj beamed, under his turban, his big black face radiating goodwill at his friend Rita. The big black man eyed Barry and the water-pale sadly-bedraggled girl standing patchily beside him.

Rita sounded impressed as she introduced her coffee date: "Raj, sweetheart, this is *Schlomo. Dr. Einstein.* He's a *professor.*"

Barry felt that he was drinking life to the lees: he was a long, long way from Rancho Bernardo. He was practically an actor in street-theater, something out of Cambridge Mass in the sixties: *very cool!* This Raj character was as large as a refrigerator, swathed in a paisley-embroidered caftan and topped with a turban. A big broach of costume jewelry glittered in his turban, and gold glittered in his big white teeth. Hooked over his arm was a furled parasol, pink with swinging gold fringe as thick as the pencils kids learn to write with.

Barry stood and extended his hand, which was promptly engulfed in Raj's big black pink-palmed

hand. "Good to meet you, Raj. Join us. Please." Barry made no mention of the water-pale, bedraggled girl standing disconsolately beside him. She had been with him since he woke up that morning, since he had gone to bed the night before; she had been with him since the fatal night on his boat, one week before, Friday the thirteenth.

No one paid any attention at all to the sad girl.

Raj lowered his large bulk onto the proffered bistro chair and, in answer to Barry's predictable *what do you do?* question, cheerfully responded: "I'm a psychic. A silly psychic."

Barry found his line-of-work very interesting. Barry Jay Schwartz, Ph.D., was founder and director of the newest casino card-dealing vocational school in Mission Valley. Club King College's eye-catching logo featuring a colorful King of Clubs playing card was aggressively marketed and could be seen week after week in display ads in high-distribution local entertainment papers and on colorful bumperstickers in parking lots everywhere throughout the county: simple-minded people with financial aid money to spend on vocational school tuition found the punning word-play in the name *King of Clubs* irresistible. Believing *it takes money to make money*, statistician Barry worked hard on the algorithms which he employed to allocate his advertising dollars. In the student bookstore – actually a broom

closet – Club King College offered packs of playing cards for sale, at cost, each card attractively marked on the back with the school's trade-marked logo.

Thus Barry had a professional interest in precognition. *He might have a use for this big fairy with the gay lisp and flamboyant appearance.*

"If you're really a psychic, can you foretell what card is going to be dealt?"

Raj nodded serenely, the rhinestone broach in his turban winking spectrally. Raj was always cheerful and equable, immensely, majestically dignified in his outlandish robes.

Immediately, Barry pulled a pack of cards, marked with the Club King College logo, from his pocket and shuffled. Raj cut. Barry slid the top card off the stack. "What is it?"

"King of clubs," replied Raj. "And the next card the seven of hearts, then the seven and ten of spades." Barry turned the top card over, and the next three: king of clubs, seven of hearts, seven of spades, ten of spades. "*Uh-huh,*" the silly psychic added cryptically as he contemplated the cards which confirmed his first impression of the ersatz Schlomo: *a cruel, demented, lying, thieving death-dealer trailed by one of his sad recent victims, who obviously had so recently been separated from her body that she herself was not yet cognizant of her condition.* Raj sent loving white light to the girl whom everyone else in the room

ignored as if she weren't there.

"You're good," said Barry with sincere admiration, ignorant of the message the cards had imparted. "You're *very* good. You could make some real money with that talent." *Too bad he had met Raj as Professor Schlomo Einstein – but maybe he could work something out with him anyway, maybe the big fairy wouldn't even remember his name.* He tamped the cards together, returned them to their box, and handed the pack to Raj. "With my compliments. Pass them on to a friend if you don't need them."

Raj accepted the gift and handed his cell phone to Rita. "Give me your number, girlfriend. I be calling you real soon."

Rita obediently punched her number into Raj's phone while he gave the high-sign to the water-pale girl. The specter of Jessica Edwards silently followed Raj out of the coffee-house and waited as he opened a parasol before making his stately way down University Avenue.

16

Plates polished, Flora happily promised her handsome detective that she had not forgotten their dinner date that night, put her apron back on, and resumed her place in the serving line.

Shamus fervently approved of his angel's devoutness. His dear old mother back in Chicago, bless her heart, wouldn't approve of a mixed

marriage but, after all, Greek Orthodox wasn't all that much different from Roman Catholic and, once his mother met the future Mrs. Fitzmorris, all her reservations would vanish. Which religion the kids would be brought up in ... *they could cross that bridge when they came to it.*

First he had to ask his angel to marry him. Why was that so hard to do? What was stopping him?

17

"What happen to you, girlfriend?" Raj asked. "Let's just sit here on this bench and you tell me all about it, baby doll. Maybe I can help." Still holding the pink parasol aloft, Raj invitingly patted the bus stop bench, ignoring the few people who noticed him talking to thin air.

"I'm so confused," said pale Jessica Edwards mournfully. Sitting in the pink shade cast by Raj's parasol, her spectral pallor gained a faint artificial blush. "Am I -?"

Raj nodded sympathetically. "Yes, little sister, indeed you is. You done lost your body. You still on the earth plane but you a free-floating entity. You going to want to move on to the next plane 'fore too long, baby doll. You don't want to follow that bad man around forever. Did that bad man hurt you?"

Jessica Edwards nodded miserably. "I've been so confused."

"Where-about you leave your body, doll baby?"

Nobody at the bus stop but Raj could see Jessica's sad face crumple like a woebegone babe's about to cry. "Ocean ... we were on a boat ... my parents ... my sister."

"I'll help you, doll baby." Under the pink shade of his gold-fringed parasol, Raj resolutely nodded his big brown head. The rhinestones in his star-shaped turban pin twinkled. "Don't you worry about a thing, little sister. Your auntie Raj here to help howsome-ever he can."

Thus Barry's latest victim at last escaped his lecherous clutches: Jessica would not have to watch as Barry plied his charms on Rita, his present designated vic.

18

"Sorry about that! I'll be sure and pass this on to the boss the *minute* he comes in," the Guano Bird was saying in the phone, rolling her eyes and tapping her ragged fingertips on her cluttered desk. "*Okay!* I'll *text* him! As we *speak!* Like I said, I'm sorry you had to go through that."

Wincing, the dispatcher distanced the phone from her ear as the unhappy client vociferated. The tinny shriek rose and fell, like a blood-crazed mosquito. Eventually, the shrill keening petered out.

"Okay, okay, copy that. Sorry, got to catch another call." The Guano Bird hung up, scowling, and lit a Doral. *Another complaint about Preacher Vic. It*

almost wasn't worth reporting the complaint to the Alpha Unit: anyone he got to replace the Preacher would be just as bad, in a different way.

Pushing sixty, Victor Cardenas had spent half his life locked up. A slow learner, the last time he'd been inside, he'd found Jesus. Now he spread the good word to everyone he encountered. People didn't like it when, before changing their flat or jumping their battery, he took the time to witness to them, telling of his dark past, selling drugs, guns, women's bodies, lying, cheating, stealing, whoring, fornicating, blaspheming, and committing every manner of perversion, and how the Blood of the Lamb had washed him *whiter than snow*.

That detail was metaphorical: nearly every visible inch of Preacher Vic was tattooed with gang code and prison art. The Preacher's skin was a walking syllabus of his criminal history and environs, from the large blue-green scarab death's head tattooed in the tender hollow of his throat to the old-style gang-code Roman numerals XVXX on his knuckles, literally fingering him as an Old Town homeboy: O equaling the fifteenth letter of the alphabelt, T, the twentieth.

It's a godless world, Preacher Vic would observe knowingly, *and a prophet is reviled in his hometown*, whenever the Guano Bird informed him that he had racked up another complaint from a Triple A

cardholder and warned him that his next offence against good customer relations would constitute his last. The Preacher wasn't worried about getting fired: *he was doing God's work, laboring in the fields of iniquity. God was his dispatcher.*

The Triple A hotline buzzed, and the Guano Bird prepared to dispatch another of Ace Tow's helpful and dedicated employees to the rescue.

19

Rita's phone chimed. It was a text from Raj: 911 LO4U TMOT GF TC V BAD MAN. *Urgent, looking out for you, trust me on this, girlfriend, take care, very bad man.* The cautionary concept of *bad man* was admonitorily emphasized by being given its full complement of vowels.

"Anything interesting?" asked Barry jealously.

Rita smiled and deleted the warning. "Just a girlfriend wanting to talk. I'd rather listen to you, Schlomo." Rita tilted her lovely head and, gazing into Barry's dead grey-green eyes set into crepey pouches, gazed with undisguised admiration frankly shining in her lustrous black eyes, pursed her lips invitingly. "*You're much more interesting ... Schlomo.*" His very name a caress.

20

Shannon Hollister had gone to the nearest wi-fi Starbucks to write her human-interest story on the St. Lucia Church Annual Greek Festival and had just

electronically filed it when the weekend editor urgently dispatched her to Balboa Park and cover the walking zombie invasion.

For Shannon, dashing girl reporter, it was a dream come true.

21

It wasn't one bit difficult, not at all, it was like candy from a baby. After the two had enjoyed their one-sided conversation over coffee and pastries which Barry had generously insisted on paying for — *it hurt to break that ten, but what the hey, spending moolah like water impressed chicks* — it was Rita herself who suggested they go round to her place, do a little coke. Barry was afraid of coke, but he eagerly agreed — anything to get into her pad.

Once they were there, he'd play it by ear, maybe just pretend to snort the stuff.

Rita said that her condo was being renovated so she was staying temporarily at a residence hotel on University just a few blocks away; he would have to move his car out of the free coffee house lot, but there was a paid-parking lot near the hotel. Barry wasn't happy about paying for parking, however, he didn't let on. Roofies were quick-acting: Rita would be a delectable loose-legged zombie within half an hour of ingesting a dose. *Better make it two doses, to counteract the effect of the cocaine.* He wanted to be in-and-out before his parking charges racked up.

And if he didn't make it back to Rancho Bernardo before late afternoon, Melanie would mope in her dreary, long-suffering way and generally make his life miserable. Barry frowned: aside from Melanie's undeniable domestic excellence, they were as ill-matched a pair as a priceless stud Arabian racehorse and a spavined old drayhorse. But as long as he allowed her keep house for him, he would have to put up with her silent suffering, her voiceless kvetching, so he had to curtail his afternoons of stolen amatory delight.

Put Rita down for two hits of roofies.

22

The idea had struck Shamus Fitzmorris several weeks before like a bolt of lightning: he knew just what he could give to his angel. In the eight weeks since he had first set eyes upon her, had fallen deeply in love with her at first sight, he had given her flowers, cream pies, jewels; he wished he could give his angel the moon and the stars. This gift would express his consummate love: he would give her one of those Greek Madonna and Child paintings. *Icons*, they were called. His angel would love it.

At the same time, imploring her to make him the happiest man in the world, he would proffer his angel the engagement ring heavily encrusted with diamonds which he had bought weeks before, but had – he hated himself for it – but had been too

cowardly to bring out from under his lonely pillow. And someday, before too long, his angel would become Mrs. Fitzmorris and hold their own child in her arms. *First he had to ask her: he would propose when he gave her the icon. That would be perfect: then, on bended knee, he would triumphantly slip the five-diamond engagement ring on her finger.*

Shamus had called an art dealer he knew, Pendennis (*Le Flambeau, Interiors: By Appointment Only*) who obligingly told the detective that he knew of a collector who *might possibly* be willing to part with a just such an icon – a truly glorious Greek Orthodox Madonna and Child. Of course, obtaining such a splendid *objet d'art* would involve delicate negotiations. By that, Shamus had known that Pendennis meant the painting would be pricey. That didn't matter in the slightest. *Nothing was too good for his angel, the future Mrs. Fitzmorris.*

"Michael?" Pendennis' fluting voice had left its electronic trace on the Viking's voice mail. "Sweetheart, I have something a little bit different in mind for your next *oeuvre*: a Byzantine Madonna and Child. Lots of gold leaf. Lapis. *Ciao, baby.*"

That had been only a week or two ago. Tomorrow Viking Mike would deliver his latest forgery: *a Greek Madonna and Child, lots of gold leaf.* Pendennis had duly informed Shamus that, after very delicate negotiations, he had managed to

acquire the icon; Shamus arranged to stop by *Le Flambeau* in Hillcrest Sunday evening to purchase it.

As soon as Shamus presented his angel the painting, he would bring out the ring and ask her to marry him. *Absolutely. With no more delays.*

23

Barry parked his Volvo on the street and paid for the maximum two hours' parking. He reasoned that, if he parked next to Rita's residence hotel in the pay lot patrolled by Ace Tow and over-stayed his time, his car might get towed but that, at worst, if the street meter ran out, he'd get a ticket. Barry's mind worked like that: very analytical and quick as lightning. He was justly proud of his analytical mind. Barak Jay Schwartz acknowledged his own brilliance: *most people just weren't very good at thinking.*

The scrawny baldheaded man at the desk under the 4 HOURS \$50 didn't look up as Rita punched the elevator button. *Good: no witnesses.* Rita was staying on the seventh floor and, as the elevator ascended, Barry's lightning-swift analytical mind, occupied with other thoughts, did not concern itself with the question *Why would Rita have a room which rented by the hour?*

The hallway was narrow and cheap-looking and Barry, who had always been very fastidious about bodily cleanliness, felt the thrill of the forbidden – there might even be bare-breasted Afro-American

women behind some of those doors, lying in sweaty, tangled bed sheets, casually smoking Kools and dropping the ashes on the cheap carpeting. Their mentholated cigarettes would be stained with bright, greasy lipstick.

It was all very exciting.

This was Life: Life down and dirty: the Real Thing.

Rita opened the door to her temporary pad and he followed her inside.

The room was spartan: a sagging double bed, a television set, a cheap chest of drawers. "Fix us a drink, Schlomo," Rita said, imperiously waving at a bottle of tequila and some glasses on the television set, and disappeared into the bathroom. Barry detested tequila – he thought it tasted like sweat smelled – but the thought of this further evidence of *Life down and dirty* excited him further: he was sure that his manhood would not need the help of the sildenafil citrate. *Rita was making this very easy for him.*

The tequila had a worm in it. Barry, horrified, studied the pickled thing – *he couldn't drink this*. Repulsed, he put the bottle back on the tv set. Before Barry's brilliant analytical mind had time to order his shocked body to follow the plan: *pour Rita a drink and add the roofies (two doses)*, Rita came out of the bathroom. She had shed her tight designer jeans and tight red sweater and was wearing a red viscose peignoir with a plunging neckline. The peignoir was

trimmed with fluffy red feathers. Her surprisingly large feet were tucked into red satin mules. With her magnificent cleavage, her slim hips and long legs, her big dark eyes, she looked like a casino showgirl.

"Where's my drink?" she demanded. "You don't like *tequila con gusano*, Schlomo? No worries. I'll make you a Baby Guinness." Rita sloshed some tequila into a glass for herself. As she downed it in one graceful gulp, her adam's apple bobbed in her throat. "*Mi casa es tu casa*," she said. "Sit down." She pushed him toward the bed.

Barry slipped out of his loafers and set them carefully side-by-side on the floor before he arranged the thin pillows and leaned back on the hammocky bed. He felt like he was in a movie, maybe a gritty *film noir*, or some black-and-white 1950's movie with Paul Newman. With his hands clasped behind his head, he watched Rita take bottles of Kahlúa and Irish Cream out of a mini-refrigerator. She poured a shot of the coffee liqueur and expertly added the Baileys by pouring it over the dome of a spoon. The cocktail looked exactly like a tiny glass of stout.

"Bottom's up," Rita said, handing Barry the shot glass. Smiling, she sat down next to him on the bed and put her hand high up on his thigh. Holding the little glass of mock-stout, Barry hesitated. Rita drummed her fingers on the corduroy of his pants. He looked at her hand on his leg. Her hand was

large, her nails exquisitely manicured.

Rita removed her hand.

"It's a shooter, Schlomo. You take it in one gulp." Her lustrous black eyes bored into his, smoldering, burning. Barry looked at the drink, tossed it back, with *élan*, just like Paul Newman would have. He shuddered. *Bitter*. In a friendly gesture, Rita put her hand once again on Barry's thigh, this time a little closer to his tremulous manhood. She smiled lusciously. "Do a line?" Barry shook his head. He tried to pull her down to him. With surprising strength, Rita pulled away. "One more shooter. Then we'll have some fun."

24

A flashmob of roaming zombies was disrupting an outdoor wedding in Balboa Park. The overwrought mother of the bride had to be peeled off one surprisingly spirited zombie whom she had in a choke-hold and was taken away in hysterics by medics. Shannon scooped it.

It was the best day of her life. Her byline would appear in the local news section, maybe even get picked up by the AP!

25

Deedra was having a hard time memorizing those damn frequency tables. She'd never liked school; she'd never been any good at book-learning.

But she had seen the writing on the wall the

moment the plumber told her that the place was swarming with termites and had shown her a bearing wall constructed with 6x6s that looked like extruded sponges. Deedra faced the sad fact: *Coral Tree Apartments was going to fall down in her lifetime. She would not be manager of Coral Tree Apartments forever. She needed to prepare for a new gig.*

Deedra had thought hard about her options. She was already forty years old, too old to learn computers or even to learn to type; anyway, she didn't want a boring sit-down, dead-end job. Likewise, she didn't want to be on her feet all day or have to deal with morons on the phone.

She liked to drink. She liked the bar-scene. Deedra considered bartender school but, because of the feet and moron factors, quickly discarded that idea. With desperate and unwonted optimism, Deedra decided that, if she put her mind to it, she could learn to work in a casino, as a dealer. She would prepare to enter a lucrative and interesting career when Coral Tree Apartments inevitably fell into termite-riddled rubble.

Barry Schwartz, the head of Club King College, the casino card-dealing school which she had chosen as her *alma mater*, had helped her fill out all those nitpicky government forms so that federal financial aid paid every penny of the pricey vocational school's tuition. The classes weren't hard at all.

There were just two instructors, Barry and Rex. They both had those very annoying East Coast accents. Rex's Boston accent was somewhat bearable because Rex was cool – actually a pretty cool left-handed guy who just played cards with the students, mostly poker and blackjack, no stress – whereas Barry was a total weeny-geek with a stupid Woody Allen New York accent.

At Club King College students could smoke in class, which Deedra really liked: they each got their own glass ashtray, a fancy one with the King of Clubs encased in the bottom and *Club King College* inscribed on the rim. Deedra wished they could do Jell-o shooters in class too; sometimes she slipped out to the parking lot and had a couple of quick shots of vodka with juice from the Gatorade bottle that she kept in her car.

Another thing about Club King College which she didn't like was Barry-the-Geek insisting that they had to memorize stupid stuff, like tables of numbers. Deedra just couldn't do it. Lately, she had been wondering if cutting back on her drinking might make a difference. She never felt drunk or anything but, over the years, she had gotten into the habit of sipping vodka and juice all day long. Lately, she had been going through about four or five liters of Wolfschmidts a week, and wondered if that might be affecting her memory, not that she was ever any

good at book-learning. But she was in hock for \$30,000 for the Club King course (at 29% interest), and she sure didn't want to blow it: this was her one chance. She wondered if she should go to AA, maybe dry out for a while, just until she got Barry-the-Geek's damned bookworm frequency tables memorized.

Deedra looked in the phone book, did some scouting. There was an AA chapter nearby, over in O.B., which had meetings every evening. She would go to AA. Deedra would try anything once.

26

Carl, the scrawny baldheaded deskman, banged on the door a few times, then opened it with his pass key, calling out: "Check-out time was an hour ago. You want to stay longer, you pay for more time. That's the rule." *Thank God for small favors: the schmoe on the bed wasn't dead*, which is what baldheaded Carl thought at first – the dude was butt-naked and woozy, but not *dead*. "Time's up, pal. You owe me some money for the over-stay. I don't want to hear that some dame's slipped you a mickey and your wallet's gone. I got enough problems of my own. Pay up or I'm calling the cops."

The terrifying threat of *calling the cops* cut through the lingering haze of the chloral hydrate which Barry had imbibed in Rita's bitter Baby Guinness shots: frantically, Barry begged deskman

Carl for mercy. Barry threw himself on Carl's mercy, literally threw himself at Carl's feet, down on the malodorous thin carpeting, blubbering, kissing Carl's scabby sandaled feet while fervently promising to pay as much money as need be to leave the cops out of it.

Carl had relented, not in pity but in avarice and disgust: Barry was allowed to use Carl's phone. Barry was so shaken by the enormity of the danger which that treacherous bitch Rita had put him in – *the cops!* – that he very nearly could not recall Rex Pelfitt's phone number. Rex was the only person in the world Barry could think of to bail him out; Barry really didn't have a lot of friends. Finally, he reached Rex who was, naturally, sympathetic, as would be one man-of-the-world to another. But, unfortunately, Rex was on the golf course, the Golden Oak, sixty corkscrew miles away, and it would take him over an hour to reach Hillcrest.

"Tell your pal to bring plenty of money," Carl sniggered, pouring salt in the wound. "It's going to cost you plenty to buy your way out of this little *contretemps*."

Contretemps – *that upstart schmuck!* Barry had never hit a man but, at that moment, he very much wished to slap Carl. However, in his present impotent state, denuded and outmanned, Barry wisely refrained from a physical outburst, and

merely passed on Carl's message to Rex.

27

It was a perfect day for golf – a shame to have to leave the bucolic links, where the clumsy green June bugs were buzzing. Rex Pelfitt decided that he really ought to play another hole or two.

Barry could wait. He really didn't have much choice in the matter: stupid mama's boy, must have been standing behind the door when they passed out brains. Rex studied the green and judiciously selected a club, king of all he surveyed. *That dumb hebe had no sense at all.*

The dumb hebe's friend and business partner waggled the left-handed club and swung, watching the ball arc through the air and drop, just where he had willed it. *Might be wise to start extricating himself from the Club King goldmine: it might be about to flame out and he sure as shit wasn't going to take the fall for the mama's boy.*

Enjoying the nice day, Rex walked unhurriedly toward the next hole. He had made up his mind about Barry and his Club King College.

28

"Nice ride, Rita," said Kenny Beck approvingly. The friendly fan of lines at the corners of his light blue eyes deepened when he smiled. "Pull right in and let's take a look at it." Rita was at Kenny Beck's AAcurate Auto Body Shop on Hickok, a short dead

end block near the Sports Arena, tucked into a hidden spot between Hancock and the 8.

Rita liked dealing with Kenny Beck. He always gave her a fair deal, cash on the spot. He was nice: very tall, very thin, with sensitive hands and waist-length hair, thick and silver-gold. Kenny Beck looked like a dreamy poet, not a guy who operated a chop-shop.

Kenny looked at Barry's coupe with the KPBS and the colorful Club King College bumper-stickers and rapidly enumerated: "Volvo C30, convertible, six-speed stick-shift, alloy wheels, cloth bucket seats, clean. Body straight. Almost new. Full set of keys, alarmed. Twelve hundred." He sounded like an auctioneer, or a living abacus. He opened his wallet and counted twelve limp bills into Rita's large open hand. "Sorry I can't give you a ride home. Very busy today."

"No problem, Kenny. I'll catch a lift from one of the guys down at the towyard. Someone will be going to O.B." Rita filed the twelve bills in her pocketbook and tucked that down deep at the bottom of her big straw shoulderbag.

It was a lovely day, clear and warm, and had been quite profitable. Picking through the pockets of the wallet, Rita had glanced over the various scribbled notes, hoping to find access numbers or passwords. She had thrown away the business cards

belonging to the *Director of Club King College*, and had transferred so-called *Professor Schlomo Einstein's* cell phone and valuables from the almost-new Coach double billfold to her own: Barry Jay Schwartz' two Visa cards, his Chevron card, and his Triple A card had an immediate street value of twenty bucks each. That was *today, right now*. By tonight, they wouldn't be worth shit.

Barry's California photo ID and social security card was worth a few easy hundreds on the street, no hurry, money in the bank. The billfold had also contained a ten, and the pants pockets some change and pills. *What a creep! A cheapskate and a creep!* Rita hoped he was married. *The jerk deserved to be raked over the coals for the way he acted – hooking up with girls on craigslist, giving a fake name, being such a gross, lecherous creep. And cheap.*

Rita hated cheap men.

Enjoying her censorious thoughts and the sun on her pretty face, Rita strolled the dead-end short block of light-industrial Hickok Street. She passed Don Sandoval's Instant Paradise Landscaping and his fleet of 1940 Ford pick-ups airbrushed with palm trees and tikis. On the other side of the street, Joe was tinkering with motorhome in front of Fred's Fix-it-Rite RV Repair. Christian Biker was watering the potted cacti under the death's head scarab picked out in metallic green and gold on the plate glass of

Empty Tomb Locksmithing. He gave her a friendly *hello*. It was a friendly street.

At the end of the *cul de sac* was the towyard, Ace Tow.

As usual, the Guano Bird, greasy-headed den-mother of the dysfunctional family called Ace Tow, was on the horn, communication apparatuses clumped untidily on the big desk before her: the Triple A console, several telephones, a Nextel unit, a lumpy layer of coffee-ringed papers. November was on the grey office couch, sleeping, his long legs and big boots hanging over the arm rest. Although November wore the blue shirt of Ace Tow's uniform, somehow a monochromatic miasma of grey hung around him; perhaps it was depression – it had gotten worse since his Mexican girlfriend had taken off in his car with Foxtrot, another driver. Hotel, short and fat, was playing a game on a beeping handheld device, Golf was playing solitaire at a card table, and Delta the Druid was standing inside a chalked pentagram, waving his magic wand, murmuring portentously.

"Hello, Gwen." Standing just inside the door, Rita sweetly greeted the woman at the desk who could have been 35 or 55, but who never had been and now never would be attractive. Rita felt sorry for homely girls and, despite her beauty, always went out of her way to be nice to them. Rita was, basically,

a very sweet girl. Someone might have explained to the Guano Bird that *pretty is as pretty does*. Whereas Rita's good nature shone through her limpid black eyes just as Rex Pelfitt's friendly nature shone out his red-jowled face, the Guano Bird was not *simpatico*.

She had been secretly, tormentedly, in love with Rex, his florid face and Hawaiian-shirted big body, for a long time and he had never even noticed her, other than as the necessary human component of the dispatch equipment. The Guano Bird knew that Rex had a special relationship with Rita – *just because the nasty thing had long legs and big boobs* – and she was getting sick of the *status quo*: the Guano Bird's fervent love was poised on the flash point and dangerously close to becoming flaming hatred.

Intent on the information she was taking down and her simmering dislike of Rita, Gwen barely nodded; then she swiveled around in her ancient office chair. The phone was ringing again before she was finished speaking: "You're up, Golf. Triple A. Lock-out on Dog Beach parking lot, red Chevy Cavalier, 2 Oscar Zulu Echo 729."

Lucky: Dog Beach, in O.B., was just down the street from Rita's studio apartment on Longbranch. She needed to get home quickly and spruce up for her date with that Marcantonio dude from Italy.

"Leland," said Rita respectfully as Golf scooped up his playing cards, which bore the Club King

College logo on their backs, and tucked them in his shirt pocket under his name badge, "could I ride with you?"

Golf grunted his assent and the two left in the tow truck. Rita had always liked Golf. He was wound tight, but in his own weird skinhead way, he was a gentleman. Golf never made offensive and hurtful personal remarks, like the Alpha Unit did.

Before she hopped out of the tow truck at Dog Beach, even though she didn't have to, Rita gave Golf a nice almost-new leather billfold, just *gave* it to him: *Coach, must have cost one-fifty. Hope Professor Schlomo Einstein misses it, the creep*, thought Rita, who worked hard for her living. *Hope he's married, the jerk. Hope the person who inked L+B inside the billfold gives him a full ration of shit.*

29

Finally Rex Pelfitt had quit the country air of the golf course with its buzzing of the clumsy June bugs and had shown up in Hillcrest's concrete jungle.

The good samaritan had brought something to cover Barry's nakedness (the change-of-clothing he happened to have in his car): a huge Hawaiian shirt and elephantine khaki shorts. No shoes: Rex's size fourteens wouldn't do for Barry's little tootsies.

Barry's blind date must have really hated him to have taken his penny loafers, on top of everything else; he must have really pissed her off, Rex was thinking as he

cheerfully paid Carl the deskman \$500 for room rent and *damages*. Barry's outraged protests had been cut short by Carl's matter-of-fact explanation that the damages fee was *prophylactic and reflexive*: if Barry or his good buddy Rex didn't pay, the ensuing police report and media publicity would *damage* Barry's reputation.

Rex shook his head pityingly. He felt sorry for Barry (*only a moron would need to have a shakedown like this spelled out to him*) and knew that Barry was probably in for another shock: *the clueless hebe was fully expecting to trot outside on his tippy-toes and get in his Volvo and drive home, just like that. The dame had taken everything: clothes, shoes, wallet, keys. Did he really believe that some broad he picked up off the internet just wanted his bod? Barry should never venture out of Rancho Bernardo— the real world is a dangerous place.*

Predictably, Barry stared unbelievably at the Honda which was occupying the metered parking spot in which he had left his Volvo, stared uncomprehendingly as he muttered, "They wouldn't tow for an expired meter. *Ticket, yes. Not tow.*" Perplexed, shrouded in Rex's loud Hawaiian shirt, Barry looked pathetic, like a barefooted and bewildered refugee in a donated muumuu.

Rex really felt sorry for Barry – Rex was a big guy, with a big heart. "You *were* insured for theft, right, pal? You can report it when you get home."

"You think it's been *stolen*?" gasped Barry.

"It's probably in Mexico, or in Spring Valley, already parted-out," the blasé man-of-the-world proclaimed matter-of-factly.

"That bitch!"

"I'll drive you home, pal. Don't feel too bad – cars get stolen all the time," Rex said kindly, as he congratulated himself on the wisdom of his decision to bail out of the Club King racket.

If Barry is running the business like he's running his life, Rex mused comfortably, the gravy train is headed for a smash.

30

Rita's phone chimed. It was Raj, checking up on her. "Everything's fine," Rita assured him. "I'm having a pumping party this week. Know anyone who might be interested?"

"Maybe. By the way, girlfriend, what that guy name? His real name? I *know* you know."

"Barry Jay Schwartz, Director of Club King College. Need his address and social?" Rita really was a very nice girl, good to her friends.

31

His legs jiggling up and down on the floor as he sat in front of his computer, Marcantonio Romano was once again looking at the email from Rita, the girl he had connected with via craigslist. Her picture showed a very attractive dark-eyed girl with glossy

black hair in soft waves, plump smiling lips, and a deep dimple in her left cheek. They were going to meet for a drink that evening at the Burrito Lounge.

Marcantonio, who was in America on a post-doc chemistry fellowship at Scripps, had a fiancée in Milano, but Milano was a long way from San Diego. Marcantonio looked at Rita's picture again: *ragazza molta sexy!*

32

Rex drove the despondent Barry to his gated complex in Rancho Bernardo where, no doubt, a tearful Melanie was waiting drearily.

"Want to come in for a drink?" Barry invited his succourer. Barry himself was in dire need of a double whiskey.

"Been on the wagon for three years, five months, eleven days, pal. Before I dried out, with the help of the good Lord, I was morally, spiritually, and financially bankrupt. I'm a new man, thanks to AA and the good Lord. I wouldn't want to go back to my old way of life."

"Yeah, I remember now, you telling me about it," responded Barry glumly. Rex recited this tedious litany to Barry every time they talked.

"Keep your pecker up, pal. It's not the end of the world," said Rex cheerfully as he dropped his business associate at the front door of his condo. "See you later."

Unbeknownst to Barry, Rex was not planning on seeing him again, ever. Rex had already written off the hibiscus-laden Hawaiian shirt flapping on Barry's narrow back and the five hundy he'd fronted Barry for Carl the deskman. The five bills was nothing; he'd made plenty out of the schoolhouse gig. Club King College was a good racket, good money in it – easy money – but Rex had always had a gambler's instinct and he knew in his bones that Barry was about to bite the big one.

33

Some motorist had bit the big one, just off the Rosecrans exit: late afternoon traffic at the Moore Street intersection had been backed up and the careless Escalade rushing up behind the Mustang hadn't slowed down in time. Golf, at the end of his shift and on his way back to the towyard, arrived at the scene before the ambulance. The other driver wasn't hurt at all and, after giving a self-serving statement to the responding officer, was able to drive the Escalade away, leaving behind some of his headlight glass in a pool of another man's blood.

Golf waited around while the vacant body of the driver of the Mustang was spirited away in the ambulance, cranked the totalled Mustang up onto the flatbed, secured it, and hauled it the three blocks to the towyard. The Alpha Unit would probably end up owning this baby: survivors of people who got

taken away by ambulances often didn't think to or didn't have the proper documentation to retrieve cars in a timely fashion; the \$89 a day storage fees added up fast. The Alpha Unit had a partner, Rex, who curbed the cars for him when the unfortunate owners or grieving survivors gave up on trying to get them out of hock.

Golf off-loaded the Mustang, polished the interior of the truck cab with a rag he kept specially for that purpose, and strolled into the towyard office, happy with a day's good work done. Juliet, the Viking, was waiting, glowering, Loki on his shoulder shitting and croaking ominously.

Golf and the Viking shared a truck and cordially hated each other: in this case, opposites repelled. The two were antipathetic.

Skin-headed Golf was slight, wiry, obsessively tidy; he had sectioned-eighted out of the Army after seeing desert combat. He looked tough, but was tender-hearted underneath and prone to humiliating tears at odd occasions: just the month before, when one of his goldfish had flopped out of its bowl during the night and he had inadvertently stepped on it, he was so disturbed that he had stayed home the next day, deeply depressed and weepy. Golf took anti-depressants which he got from the VA, but didn't know if they helped any.

The big-bodied, slovenly, foul-smelling Viking

started his day with a hearty line of crystal, coke when he could get it. When his shifts ended, the Viking delighted in annoying Golf by leaving greasy detritus in the truck and his peculiar fungent odor which spoke of deep crevices of unbathed flesh, decay, and ineluctable mortality. Loki indiscriminately added to the impasto of filth encrusting the truck's interior.

Golf set the truck keys on the Guano Bird's desk, and the Viking wordlessly snatched them up, eager to get going. Golf was ready to get home and observe his remaining goldfish, just watch them swimming in their clear, shining goldfish bowl, his own light eyes shining with unshed tears for the deep sorrow of mournful life.

If either Golf or the Viking had known that the Guano Bird was perishing for Rex Pelfitt, that her eyes often shone with unshed tears, formerly of unrequited romantic love, more recently of angry seething hatred, neither of the drivers would have cared at all: the Guano Bird was not *simpatico* and her volcanic inner life was of no interest to anyone.

That would change, to the detriment of some.

34

Whimpering with relief, Melanie was at the front door, shooting back the deadbolts, the moment Barry rang the doorbell. "Barry! I was so worried," she sobbed. "What happened? Why didn't you call me?"

Are you all right?" The attention was simultaneously annoying and gratifying.

"Do I look like I'm all right, Len? Jesus Christ on a stick, get me a drink," he said, shrugging off her unwelcome embrace. "I was carjacked, all right? I was knocked unconscious by an African-American. Probably a drug-crazed gang-member."

Drink in hand, enthroned in his favorite easy chair, Barry embroidered his lurid tale for the horrified Melanie.

"I must have lain on the street for an hour before someone called an ambulance. Concussion. Lucky to be alive, not brain-damaged. They lost my clothes in the ER. And you ask me if I'm *all right!*"

"Oh, Barry, I'm sorry, I didn't know, my poor baby," Melanie expostulated tediously.

"The damage is done," said Barry severely, wincing at the word, *damage*, which was freighted with painful memories.

Melanie saw the involuntary grimace; her alarm heightened. She knew that her sweetheart didn't like fussing, but she couldn't help it: "Shouldn't you be in the hospital, under observation? Concussions can be very serious."

"Yeah, Lennie, I'm supposed to have complete peace and quiet. And your hysterics aren't helping my condition. Just get me another double scotch. And something to eat. I think I'm going to faint if I

don't eat." The solicitous Melanie dutifully scurried to obey.

35

In a rush to get to her first AA meeting, Deedra had foolishly locked herself out of her car. Wolfy, her wolf-like yellow-eyed elkhound, was lunging and snapping at June bugs buzzing the sweet blossoms of the thorny mock orange shrubbery, and Deedra was leaning against her Toyota, in the little Coral Tree Apartments parking lot, apparently deep in thought. Actually, Deedra was not thinking much of anything; her mind was simply a swampy heaving welter of intermingling regrets and alarums. Having determined to dry out with the help of AA, she had thriftily finished off her last bottle of Wolfschmidts, and was feeling the physiological effects of her .12% BAC.

"Shut up, Wolfy," Deedra commanded when she eventually became aware that her watchdog was howling and that Golf was standing on the other side of her car, prudently shielded from Wolfy's yellow fangs. Golf was talking to her, asking her a question.

"Locked out?" Golf had a professional interest in Deedra's situation: he normally responded to several lock-outs everyday. "Maybe I can help." Golf had to yell to be heard over Wolfy's howling.

"That dog needs some discipline," said Buckaroo, who was standing next to Golf. "Way too

noisy. Barks too much.” Indeed Wolfy was howling like the hound of the Baskervilles.

Aerosolized Buckaroo, quondam driver of the totaled Mustang, feeling weirdly disoriented, had accompanied his defunct Mustang to the towyard. Then, not knowing what else to do, but hazily recognizing in ex-army PFC Leland Parrish a kindred spirit, the late Sergeant Romulus Buckalew, USMC, had accompanied Golf home to the Coral Tree Apartments.

That dog barks too much, thought Golf.

“No, I’m just standing here cause I don’t have anything better to do, Jesus fucking Christ, what’s it look like?” responded Deedra, and added offensively: “Golf.” Even in her inebriate state, she knew that using her tenant’s work name would rankle. “Go away, shithead. Wolfy don’t like the way you stink.”

Stung, Golf was glad that he didn’t have a slimjim with him: *Why should he bother with trying to help Deedra? She was a mean bitch, always ragging on him for no reason at all.*

“Beat it, Golf,” said Deedra. “Wolfy don’t like you and, believe me, that’s not healthy for you.”

“What a lead-lined bitch,” remarked Buckaroo, trailing Golf to the door of his apartment. “I’d like to whup her upside the head.”

What a lead-lined bitch, though Golf, sprinkling a

pinch of shrimp flakes over the surface of his goldfish bowl. *I'd like to whup her upside the head.*

His goldfish gobbled their flakes. Their ken stretched no further than the extent of their watery world, fifteen hundred cubic centimeters, about the volume of a human skull. They couldn't see the late Sergeant Romulus Buckalew, USMC, making himself at home in Golf's apartment. Golf couldn't see him either.

36

Barry was hunched over the tv dinner tray, holding his empty grizzled head in his hands, staring sightlessly at the bowl of chicken soup which Melanie had nervously served with another double scotch. She sat on the edge of the couch, anxiously watching Barry ignore his comfort food. He had been at loose ends lately, morose and mordant, almost *haunted*. Melanie wondered with if Club King College was worrying him. He hadn't been the same since he had been let go from Scripps. They were *fools* not to appreciate Barry's brilliance. And the last week, he'd been worse, almost *haunted*.

Melanie fingered the business card which had been tucked in the door while she was out looking for Barry during his worrying absence. A new mental puzzle would take his mind off the loss of the Volvo. Melanie *oofed* as she hauled herself up off the couch. Since she'd gotten so heavy, her joints scraped

and burned whenever she changed position. She waded to Barry's easy chair and slipped the business card onto the tv dinner tray. Melanie pointed at it with one pudgy pale-nailed finger.

"What's this, Len?"

"I don't know, honey. Someone wants to talk to you, I guess." The card read *FBI*. A few words penned on the card urged Barry to call *ASAP*. "Do you want me to bring you the phone, honey?"

Responding to an intense physiological imperative which sloshed, bubbling and burning, in his seared bowels, Barry knocked the bowl of chicken soup to the floor, crumpling the delicate aluminum legs of the tv dinner tray in his scuttling haste to the bathroom. Barry was scared shitless: *the FBI wanted to talk to him a.s.a.p.* Sitting on the pot, Barry took stock of his options as Melanie knocked timidly on the locked door, pleading: "Talk to me, Barry. Are you all right? Answer me, please, Barry."

Barry was thinking hard, his mind a lurching, lumbering tumbrel: if he could figure out how to engineer his own *fake* death, all his problems would be solved – the school, that girl, the FBI, and Melanie. He could leave it all behind and start fresh somewhere else.

Melanie was crying.

"Should I call 911? Answer me, Barry."

"Go *away*! I'm trying to *think*."

37

"Deedra?" prompted Flora, who had pulled in next to her landlady. Deedra had fallen asleep, her head nestled in her arms crossed on top of her car. "Deedra? Are you okay?" Hackles up, Wolfy growled, his black lips curled back from his yellow fangs. Prudently staying within the safe bulwark of her vehicle, Flora honked a few times and Deedra fetched up from her vodka swamp of unconsciousness.

"Why the fuck you honking like that, Flora? People trying to sleep."

Flora was alarmed by not only the yellow-eyed elkhound's intense and slavering grumbling, but by the dishevelment of her landlady, newly awakened from her haphazard nap in the parking lot. Deedra appeared to be one six-pack away from full-blown alcoholic hallucinosis. "Do you need a ride somewhere, Deedra? To the hospital?"

"I can drive myself," Deedra mumbled. "Need my keys." She pointed to her keys on the dashboard, safely locked inside her white Toyota. Flora thought it a good thing that the inebriate's keys were out of bounds: *Deedra definitely should not be driving.*

"Are you sure you wouldn't rather go lie down? Or go to the ER?"

"No! I have to go to a meeting."

"A meeting?" Flora was surprised. She had

never known Deedra to attend any sort of social function other than ungainly forays to the neighborhood bars from which she returned with soused and loudly lecherous fishermen. Sharing a party wall with Deedra, Flora perforce knew more than she liked about her haggish landlady's nihilistic personal life. Suddenly, the light dawned: "An AA meeting?" Deedra glared but did not contradict her. "I'll be happy to drive you to an AA meeting, Deedra." Flora hospitably swung open her passenger door. "Where is it?" Still glaring haggardly, Deedra clumsily plunked herself down in the passenger seat and motioned to Wolfy to jump in the back.

"O.B. And *step* on it. I don't want to be late. That's just *rude*."

38

It was late afternoon, cocktail hour at Elmyr Herzog Burrito Lounge in the Gaslamp. Modern masterpieces – De Koonings, Kandinskys, Klees, and Moreaus – hung on the rough plaster walls, the artwork of the late Elmyr Herzog. The *tapas* joint enjoyed great acclaim for its valuable collection of paintings by the infamous forger.

Seated under the disquieting corpse-like Edvard Munch whose titled "Madonna," his legs jiggling under the table and his fingers drumming, Marcantonio's tenuous command of grammatical English abruptly deserted him when he encountered

Rita in the flesh. The two of them fell to conversing in a spontaneous Romance pidgin, Marcantonio animatedly attempting to explain to Rita in Italian that she was the most perfect girl he had ever met, Rita answering him briefly in Spanish punctuated with dimpled smiles and flashing eye flutters. Under Munch's painting of the disease-raddled whore with the smoldering eyes, Marcantonio plied his date with pasta and red wine and Rita, not seeming to notice Marcantonio's fidgety legs shaking the table, overjoyed her goggling conquest by eating with a stevedore's lusty appetite.

Then they went for a fast ride along the coast in Rita's spiffy yellow sportscar, a new Crossfire. Marcantonio tried to impress upon this perfect girl that he was disconsolate over his automobileless condition: he wished to demonstrate to her what an outstanding fast driver he was. It was not right that she should drive him. He needed to buy a car, *prontissimo*. In Spanish, her large, perfectly manicured hands fluttering charmingly, her dimples and dark eyes flashing, Rita informed Marcantonio that she had a very good friend, Jack Nicholas, who had a red Camaro, *very fast car*, for sale. It was an excellent car, and Jack would treat him right. Marcantonio, determined then and there that he would buy the red Camaro from Rita's good friend Jack. And he would drive Rita, that perfect girl, very

fast in his red Camaro.

39

"What a hokey load of shit, what a shit-load of crapola," Deedra was murmuring, barely bothering to modulate her voice. She'd never been one for church, and here she was, trapped in a crappy room crammed with losers talking about how God saved them from booze, forced to declare herself a fellow loser helplessly caught in the grip of addiction.

"What a load of hokey shit," Deedra muttered mutinously numerous times throughout the AA meeting. And her humiliation was not merely anonymously private, but public in the worst possible way: Rex, her blackjack teacher, suddenly appeared at her side, gladhanding her and wanting a friendly hug.

Deterred by Wolfy's ominous growls from enveloping her in an embrace, Rex trumpeted: "Been on the wagon for three years, five months, eleven days, little sister. Before I dried out, with the help of the good Lord, I was morally, spiritually, and financially bankrupt. I'm a new man, thanks to AA and the good Lord. I wouldn't want to go back to my old way of life, and neither will you." Despite her hearty and profane disavowals, Rex insisted on sponsoring her.

"Forget that sponsor-shit, Rex. What I really want is a ride home." What Deedra really wanted a

drink. She was in a hurry to get home and drink enough to wash away the bad taste of the AA meeting. With keen regret, she remembered that she'd drunk up the last of her Wolfschmidt's; she'd have to trek down to the corner liquor store for a new bottle.

"As you do to the least of them, so you do also unto me," Rex replied. "That means that I can serve God by serving you, little sister."

"Whatever," responded Deedra ungraciously, and allowed herself to be escorted to Rex's Saturn, the bumper of which sported a colorful Club King College advertising bumper-sticker identical to the one on her Toyota's bumper. Barry had generously included free bumper-stickers in every student application packet. The Dean of the college considered them highly cost-effective advertising: he loved the idea that every student would advertise his business for free in every parking lot.

Like the drone of a distant motor, Deedra continued incoherently muttering, directing various generic insults toward Rex. Fuming, Rex's newest little sister knew that she sure as shit wasn't going to ask that sack of guts to serve God by giving her a lift to the liquor store, and have to put up with more of her unwelcome sponsor's preaching about how he used to be "morally bankrupt."

And she'd thought Rex was a nice guy! Boy, the

things people keep hidden!

40

Miles away, on the eastern edge of the San Diego, in the unattractive stucco neighborhood known as Skyline, Pharoah Brown was detailing his car; he'd waxed and polished the gold coupe until it gleamed in the Saturday sun like a rapacious idol of electrum. The '76 Chrysler Cordoba with opera windows was Pharoah Brown's pride and joy. On its back bumper was the colorful Club King College advertising sticker.

When he finished shining up his ride, he'd go inside his mom's house and, sitting in front of a mirror, practice his card-dealing manner. Pharoah Brown would smile and the young man in the mirror would smile back with warm brown eyes, twinkling eyes, and his gold-capped white teeth would gleam against his warm brown face. Pharoah Brown's hands were well-shaped and beautifully manicured, and gold and diamond rings glittered on his flashing brown fingers as he cut and riffled and threw out the cards in elegantly controlled, practiced motions. And after that, he'd spend some hard book time memorizing more probability tables.

Pharoah Brown was serious student, determined to succeed: his \$30,000 student loan at 29% interest was no joke.

41

Rex was really very helpful. He happened to have a slimjim in his car and, working it left-handedly, had Deedra's Toyota open in no time. "Thought them things was illegal, Rex," Deedra said, snatching up her keys.

"Strictly legit," Rex assured her. "I'm partners in a tow company. It's legal for tow-drivers to carry slimjims." He opened his wallet and gave her a business card. "Ace Tow. Next time you need a tow or lock-out service, just mention my name. Get you a discount if you don't have Triple A. Now, let's go inside and have a wholesome pot of green tea."

"Green tea!" Deedra cursed herself for allowing Rex to drive her home; she should have called a cab. Now she was stuck with the chatty bag of guts. "I don't have any green tea."

"You're in luck, little sister." Rex opened his wallet again and pulled out several small foil-wrapped items. Perhaps in the spring of his life, when the sap was rising, they would have been foil-wrapped condoms. But now, in the autumn of his life, the foil-wrapped items Rex carried in his wallet and was now holding in his left hand were tea bags.

"Deedra, you got your car open," said Flora apprehensively, carefully keeping a car body between herself and Wolfy. She and Shamus were just leaving on their dinner date.

"What is this fucking third-degree, Flora? My car's none of your business," snapped Deedra aggressively. Frowning, Shamus patted Flora's hand and once again determined to marry her immediately and move her out of this den of vipers.

Friendly hand outstretched, Rex came around the car and introduced himself to Flora and Shamus. He gave them both Ace Tow business cards. "Next time you need a tow or lock-out service, just mention my name. Get you a discount if you don't have Triple A."

"Ace Tow," observed Flora, looking at the familiar card, and exclaimed: "It's a small, circular world, Rex! Leland lives here. *Golf*. He gave me a card just yesterday."

"Good man, *Golf*," Rex observed, the hearty uncle. "An asset to your little community – and, speak of the devil, there he is."

Golf had emerged from his apartment bearing a small bag of trash destined for the dumpster. He looked at Rex with the puzzled expression an introvert displays when unexpectedly encountering an acquaintance in a new environment. "Hey, Rex," he said, and turned his attention to the combination lock which protected the contents of the dumpster from trashpickers.

"Yeah, talk about small world," said Deedra, "Rex here's my teacher at Club King College. He's

teaching me how to deal cards.”

Shamus caught the sudden twitch in Rex’s eyes which shifted like a frightened animal; the detective wondered why the big-bellied man in the Hawaiian shirt looked like he wished that he hadn’t handed out his card to freely and why he left so quickly, moving fast for a fat man.

42

Rita was a doll, beautiful and kind. After their exciting twilight ride up the coast in her yellow Crossfire, she dropped Marcantonio off at the Coral Tree Apartments in Point Loma. Marcantonio, oblivious to anything but Rita’s entrancing charm, didn’t notice the big man in the Saturn exiting the parking lot as the Crossfire was entering.

Thus Marcantonio did not recognize Rex when he met him the next day: a few seconds earlier, and everything would have been different – any banal and unremarkable incident, a traffic light changing a moment earlier or later anywhere along their route would have spelled the difference between life and death for one of the people congregated there in the parking lot of the Coral Tree Apartments that Saturday evening as the green June bugs buzzed.

So capricious – or so ineluctable – is Fate.

Happily, proudly, Marcantonio insisted on introducing the suddenly shy Rita to his neighbors; he hailed Golf, skirting the edge of the group.

"Al-loh Leland, come and meet my new friend, Rita. She is so nice."

Golf, still wearing his puzzled expression, said simply, "Hey, Rita," and disappeared laconically into his dark apartment.

Deedra turned her back on the group and, on unsteady legs, stalked off with Wolfy, heading for the corner liquor store, but Flora and Shamus, hoping to make amends for Deedra's rudeness and Golf's taciturnity, both greeted Rita heartily. However, Marcantonio's long-legged new friend made her exit quickly, as quickly as had Rex, and the smitten young chemist went alone to his apartment, next door to Flora's, where he paced, occasionally pugilistically punching the air as images and emotions bubbled in the cauldron of his mind: a fast car, the open road, and Rita, *la ragazza molta sexy*, sitting next to him. After pacing for some time, he went for a run.

When he fell to sleep that night, his legs twitched, as if he were running in his dreams.

43

Across the courtyard from Flora's apartment, darkly shadowed by the large soft green leaves of the thirty foot tall coral tree which dominated the courtyard of Coral Tree Apartments, inside his ground floor apartment dim with the shades shut, Golf was watching his goldfish, which soothed him. The odd

thing which had just occurred – encountering Rex, then Rita, in the company of his neighbor Marcantonio – concerned him not at all.

Buckaroo was kicked back, talking, telling some rambling story about his grandad and his grandad's funeral. "He had a whole Butler building full of tools and equipment. Grandad always said he wanted to be buried in a tool-box. Spent his last ten years building it himself, out of heavy-gauge corrugated aluminum. Thing like to put your eye out, it was so damn shiny.

"Casket looked just like a big toolbox. Hoisted it up on the back of a flat-bed six-wheeler, hauled Grandad's custom toolbox up to the family burying ground.

"Put a metal toolshed over the grave instead of a granite grave-marker, pumped it up with a cubic yard of concrete so it wouldn't blow away. A real mausoleum.

"Had it all worked out. Spent his last ten years getting every detail down. When I get old, I guess I'll start working out the details of my fancy-ass funeral, like Granddad did."

The late Romulus Buckalew, USMC, had not yet realized that he had no time left to spend working out the details of a fancy-ass funeral: his mortal shell was soon to be transported back to Texas where, within two weeks, it would be planted under a

conventional polished plaque and, as the years passed, often visited by his mother and sometimes by his high school sweetheart, who shed a few sentimental tears, thinking of the happy hours they had shared.

Happy hours, but too few.

It occurred to Golf that he was not going to live forever, that he could bite the big one any day, just like that Marine had done that very day. *The poor guy was probably barely old enough to buy a beer in a bar. He probably never imagined when he got up in the morning, got himself ready to go play volley-ball on the beach with his buds, that he wouldn't live to see the sun set. You just never know which day is going to be your last.* Golf's eyes filmed over with unshed tears and his goldfish appeared even more aqueous and shimmery, as did the unseen shade of the late Sergeant Romulus Buckalew, USMC, who was leaning back on the couch, his long legs crossed, still talking about his dead granddaddy.

44

Oscar hadn't shown up, hadn't even called in, so Preacher Vic was working a double-shift. That meant that Echo, the night-dispatcher got to field the inevitable complaint calls from affronted Triple A clients outraged by the Preacher's dire warnings of their inevitable upcoming death: "Death! The wages of sin are death. For all have sinned and come short

of the glory of God.”

45

Shamus had regaled his angel with a rich feast at his favorite steakhouse in Mission Valley. The fare was simple but savory and, even after a day spent sampling dishes of Greek home-cooked delicacies, Flora had eaten with good appetite.

After a tactful interval, after dessert was served, Shamus broached the subject which they had both been avoiding: “About your fidgety friend Marco...”

Flora sighed, contemplating the cumulus of meringue drizzled with cherry brandy on her fork. “I promised his mom that I’d watch out for him. He’s been in school all his life. He’s very intelligent, of course ... but ... not very street-smart.”

Shamus smiled fondly at his angel, who also had led an unusually sheltered life, wrapped up in her language studies and graduate work in folklore.

Shamus did not disapprove of his angel’s friendship with the wiry, hyperactive young scientist who, aside from lacking a goatee, resembled a thin-shanked, nervous mountain goat. The fidgety young scientist was impossible to conceive in the role of a romantic rival. Shamus knew that Flora had met Marcantonio in Florence during a study-abroad semester some years before, and that his motherless angel had become friends with the entire Romano family, especially with Marcantonio’s mom. He

knew that Flora had arranged housing for Marcantonio at Coral Tree Apartment and had done her best to make the transition easy for the post-doc student, who knew no one else in the area.

Flora sighed again, shaking her head. "This isn't going to be *easy*."

"Do you want me ... umm ..." Shamus fingered his shirt collar, grimacing slightly, "...man-to-man ... to talk to him ... ummm, *tell him?*" The thought obviously unnerved Shamus, and Flora smiled indulgently. She leaned forward, the rubies in her cleavage winking madly.

"That won't be necessary, Mr. Fitzmorris. *I'll* break it to him." Scooping up another forkful of meringue, Flora murmured, "She certainly knows how to wear her clothes. So *slender*."

"*She?* Tsch!" Shamus sputtered. "Anyway – too skinny! How about another dessert? The ice cream pie here is great."

Shamus loved to see his angel eat.

46

Barry didn't have every detail worked out yet, but he didn't think he had time to dot every *i* and cross every *t*: he had to move fast. He had fed Melanie a double dose of roofies, collected his passport and the secret stash of cash he kept hidden at home, thrown a few clothes into a suitcase, and lifted Melanie's car keys. He had to put some distance between himself

and the condo; he would figure out his next move from some safe place, somewhere the feds wouldn't think of looking for him.

47

Neither Raj nor Hope Elphinstone knew that they were both praying for the soul of Jessica. The last bedraggled earthbound essence of the girl who had had the misfortune to encounter the predatory Dr. Schlomo Einstein was being eased from her lingering entanglements on the material plane.

Thanks to the prayers of the two, Jessica had found peace at last. She had gone home.

48

Thus passed the longest day, the shortest night of the year. Street lights and head lamps reflected off the fog of the June gloom, casting a silver sheen across the metallic night sky, quenching the Milky Way in the light shadow cast by human doings.

Eyes shielded by her lavender-scented sleep-mask, easy-minded and exhausted, Flora slept, dreaming of endless rows of tables laden with Greek delicacies. Before leaving for her twelve hour day in the kitchens of St. Lucia, she had unplugged her landline and, therefore, did not know that her friend Raj was urgently trying to reach her with a message which she would not receive for another 24 hours: Raj wanted to tell her about the poor, pale girl, Jessica Edwards.

In Friday's Child, Flora and Shamus match wits with a maniac who is killing aged owners of Victorians on historic Brick Row. In Saturday's Child, they sort out the tangled skeins of deceit linking Ace Towing and Club King College.

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