

Sombras del Pasado (Shadows of the Past)

Rebecca Radley

Copyright © 2014,2015 Rebecca Radley
All Rights Reserved
<http://rebeccaradley.com>

formatted by <http://nepotism.net> February 18, 2016

isbn 978-1502304957

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Those who wish to purchase film, dramatic, or television rights to this book should contact the William Kerwin Agency:

<http://williamkerwinagency.com>

- The printed and PDF versions of this book are set in the Libertine font (<http://linuxlibertine.org/>) licensed under the Open Font License (<http://scripts.sil.org/OFL>).

- Cover image derived from the lovely patio image by Jaime Vives Piqueres, shared under the Creative Commons by-sa license:
 - <http://www.ignorancia.org/en/index.php?page=Patio>
 - <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0> and thus this book cover is also under the same license.
- Morpho Menelaus Huebneri (blue butterfly) photo (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Morpho_menelaus_huebneri_MHNT_Male_Dos.jpg) by Didier Descouens (<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/User:Archaeodontosaurus>) license Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.en>)
- *Time Enough for Love*, science fiction novel by Robert A. Heinlein
- *Tranquility of Bibbiena* by Dalhart Windberg (Chapter 24) (<http://windbergartcenter.com/shop/architecture/tranquility-of-bibbiena>)
- *Romance* by Dmitri Shostakovich (Chapter 27) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KrQ5iSz-ch4>)

Contents

Dedication	ix
Acknowledgments	x
Prologue	1
Chapter One - Butterfly Effect	3
Chapter Two - Shrek Effect	7
Chapter Three - Hornpipes and Haints	15
Chapter Four - Garden Apartment	19
Chapter Five - Auditions	33
Chapter Six - Pass with Care	45
Chapter Seven - Pas de Deux	59
Chapter Eight - Breakfast of Champions	71
Chapter Nine - Fine Mexican Food	77
Chapter Ten - We Heart Our Children	85

Chapter Eleven - Another Opening, Another Show	95
Chapter Twelve - Understudy	105
Chapter Thirteen - The Magic Words	115
Chapter Fourteen - Mixing Household Chemicals	119
Chapter Fifteen - Watch for Trucks	129
Chapter Sixteen - Curo Estilo Mexicano	141
Chapter Seventeen - MIL from Hell	151
Chapter Eighteen - Sonnets for Food	157
Chapter Nineteen - Entropy of Isolated Systems	171
Chapter Twenty - Sangria and Tapas	179
Chapter Twenty-One - Rebalancing the Portfolio	187
Chapter Twenty-Two - Stage Door Janes and Johnnys	197
Chapter Twenty-Three - Dinner at Seven	209
Chapter Twenty-Four - Memories of Tuscany	217
Chapter Twenty-Five - Hottest Day	231
Chapter Twenty-Six - Pas de Trois	247
Chapter Twenty-Seven - Across the Universe	253

Chapter Twenty-Eight - Fern Bar	265
Chapter Twenty-Nine - Honky-Tonk Men	275
Chapter Thirty - Yin and Yang	291
Epilogue	305
About the Author	310
About America's Junior Miss	313
About Tree People	315
About Vienna Bonbons	317
Glossary	319

To Bill Kerwin, who gave me the idea for this story, and whose kindness and encouragement twenty-something years ago meant the world to a novice screenwriter from Texas.

Acknowledgments

Again my thanks go to Mary Beth Wilbanks, exceptional editor and dear, dear friend. Also, profound thanks to Frank Sergeant, whose formatting, artistic, editorial, proofreading, and people skills have made my career as an author possible. And a very special thank you to Sam Cherubin, who gave me much appreciated assistance with Ned's sonnet in Chapter Eighteen and who gets my vote for America's Poet Laureate. <http://samcherubin.com>

Thanks also to Jorge Luis Gaitan for help with the Spanish and to Sweet Maria's inspirational coffees, particularly their Puro Scuro Blend—coffee to brood by. Though available in the early part of this decade, we've taken some poetic license to see that Max can get his morning fix in 1995. <http://www.sweetmarias.com/>

The vastness of the heavens stretches my imagination—stuck on this carousel my little eye can catch one-million-year-old light. A vast pattern—of which I am a part . . . What is the pattern, or the meaning, or the why? It does not do harm to the mystery to know a little about it.

— Richard P. Feynman

Butterflies are not insects. They are self-propelled flowers.

— Mrs. Virginia Heinlein, *Tramp Royale*

Prologue

She woke with a start. She must have been riding on an air current. But for how long had no one been at the controls?

Turn left at the big river, her instincts had told her. But she had obviously missed the river. The landscape down below was not a lush tropical forest but a mixture of farmland, highways, and the skyline of a large city.

I've been going the wrong way all night. What am I supposed to do, now? She needed to find something to eat—fruit always sounded good—and get her bearings before she went farther off course.

She glided down toward the tarmac, closing her eyes at the last second—a bad habit for a flyer, but you are who you are.

When she opened her eyes again she saw a blue iridescent butterfly reflecting in the glass. A rock flew from nowhere and hit perilously close to her head ...

Chapter One

Butterfly Effect

Shane Eckland slept like the dead. He spent way too much time in Delta and precious little in REM. That's what Rachel-the-Psychologist always told him was *one* part of his problem. This morning he was traveling through treacle when the sound of children's laughter dragged him up from the depths.

Shane uncurled his limbs, sucked in a lungful of air, then peeked out through a crack under his left eyelid. "Where am I?"

A large blue butterfly fluttered down onto the U-Haul, followed by a loud thwack as a flying rock came from nowhere and hit the windshield perilously close to the insect. Unharmred, the butterfly lifted its wings and took off toward the sunrise.

"Stop that, you two!" a man's voice shouted.

"He started it!" a boy's voice called.

"Catch me!" another child's voice rang out.

Shane blinked both eyes open and tilted his chin side to side to crack his neck. He muttered, "Oh, yeah . . . Junction,"

then cranked down the window and breathed in the dry May air.

When he'd got too tired to drive another mile last night, he stopped at a lay-by just west of the Texas Hill Country hamlet and curled up in the front seat to sleep.

As the blue wings flitted their way east, Shane observed a man near the restrooms reaching out to grab a little boy. The boy—evidently the culprit in the offense against Lepidoptera—squealed “Nanny nanny boo boo!” and took off running. The man and a larger boy followed in pursuit, giggling and whooping.

The chase ended with the older boy tackling his little brother, who fell on his face and began to wail. The child's sobs were so annoyingly loud, his previously good-natured father picked him up by the arm and manhandled him into the car.

“Yikes!” Shane said. “Shades of the asylum.” He reached to the floor for the thermos and unscrewed the top. Only a drop of coffee splashed into the cup.

“Well, dang!”

Shane put on his sunglasses, eased out onto the highway, and followed the signs into Junction where he stopped at the first place that looked open. Immediately upon entering the diner, Shane threw his backpack into a booth, ordered coffee, and headed for the men's room.

The waitress was standing with her pad at the ready when he returned to the table. “What can I get you today?”

“An egg white omelet with vegetables, no cheese. Whole wheat toast, no butter. And a bowl of fruit—canned is fine, if you don't have fresh.”

“Egg white omelet?” the waitress asked.

“You use double the eggs and leave the yolks out.”

“I know that. I’ve just never had a man order one before.”

“I guess there’s a first time for everything,” Shane said.

“Guess so.”

Shane took a sip of coffee and unzipped his backpack. He had a big road map opened across the table when the waitress brought his food.

“How long to get to San Mateo?” he asked.

“The back way or through Boerne?” She traced a path across the map.

“Which is quicker?”

“Boerne,” she replied. “You goin’ the speed limit?”

“Well . . .”

“Two hours twenty tops.”

“Thanks!” Shane gave her a beatific smile and began to re-fold the map to align his route.

“Um, um, that’s one cutie pie!” he heard the waitress say to the cashier as she crossed back to the counter.

He’d finished his breakfast and was packing up when the waitress returned. “Can I get you anything else, hon?”

He slid out of the booth, “Fill my thermos?”

“Absolutely.”

“You guys sell any city maps here?” he asked while she poured.

“Not here. But they’ve got everything at the Save-A-Stop right where you get back on the highway.”

“Thanks! Guess I’ll hit the road then.”

Shane grinned to himself when he noticed the waitress and cashier’s reflections in the glass door tipping their heads to admire his cute behind as he exited the diner.

Chapter Two

Shrek Effect

Sometime after Lillie Cloutier had returned from the bathroom in the middle of the night and fallen back asleep, Barry Siefert rolled over on her and pinned her down.

When she woke on her back after the sun began its ascent, she tried to sit up, but found her limbs befuddlingly incapacitated. Barry's tubby tummy, a sausage arm, and a thigh as heavy as a tree trunk were splayed across her as if a Sequoia had fallen over in the forest and squished a cuddly little bunny.

She tried to wiggle free, but no joy. *At least I put my panties back on*, she shuddered. In the dark, Barry hadn't looked like Shrek. In the cold, nude light of day, *Oh, the horror!*

Lillie squirmed and jerked her left arm out, then scratched her nose and ruminated on the coming day, organizing her schedule. She'd been practicing keeping daily lists in her head since her favorite choreographer, Twyla Tharp, recommended the exercise at a pre-performance

lecture some years ago. After ten minutes memorizing her list, Lillie was up to number seventeen.

She sighed and glanced across the room. An iridescent blue butterfly resting on the other side of the window looked her in the eye.

Lillie watched the butterfly flit off into the morning then scanned Barry's man cave to take in the selection of Broadway show posters on the wall. The posters brought on a wave of nostalgia and a smile, but she had to grimace when she observed the photographs of Barry and his big head cozying up to an array of movie stars. Somehow Barry had always been able to wheedle has-beens and even the occasional A-list actor to come to the college. Serving as guest faculty, the stars of stage and screen lent an air of authenticity to the big-egoed director's dramatic arts program.

"Oh, no!" She hadn't seen it last night on the wall there right beside the bed. "Damn!" In the photograph, Lillie and several of her classmates were crowded around their hero director. Even then—especially then—Barry couldn't keep his hands to himself. His arm was wrapped possessively around Lillie's waist, his hand on her butt.

He didn't look like a beached whale twenty-something years ago. The Barry of then was trim, athletic, sexy. "Still got that gorgeous head of hair," Lillie murmured turning her head to inspect his thick, brown thatch. "Oh, it's a weave."

Barry's immense mass had continued to paralyze her from his position face-down on top of her. When his fleshy jaw jerked open and he suddenly lifted his head, she thought he might be waking up or, at least, roll off her. Instead, a fit of smoker's hack erupted from the caverns of his throat. His head turned and dropped like a bowling ball, a nasty goo dripping from the corner of his mouth.

Jesus save me! With her good hand, Lillie squeezed his gaping jaw shut. The leviathan snorted, but didn't otherwise budge.

She was little—always had been—and the new Barry possibly outweighed her by a hundred and fifty pounds. She was stronger than she looked, though, and knew a thing or two about leverage. Lillie braced against him with her left arm and dragged her leg out. With the combined force of her freed arm and leg, she heaved and pushed the dinosaur off her and onto his back.

Lillie sat up against the headboard and rubbed away the pins and needles. Once she could feel her legs again, she snuck out of bed.

Lillian, you should know better, her adult self said.

But, I do. I do know better. It was beyond my control.

Right, missy. Number eighteen. No drinking tonight!

Lillie dressed as quickly as possible, then took a minute in the bathroom to brush her teeth with her index finger and a dab of Barry's toothpaste.

Though a woman stared into the mirror, a child with short, tawny hair and dark pools for eyes gazed back. Lillie exhaled and shook her head, "Jail bait!" But she was years past jail bait. She'd been a year past it even in college when Barry popped her cherry.

"More like the face that launched a thousand ships," she brightened, smiling at herself in the mirror.

Make that the legs that launched a thousand ships, her reflection replied.

"You think you're so clever," the real Lillie said.

Barry was leaning on his elbow lighting a cigarette when she came out of the bathroom.

"Where you going, Little Bit?"

"I'm supposed to be at the hospital."

"Are you sick?"

"Go back to sleep, Barry." Lillie turned and hurried out of his pathetic bachelor pad as fast as her tiny feet could carry her.

Santos Martinez stood on the porch and opened her umbrella. Her purse strap secured around her shoulder, she climbed down the steps then bobbed along the sidewalk toward the bus stop. The sun's rays would be more ferocious this afternoon, but Santos carried an umbrella whenever she went out. She had grown up in the blazing Texas heat and sometimes that tiny bit of shade was more welcome than a barrel of water.

"Wait, Yaya!"

Santos heard the slap of Rosa's flip-flops along the sidewalk behind her. The old lady turned, lifting the edge of the umbrella so she could see the young woman who stood towering above her.

"Sí?"

"You forgot your bus pass," Rosa said.

"Gracias, nieta," Santos said, taking the slip of paper from her granddaughter. "I go to Miss Violeta's, now."

Rosa watched as her grandmother straightened her umbrella, turned, and continued down the sidewalk. All you could see of Santos was the huge umbrella, the polyester print skirt, the thick ankles, and the misshapen slip-ons that half a century ago fit perfectly.

At the bus stop, Santos waited in the queue then folded her umbrella when it was her turn to board. She took a seat near the front and glanced out the window as the bus

pulled away from the curb. A big blue butterfly came from nowhere and glued itself to the pane right beside her.

“Hola, pequeño. ¿Cómo estás?”

Santos’s new friend kept her entertained for the ride from the east side of town, across the interstate, and past the city hall to the historic district, just west of the courthouse square. When she stepped off the bus at her stop, the butterfly hitched a ride on her umbrella to the gates of the *Sombras del Pasado*.

Violet Cloutier, the owner of the quaint block of apartments, had fallen in love with the *Sombras* when she immigrated to San Mateo from the French Quarter nearly fifty years earlier. She had been a young history professor then, homesick for New Orleans. The shady courtyard with its bubbling fountain and luxurious flower beds called to her like *Bali Ha’i* and invited her to stay.

Santos opened the gate and entered the courtyard.

Inside apartment A-3, Gail Sampson, petted her cat Ginger and cursed at the messy kitchen. She picked up a cereal box from the counter and began searching through the cabinets for a clean bowl.

“Pigs live here!” she hollered and stomped into Edward’s study.

The study was a disaster area on another scale with stacks of tottering books and periodicals, half-filled glasses with clogs of mold floating in them, and dozens of used ice cream cups cluttering the available surfaces.

Gail moved to the computer and swiped a finger across the monitor. “Yuck!” she said, and slumped down into

Edward's new, state-of-the-art Aeron chair. She rocked side-to-side as she inspected the dusty papers scattered on her boyfriend's desk. The last dated notation was the middle of March, with the pencil that had made the note still lying across it.

"Lazy sack of shit," Gail said just before she sneezed.

"Meow," said Ginger.

"I agree," Gail said to the cat.

Ginger followed her fuming mistress into the bedroom. "Edward, this isn't my job!"

Edward Gold was unconscious. He never let Gail forget that it was exhausting work being a writer. In spite of banging around in the kitchen, hollering obscenities from his office, and muttering at him while she dressed, Gail's good-for-nothing boyfriend never once stirred. She slammed the door when she left the apartment, knowing even that wouldn't wake him.

As she emerged from A-3, Gail saw Santos attempting to lift a heavy rug over a wrought iron railing.

"Morning, Santos. Can I give you a hand?" Without waiting for a reply, Gail set her purse and satchel on a nearby bench and helped the elderly woman heave the rug onto the rail.

"Gracias, miss. Have you seen Miss Lillie?"

"Not lately," Gail said.

"I got here this morning and the coffee pot was all day to the bottom, and the counter top a hot as I can't tell you," Santos said.

"Really?"

"I don't think Miss Lillie come home last night."

"Maybe Edward will know. He's sleeping now, but I'm sure he'll emerge from his cocoon the minute I'm gone."

“Yes, miss. Have a nice day, miss.”

“You, too, Santos.”

While Gail headed out the gate to go to her temp job downtown, Santos picked up the nearby broom and began to beat the rug.

In B-3, Maxon Moore leaned against the counter and tapped his foot while he waited for the microwave to ding. The emaciated face reflecting back at him was a ghost of his former self. Once considered dapper and handsome by his boyfriend, Jeffrey—now luxuriating in the great bathhouse in the sky—and by his students, male and female alike, the retired physics professor today resembled a death camp survivor.

Maxon tore open a tea bag that said Essiac Tea on the label, and dropped it into the cup of scalding water. He carried his cup through the apartment and out onto the balcony.

Below in the courtyard, Santos was lifting a heavy rug off the railing in front of A-1.

“Good morning, Santos,” Maxon called out.

“Buenos días, Señor Max.”

“How’s it coming along in there?”

“Ay, Señor Max, el Diablo está allí.”

Santos sighed loudly and returned to the door of A-1. She made the sign of the cross and Maxon could hear her mumbled prayer, “Padre, Hijo y Espiritu Santo,” as she re-entered the apartment.

“Now or never,” Maxon said, and tossed down the contents of the cup.

Chapter Three

Hornpipes and Haints

After a cup of coffee and a donut in the cafeteria, Lillie took the elevator up to Violet's room. Violet Cloutier was wearing her silk and lace dressing gown instead of the paper thing she had violently refused to put on when she was admitted to the hospital the previous day. While Violet dozed in a drugged sleep, Lillie spread her work out on the plush sofa of the executive suite. Her work alternated between consulting the *Carousel* script, making notes in a thin spiral notebook, and occasionally scrambling off the couch to try out a dance step.

Lillie was humming a hornpipe, hopping on one leg, and toeing her off-foot in and out to the side, when Dr. Paul Brenner tapped on the door and entered the room.

"Well, hello," Paul said. "I didn't know you were in town."

"It's not a secret. I'm choreographing the summer show. Just getting some stuff ready for the auditions tomorrow."

Paul looked at Violet's chart, checked her pulse, and scribbled a memo on the top sheet. "How's she feeling? Any concerns, complaints?" he asked.

"None so far," said Lillie. "But you know Vi. She'll have plenty to say when she wakes up. The nurse said she had some tests yesterday?"

"Let's go out there, discuss a couple of things." Paul took Lillie by the arm and led her into the hall. "It's not good, Lillie," he said. "Colon cancer. Looks like it's a hearty Stage Two."

"But, she seemed just fine when I was here Easter ..."

"It has obviously been growing a while. She was due for her 5-year colonoscopy last year, and she wouldn't schedule it," Paul continued. "Said she'd had one before and was never going through that torture again."

"They are unpleasant ... I've heard," Lillie said.

"We shouldn't have that lovely experience for another seven or eight years, anyway."

"Not looking forward to it ..."

"Nor am I," Paul agreed. "Then earlier in the year she was having some stomach cramps, and gas, and bloating, and she refused the colonoscopy again."

"She didn't tell me ..."

"Little old ladies seldom discuss these things with their granddaughters."

"Or great nieces," Lillie corrected. "So, what's next?"

"I'm going to run that motherfucker tomorrow ... see if it's just polyps or if we're going to have to do a bowel resection."

"She's not going to like it ..."

"Yeah, well, she doesn't have to like it."

"I guess not."

"Let's change the subject. How about dinner tonight? I get off around four, give or take."

"I can't, Paul."

“We never officially broke our engagement, you know. The longest betrothal in history . . .”

“Does Gloria know?”

“Come, on, Lillie. I can go out with an old friend. We’ll remember things past.”

“I’ve got class.”

“Some other time, then.”

“I don’t think so, Paul. Give my regrets to your wife.”

After she made her tentative way back into A-1, Santos spent the remainder of the morning giving the place the best cleaning she could—under the circumstances.

She had opened the windows wide in order to give the evil spirits a chance to escape. She had swept the construction dirt and rubble into a large pile to the side of the front door.

At one point, the handyman—wearing his uniform of chambray shirt and faded blue jeans—came in.

“Hola, Santos. Is Lillie around? No one answered upstairs. She said she had a list for me, or something . . .”

“Ay, Señor George. She not come home last night and the coffee pot was all day to the bottom.”

“Well, I’ll just clear some of this stuff out of your way, then.”

“Sí, Señor George. Muchas gracias.”

George began to collect his ladder, drop cloth, and several paint cans.

Once George had taken his load out and Santos was again alone with the ghosts, she looked at the pile of debris by the door. “Ay, Maria, where’s the dustpan?”

After an exhaustive search, she found the implement peeking through the crack on the other side of the bathroom door. She sucked in a big breath and hurried in and out of the bathroom quick as she could to retrieve it.

With her dustpan now full of rubbish from the dirt pile, Santos headed for the kitchen. The trash barrel sat where it had been the day before but was still loaded to the top.

“Señor George! Señor George,” she called. “You take out the trash, por favor?” But George had gone.

While dust bunnies and dirt dribbled from the dustpan, Santos fumbled through the drawers and cabinets looking for the trash bags she knew had been there the day before. She reached with her foot to swing open a low cabinet door. Inside were only a couple of sponges, a bottle of vinegar, and a few plastic sacks from the grocery store.

Santos shook the crud into one of the plastic sacks, whereupon the thick, nasty debris immediately slid onto her foot through a hole in the bottom.

“¡Dios mío! Where’s the trash bags?” There was nothing to do but sweep up the pesky dirt one more time and carry the dustpan out to the courtyard where Santos dumped the refuse into the flower bed.

Santos crossed herself as she re-entered A-1, then picked through the trash pile until she located a scrap of paper. She found a carpenter’s pencil, scribbled a note on the scrap, and placed it on the counter, weighing the paper down with a small piece of sheetrock.

If she didn’t get out of A-1 soon, she’d end up spending the night at the *Sombras* with the ghosts of the Johnsons. Santos closed the door behind her and headed upstairs to finish out her workday in the safety of Miss Violeta’s apartment.

Chapter Four

Garden Apartment

At about the same time Santos was folding the laundry in B-1, Lillie was getting ready for her class at Miss Adeline's Studio of Performing Arts. The class was Dance Aerobics and an assortment of seniors were in the process of checking the knots on their jogging shoes and filling their water glasses from the tap in the dressing room, while Lillie changed out the tape in the jam box.

George, the handyman from the *Sombras* and also one of Lillie's students, squatted down beside her. "I was looking for you at the *Sombras* this morning. You were supposed to leave me a list."

"Oh, sorry, George. I meant to write one up. I just forgot. Things are crazy right now ... Can I call you when it's ready?"

"No problem. So, what's it going to be today?" he asked.

"Big Band all right?"

"Long as it's not Tina Turner," he replied.

"I can't believe you don't like Tina Turner," a seventy-something granny said. "That's my favorite set."

“Just warn me when we’re doing it again, so I can skip class,” George said.

While the students chatted and congregated toward the center of the floor, Lillie pushed the Play button. The intro to *Jersey Bounce* began.

“Five, six, seven, eight,” Lillie called. “Toe drop in-2-3-4-5-6-7-8; out-2-3-4-5-6-7-8; in-and-out-3-4-5-6-7-8; out-and-in-3-4-5-6-7-Change. And one ...”

When the class was about half-way through and they were finishing the moves for *I Got A Gal In Kalamazoo*, Lillie saw a young man enter the Studio. He was tall with curly black hair and eyes that sparkled like blue ice when he gazed through the doorway into the dance room. “Somebody’s grandson here to pick her up?” Lillie asked.

“Maybe he wants to ask about auditions,” George said.

“He’ll have to wait until we’re through,” Lillie said. “Get a quick drink everyone, we’ve got a seven-minute song next.”

Even though she didn’t intend to give the invader the time of day, Lillie continued to peek out at him from the corner of her eye. *Oh my, is he gorgeous!* The godlike youth stood in the small lobby, his hands framing his face, as he peered into the dance room through the plate glass viewing window.

Apparently not in a hurry, he seemed absorbed watching the seniors dance to *One O’Clock Jump*. Just standing there in his gym shorts and wife-beater, the young man could make your heart stop. And to top off his native good looks, he was muscular and tan ... like perhaps a surfer or a tai chi Sifu who taught on sunny mornings in the park. *What’s a body to do?* Lillie wondered to herself while she called out the steps.

He turned and wandered across the waiting room where he seemed to be reading every notice on the bulletin board. She'd put one up last week about auditions for *Carousel*. *Maybe he really is trying out for the play*, Lillie thought as the music started for *Tuxedo Junction*.

He was sitting on the couch now—directly across from Lillie, though a room away. He studied a newspaper with his steely blue eyes and was circling and crossing off items in the want ads.

She forgot about him during *King Porter Stomp* and they were in the middle of *Pennsylvania 6-5000* when she noticed he had turned onto his side on the guest couch and dozed off.

The music stopped.

“Wonderful class, Lillie,” Mable, the seventy-something granny, said. “I wish we had you all the time.”

“You don’t know how much I needed that,” another woman said. *What’s her name?* Lillie mused as she smiled at the woman and nodded.

“Come to San Antonio, you could keep me in business.”

“We would if we could,” Mable said. “Wouldn’t we, Eva?”
Eva! That’s it! Eva, Mable, George, Brenda, Dan, Tonie . . .

“Thanks, Lillie. That got all the kinks out.” George’s comment interrupted Lillie’s memory game.

“I hope you’ll come to auditions tomorrow, George. You’d be the perfect Starkeeper.”

“So, you’ll put in a good word for me, huh? I haven’t acted since college.”

“I’ll do what I can,” Lillie promised.

“See you tomorrow, then,” George said as he walked through the doorway into the waiting room. “Hey, kid, you

lost or something?" Lillie heard him say as the visitor stirred awake.

Lillie took her time picking up the studio. Then she checked the bathroom and dressing room. She locked the back door, turned off the lights, and, finally, made her way through the classroom to the waiting room.

He was still there. "May I help you?" she asked.

"Miss Adeline?"

"No, she's away for the summer. I'm the substitute."

"I think it's you I want, then."

"About the auditions?"

"No, the garden apartment."

"Garden ...? I don't think so."

The young man pulled out his newspaper and started reading. "Garden apartment ... blah, blah, blah ... Perfect for student or couple. Available immediately. Inquire at Miss Adeline's ..."

"Let me see that," Lillie grabbed the paper from him. He pointed to an ad that had been circled. "No, no ..." she said.

"Is something wrong?"

"Those bastards, it shouldn't be in there yet. The remodeling's not done. The ad's not supposed to run for at least another week."

"It says, 'available immediately.'"

"I don't have time for this ..."

"What do you suggest I do for a week? Sleep in the park?"

"It's wrong. I'm sorry. Shoot!"

"Come on, Miss ..."

"Lillie ..."

"Lillie ... What's a little sawdust?"

“Shoot! Damn it! ... I’m going over there now. Do you want to follow me?”

“Lady wins the jackpot!”

He stood to one side while she locked the door. “You know I could take your aerobics class for you, if you ever need a substitute.”

“You?” she asked.

“I taught Senior Fitness back home.”

“Do tell.”

There was a U-Haul van parked on the street near the entrance to the studio. The young man climbed into the van and put it in gear while Lillie threw her things into her Ford hatchback and started the engine. The van followed the hatchback down a steep hill and then east to a residential section within the city center’s historic district. When they arrived at the *Sombras*, Lillie motioned for the youth to park along the curb across the street from the front gate.

She made a U-turn, then pulled up beside him, lowering her window.

“Give me a minute. The resident parking is in back.”

He was standing at the gate peering into the courtyard, when Lillie returned.

“*Sombras del Pasado*,” he murmured.

“It means ...”

“I spent a summer in Mazatlán.”

“Well, then.” She pushed open the gate and led him across the courtyard to A-1.

They stepped inside, dodging the pile of debris that Santos had been unable to clear away earlier for want of trash bags.

“Whoa! Sawdust is right,” the young man said.

“My great aunt owns the building. We live upstairs.”

"Must be very nice up there," he said, wandering into the kitchen.

"I tried to tell you." Lillie reached for the scrap of paper that lay in a conspicuous spot on the kitchen counter.

She stifled a giggle as she studied Santos's note.

"What is it?"

"A note from the cleaning lady."

"What's it say?"

"No trash bags. Pretty soon you pick it with a shovel."

He was standing in the bedroom. "Where's the furniture? It's supposed to be furnished." He held the newspaper up to Lillie.

"We had to move it out to do the remodeling."

He was back in the kitchen, now, opening and closing all the cabinets.

"Kitchen's in pretty good shape."

"I don't think the Johnsons were much on cooking. Not in here, anyway."

"Of course, you get spoiled after you spend any time with the Cordon Bleu." He sniffed the air and leaned his head inside the oven. "Do you smell something? Some chemical, something?"

"What? You mean like gas?" Lillie said.

"No a kind of acrid ... I don't know ... like tires on a bonfire ..."

"Sorry," she said, knowing full-well where the smell came from. "I don't smell too good."

They were back in the living room. "What do the bills run, then?" he asked.

"Uh, I've only been back a couple of weeks."

"Is it wired for cable?"

"I ... I think that's separate. The bath's down there."

The young man walked into the brand-new, gleaming bathroom.

“Whoa! Looks like it belongs on a spaceship.”

“It just needed a little repainting. There’s also new carpet in the hall.”

“Are those double-paned windows?”

“Huh?”

“You know, thermal insulation?”

“Uh, gee, I . . .”

“I wouldn’t quit your day job just yet.”

“Well, if you can’t tell by looking . . .”

“A fella’s got to know what he’s getting. Can your aunt maybe tell me?”

“She’s in the hospital.”

“Well, what’s it renting for, then?”

“Doesn’t the ad say?”

“Never mind. Just show me where to sign my John Henry.”

“What?”

“I’ll take it.”

“Look, I don’t know where Vi put the papers. You’ll have to wait until next week . . . Monday, anyway.”

“I need a place tonight.”

“But Santos has to finish the cleaning. And we have to get the handyman to move the furniture back in.”

“But I have to turn in the van by eight-thirty.”

“All right, all right, stay, geeze,” Lillie said. “I’ll see what I can come up with tomorrow . . . in my spare time.”

She opened the front door.

He followed on her heels. “Do I get a key?”

Lillie wiggled a key off her key ring and handed it to him.

“Is this for the front gate, too?”

“There’s just a bolt for the gate. Emergency services and the mailman have to be able to get in,” she said, and headed for the spiral staircase that stood in the corner between the downstairs units.

“Lillie,” the young man called. “Don’t you want a deposit, at least?”

Her impatience far past its limit, Lillie slumped and turned to, once again, deal with the handsome nuisance. “Tomorrow, okay?”

“Sure. Fine.” He shook his head and ambled out through the gate.

Lillie stopped and backed her way down the staircase when she saw Santos descending from the top. Impatiently, though not impolitely, Lillie wagged her leg and drummed the banister while she waited at the bottom.

It took a while for Santos to creep down one step at a time. “Buenas tardes, Miss Lillie,” Santos said when she had reached the final step.

“Buenas tardes, Santos.”

“How Miss Violeta, today?”

“She’s enjoying herself . . . pretending she’s vacationing in a ritzy hotel that has bad food.”

“You tell her if she don’t like what the doctors do to her, I know a man can cure anything.”

“I’ll tell her.”

“I be backs, if God is willing,” Santos said, heading for the gate.

“Have a nice night!” Lillie said, climbed the staircase, and let herself into B-1.

Lillie checked the thermostat, then jumped into the shower. She’d felt icky all day, starting with the hungover

realization this morning that she really had slept with Barry. Appraising her reflection in the mirror when she toweled off afterward, the face of a thin young boy stared back. Two decades ago, everyone had called her “Peter Pan”. But now, not so much.

Lillie was chugging down a large glass of water in the kitchen when she spied another note from Santos, this one next to the coffee pot. “All day to the bottom,” she chuckled, immediately cheered.

Sometimes she’d rather drink than cook. “I’ll have fruit for supper,” she spoke to the wall and, ignoring her resolution of earlier in the day, proceeded to fix a pitcher of Mai Tais.

Lillie hauled the pitcher and a couple of glasses outside and plopped herself down in one of the rocking chairs that lined the balcony.

“Huhhhhhhhhhh,” she sighed after her first sip, rocked back, and put her feet on the rail.

She hadn’t been there long, when Max came out of B-3. “What are we drinking tonight?”

“I thought you’d quit drinking.”

“One won’t hurt. I’ve decided to try a slightly different tack.”

“I brought an extra glass, just in case . . .”

“Perfect.” Max poured himself a large one and took the rocker next to Lillie.

“Good day for you?” he asked.

Lillie sighed again. “All day to the bottom.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Vi’s got cancer.”

“Yes, I expected as much.”

"I don't know why I let Barry talk me into doing this show," she said.

"A little something to pass the time. And I'm sure the money doesn't hurt."

"Rick was on the recorder, again ... he wants to talk."

"So, don't."

"Why couldn't I have married someone like you, instead of that ... that ... person?" Lillie asked.

"I seem to recall proposing once," Max replied.

"You were drunk as a lord and Jeffrey was only gone for the weekend."

"Yes, well, Jeffrey might have complicated things a bit."

"I'm so weary of the same old thing. Over and over. Nothing new under the sun," Lillie sighed.

"I look at it more like the tides, constant and dependable," Max said.

"Sometimes I see someone, a handsome stranger or a disconsolate millionaire. A lonesome celebrity. Young Adonis. And I think, 'I could make him happy.'"

Just below, the new tenant entered the courtyard with an armload of boxes.

"There he is," Lillie said, nudging her chin in the lad's direction.

"Young Adonis?"

"That—person I just rented the Johnsons' apartment to."

"What's his name?" Max asked.

"I ... uh ... fuck."

The fellow in question balanced the boxes on his knee and raised a hand in greeting.

"Hi, I'm Shane."

"It's Shane," Max said to Lillie, then called down to the young man, "Maxon Moore, pleased to meet you!"

“Just unpacking,” Shane said and carried his load into A-1.

“When I was married,” Lillie said, “I had to work like hell to keep from having a fling with every new, interesting person in pants who came along.”

“So, you were faithful to Rick.”

“I was so stupid.”

“How could you have known?”

“Now, we’re divorced, and is there anybody new? ... Of course not. It’s the same old boring parade, over and over.”

“Poor thing.”

“I actually had a game in college. Did I ever tell you this?” she asked. “Whenever I went to a party I’d count how many men there I’d previously slept with. I think my record was four.”

“Really?” Max said.

“Today I’ve already got two.”

“Is that a fact?” he asked.

“Do you know that clown asked me out for dinner?”

“Which clown?”

“Vi’s doctor. He threw me over for that sniveling Gloria, to whom he is still married. And twenty years later, he has the nerve to ask me out.”

“Shameful.”

“And Barry of all people! Boy, do I know how to start the day off right.”

“Then, it’s three then,” Max said.

“What?”

“Three today. And as long as you’re here for the summer, it’ll be at least one every day.”

“Oh, Max. I’m sorry.”

“Not exactly the life of the party, I’m afraid. But I still might have a tiny bit of sex appeal left, don’t I? You can be honest, now.”

“You’re wonderful, Max. Truly the only decent man in the world—the universe. Believe me, I should know.”

“Thank you, I think.”

Lillie topped off her glass. Even though he’d said he was starting to drink again, she noticed that Max had only had a sip or two of his. “Let’s talk about something else. Haven’t you had enough of me and my pathetic problems?”

“Don’t look at them as problems, Lillie Belle. Look at them as insurmountable opportunities. There, I almost made you smile.”

“And you must be feeling all right.”

“Much better ... now that I’ve had my nightly fix.”

Shane appeared in the courtyard with another load of boxes. The pair on the balcony had been oblivious to his trips in and out after their brief introduction. The flash of movement below caught Lillie’s eye and she noticed again his tight buns and fairly awesome biceps.

“Cordon Bleu, my ass,” Lillie said.

“Say, what?”

“He said he studied at the Cordon Bleu.”

“Who?”

“That—Shane. Little prick!”

“Yes, but he’s our little prick,” Max replied.

“Vi’s gonna kill me,” Lillie said.

“Why ever for?”

“I don’t know anything about him. Didn’t get any references.”

“For shame.”

Shane reappeared below and was in the process of locking the door to A-1. He looked up to the balcony. "Guess I'll be taking the U-Haul back. Night, folks!"

"Good night," Max replied as Shane walked out to the street and closed the gate behind him.

"Vi's going to ask why I didn't get references ... financial statements."

"You should be spanked."

"She's going to call me Lillian."

"Tsk. Tsk."

In a little boy's voice—nothing like Shane's—Lillie said, "Don't you want a deposit?"

Violet's niece knew her great aunt well.

"Lillian!" Violet swore, when, later that night, Lillie returned to the hospital.

"It's all your fault, Vi."

"Of course it is, child."

"You should have raised me better."

"That's an understatement."

"You know I'm the worst at that sort of thing."

"Yes, I know."

"And, yet, I'm the one responsible for renting the apartment. You should have had a leasing company do it. Or Max, or Santos, for crying out loud."

"Santos show the apartment? Really, Lillian."

"I've got enough troubles of my own."

"Puberty or change-of-life?"

"Take your pick." Lillie sighed and sat on the edge of her great aunt's bed.

Violet giggled. "Santos! I'd like to see that through a two-way mirror. 'And this is the baño. Be sure you put the top down after you use.'" She patted Lillie's shoulder. They grinned at each other, then both burst out laughing.

Tears streaming down her face, Lillie could hardly get the words out to quote another Santosism, "Hail Mary, around the world ten times." She lay her head in Violet's lap and sobbed with laughter.

"At least she'd get a deposit," Violet said, shaking her head thoughtfully.

"I'll do it, Auntie, I promise."

"I think I'd better go home tomorrow, take care of things myself."

"You're staying right here, Vi."

"If you had to eat this dreadful food, you'd . . ."

Lillie stood up, her hands on her hips. "It won't be any better back home and you know it. Paul's going to put you on a diet."

"Let him try. I've gone this long eating whatever the hell I like."

"And look where it got you."

"We don't all live a life of regrets, child."

Lillie sighed and slumped into the cushy sofa.

"Sit up straight, dear. You'd never know you were a chorine by your posture."

Lillie sighed again and shifted in her seat.

Chapter Five

Auditions

Shane was used to being able to sleep soundly, even when he slept rough. But last night had been uncharacteristically uncomfortable on the pallet on the floor.

Sometime after jogging home from the truck rental place, he'd had to face the fact that the adventure really had begun. Under his present financial circumstances—owing to Rachel's firm hold over the trust account—there was no predicting what might lie ahead. He tossed and turned through the night.

After finally dozing off, he'd slept for less than an hour, then jerked awake again just before sunrise. "Guess I'll go for a run," he announced to the empty apartment. "Clear my head . . . pick up a cup of coffee on the way back."

A car crept along the curb as Shane entered the courtyard and a newspaper flew over the gate. He picked up the paper and slid it out of its plastic sleeve. "What day is it anyways?" he asked himself.

The masthead read Saturday, May 27, 1995. Shane took a peek at the headlines in the early morning light.

More of the same, another juror had been dismissed in the OJ Simpson trial, a woman who had drowned her two children was found competent to stand trial, a US Navy helicopter had rescued an Iranian vessel stranded for three days in the Persian Gulf, President Clinton had renewed China's favored nation trade privileges.

The front page also had a teaser just above the banner.

Auditions for Summer Musical. C2

The announcement on page C2 had the same information he'd seen on the poster in Miss Adeline's studio yesterday, together with short biographies of the director, musical director, and choreographer.

Lillian Cloutier grew up in San Mateo and attended San Mateo College, studying drama and dance. She danced in "Chicago" in its final three months on Broadway. After touring in the US and Europe for several years, Ms. Cloutier opened her own dance studio in San Antonio which she still operates today. We are delighted to have her back home for the City Theatre's summer musical production of Rodgers & Hammerstein's "Carousel".

By now, Shane had made himself comfortable with the newspaper and was sitting in a wrought iron chair, his feet propped up on the brick wall of the fountain. A thin man with a hawkish face came out of the apartment across the way.

"Hi," Shane said.

"Morning," the man replied. He hugged his bathrobe around him and began searching the ground near the fountain.

“Looking for this?” Shane said. He re-folded the paper and handed it to the man. “I didn’t think anyone would mind. I moved in last night.”

“You’re kidding. The Johnsons are barely cold.”

“What? Did they die, or something?”

“Lillie didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“Never mind. I’m Edward, Ned Gold. A-3.”

“Shane Eckland. Who’s A-2?”

“No one. Storage. The City’s trying to make the landlady put in an elevator there.”

“Are they?”

“But the old bird’s holding out. At least since Gail and I have been here.”

“Gail your wife?”

“No, we’re uh, no. But Miss Cloutier thinks . . . well, the lease and all . . .” Ned slapped the newspaper against his leg.

“Of course.”

“Not that she wouldn’t want to. But how can I? I mean, I don’t even have a job.”

“I figured you for a professor at SMC or something,” Shane said.

“Uh, no. Almost, I mean. I finished my coursework, was a TA some. But not this summer. I’ve got to write the dissertation.”

“I’m guessing English Lit, am I right?”

“*Swift and Platonic Love*.”

“No way. Didn’t he make it with Esther?” Shane asked.

“Which Esther?”

“Stella. He married her, right?”

“No! That’s a perverse rumor. The man was celibate,” Ned replied.

“Oh, get real. Swift had some serious zot-zotz, but he wasn’t a monk. Probably ran off Varina trying to have anal intercourse.”

“The times were not sexually permissive. He wouldn’t have dared.”

“Aw, it’s dirty, but he does it,” Shane said. “Hasn’t that always been the way with men? And why else all the scatological references and the baby talk?”

“How do you know so much about Swift, anyway?” Ned asked.

“My brother read me *Gulliver* when I was a kid.”

The door to A-3 opened and a woman appeared in the doorway.

“Edward!”

“Here!” Ned waved, then turned back to Shane. “That’s her, Gail.”

Gail’s fists were on her hips and she tapped her foot. “Do you think the eggs will be worth eating cold and grey?”

“Coming. I’d better run,” Ned said over his shoulder.

“Hi, Gail, I’m Shane. Nice to meet you, Ned. Guess I’ll head out, now.”

After the door to A-3 had closed behind Ned, Shane put his foot on the edge of the fountain and stretched his hamstrings. He swung his arms in various directions and did a few waist bends. He jogged around the courtyard, then opened the gate and headed toward a track he’d seen on his way home from the truck rental place.

Ned followed Gail back into A-3 and obediently sat down at the table, his plate of food no longer steaming.

“I’m not the best cook in the world,” Gail said.

"It's edible." Ned gagged down a small bite.

"I don't know why I even bother anymore. You always pick at your food. Pick, pick, pick."

"I don't like cold eggs."

"Is that my fault?"

"No, of course not. To tell you the truth, I never really cared for eggs that much at all."

"So ... I'm supposed to read your mind, now?"

"It doesn't matter."

"It's not like we have money to waste on food you won't even eat."

"Uh-huh."

"Or like I have gobs of free time to cook for you. If my time is worth anything."

Ned rose from his seat. "Have you seen my Swift? I've got to look something up."

"So ... do you want me to throw it out?" she asked.

"Do whatever you like with it," he said.

"Then I'll save it for your lunch."

"Would you just throw it out?"

"I don't know what you expect me to do, really," Gail said. "I gave up any hope of a real career to support you in your very important research. And you can't find your Swift."

"Could we perhaps once have a different argument?" Ned turned and headed down the hall. He had just found his biography of Swift when he heard her holler at the top of her voice, "And you can clean your own fucking office!"

Lillie slept like a baby and awoke Saturday less hungover than the day before. After breakfast, she collected her jam-box and notes and left for a meeting with the directing team at the college.

After the meeting, they headed for the auditorium to start the auditions. Barry sat in the middle of the auditorium beside Patricia Collins, the musical director. In the row behind, Lillie sat with the costume lady, Cynthia Howell.

During the first round of auditions, the four directors would listen to the actors read for the main speaking roles. After that the actors and singers would retire to a rehearsal hall with Patricia for the singing auditions while, on the main stage, Lillie would teach choreography to the dance leads and corps hopefuls to prepare them for the dancing auditions.

At that point, Barry and Cynthia would crisscross between the two venues to give their input on the final selections.

As the acting auditions wound to an end, a young woman named Martha had just finished reading for the part of Julie Jordan.

"Thank you, Martha," Barry said. He stood and announced, "Dancers who wish to try out for Louise and the Carnival Boy should stay here to rehearse the dance sequence with Miss Cloutier. Chorus hopefuls and leads, please follow me and Mrs. Collins across the hall for singing auditions."

Lillie made her way down the aisle, climbed the steps that led to the stage, and spoke to the dancers who had assembled there. "Let's get started, shall we? Men come

forward, please. This is the Carnival Boy's entrance in the Act Two Ballet."

She turned her back to the group, demonstrating as she spoke, while the dancers followed in a clumsy mass behind her.

"Okay B-Plus at Stage Left."

Half of the group began to move to Stage Right. "Come back, you guys! That's Stage Right. Stage Left is the side of the Stage to your left, as you're facing the audience."

When she had their attention again, she said, "Let's just start in Fifth Position with your arms relaxed."

"Miss, what's Fifth Position?" a high school kid asked.

Lillie turned back to the motley looking group. "For Fifth, turn your legs out from the hips . . ."

Many of the crew tipped their heads and wrinkled their brows.

"Let me show you. Put the right foot in front of the left. Plant the right heel down and point the toes out."

Lillie demonstrated as she described the position, and the dancers attempted to follow. "Then do the reverse with the left. Plant the left toes down behind the right heel and screw the left heel in."

"Screw, miss?" the teenager said.

"Sorry, sorry. Rotate, I mean. Okay, from Stage Left . . ." The eleven men were now so clumped on the left side of the stage that no one had a clear view of the choreographer.

"Well, that's not going to work . . . y'all come back and learn the sequence at Center. After you've learned it, the movement will come from Stage Left. Okay from Fifth, take B-Plus."

"Miss, what's . . .?" it was the high school boy again.

“Lift the right heel, and with the weight on the top of the foot, place the right foot behind the left. Keep the left in Fifth!” *Jesus!*

Lillie demonstrated the choreography, calling out the steps, while the men watched.

Step sauté Right. Step Left across, Right into grand jeté. Weight on the Left and sauté. Glissade back, piqué Right, and inside turn with the arms in a circle.

Step soutenu turn, soutenu turn, prep pirouette dedans arms Fifth.

Step Left piqué arabesque, glissade tour jeté, prep pirouette dehors arms First.

Step sauté, Step Left-Right hop, plié Left, Barrel Turn one-two three-four five-six, lunge Left and reach Left.

She turned to face the group. “How are we doing?”

“Miss, can we see that again?” It was the high school kid, of course.

I’m going to remember you, Number Two, Lillie thought to herself.

After an exhausting hour with the men, Lillie sent them to the hall to practice. “Female dancers who want to try out for Louise, please come to the stage to learn your audition counts!”

When Shane walked into the theatre building that afternoon, he saw a group of men “dancing” in the hall. One of the men, who seemed to have had some dance training previously, was practicing the choreography, at the same time trying to

help some of the less fleet-of-foot master a series of intricate steps.

“Hi, I’m Shane. I’m kind of late. Can you show me the steps?”

“I’m Julian. You trying out for the dance lead?

“I thought I might.”

“You do ballet?”

“It’s running and jumping, right? Like track and field.”

“And weight lifting, too.”

“Sure, how hard can it be?”

Lillie was rehearsing the women when Barry returned to the stage at the end of her second hour. She sat at Center facing the stage, and called out the steps while the women danced. “And sissone, two, three, fouetté, and five-six, seven-eight.” She gave Barry a little nod when he squatted down beside her.

“Time for the auditions,” Barry said.

“All right, Ladies,” Lillie said. “Thank you. I’ll take my seat with Mr. Siefert, now. Let’s have the men first. Numbers One through Six, please.”

While Lillie and Barry moved down to the auditorium, the male dancers returned to the stage. “Ready, Leo,” Lillie said to the pianist.

The pianist played the introduction and the six men waded through their eight bar step.

Barry leaned over to Lillie. “I like Two. The others ... well.”

“Three might have something,” she said.

“Okay,” he spoke in her ear. Then, loudly, he called out, “Two and Three, wait a few minutes—we’ll want to see you one more time. Let’s see Seven through Twelve.”

“Twelve?” Lillie said. “There were only eleven when I worked with them.”

“An extra came in when they were in the hall.” The next six auditionees were moving toward Center Stage.

“Oh, no!” Lillie cried.

“What?”

“It’s that wise-acre from the *Sombras*.”

“Who?”

“Never mind. He can’t be any good.”

“Music!” Barry said to Leo.

Of this group, Julian stood out as the best dancer, by far. Lillie thought so, anyway. But after the men had finished the choreography and stood quietly at attention, Barry seemed to be on Cloud Nine.

“Boy, he’s amazing! Twelve. Who is that?”

“Dammit!”

“Twelve!” Barry called to the stage. “That’s him, Lillie. That’s the Carnival Boy.”

“I really don’t think we should risk it, Barry. Even you can see he’s no ballerina. Now Ten, Julian, at least he’s got some training.” Lillie raised her head and called to the stage. “Ten!”

“Ten’s got the technique, but you can see he’s plastic—not dramatic. Not athletic and sexy like my boy. And sensitive. Twelve’s a natural.”

“Barry, please! He’s not a dancer.”

“Ahhh, you’re a magician with non-dancers. The guy has presence. Boy, does he have presence.”

“My gut instinct says no.”

“Your instincts have always been lousy, Little Bit.”

“Please, Barry. Help me here.”

“Unh-uh. Raw talent and sexuality overrule you on this one.”

“Shit! I knew this would happen if I let you cast the dancers.”

“If there’s any *let*, sweetheart,” Barry spoke as he rose to his feet, “it’s me *letting* you . . . Two, Three, Ten, and Twelve. Let’s see you again!”

Barry beamed like a lighthouse, with eyes only for Shane, as the four men went through the choreography again then stood in quiet anticipation after the music stopped. Barry turned to Lillian, “What did I tell you?”

She spat out her reply like it was an expletive, “Terrific!”

Max had just mixed a shaker of martinis and was sitting in his favorite rocker when Lillie stormed through the gate and stomped up the stairs. He met her at the top, holding a cocktail glass at the ready.

“Beverage, Lillie Belle?”

“I don’t have time . . . I’ve got to go to the hospital.”

“Drink up,” he said, pushing the glass toward her. “That’s my girl.”

After a couple of sips, several deep breaths, and a few minutes with her feet stretched out on the balcony rail, Lillie handed the glass back to Max.

“I’ve got to change and head on over. Paul needs to discuss something.”

When she arrived at the hospital twenty minutes later, Paul spoke with Lillie in the hall outside Violet’s room, his voice a quiet murmur.

"We got the polyps, but it's nearly into Stage Three. I think we should do surgery at the end of the week," Paul said.

"Have you told her this?" Lillie asked.

"Do I look like I'm insane?"

"You want me to," she said.

"It's the best thing. We cut out the cancer, do the resection ... a little radiation. She's better in six weeks."

"That's a crock, and you know it, Paul."

"Six months then."

"It's a five hour operation."

"You got a better idea?"

"She's eighty-two."

"She's mean. She's tough. Do you know anyone with more fight?"

"She's going to call me 'Lillian.' "

"Come on. I'll go in with you. And afterward, I'll take you out for a drink."

Paul held the door open and followed Lillie into Violet's room.

Chapter Six

Pass with Care

At the cast meeting Sunday afternoon, Barry assumed the role of Master of Ceremonies. He spoke while the assistant director signed out scripts and songbooks for the principals and minor speaking parts.

“We are so lucky to have Martha Ivey and Marshall Reed as our Julie and Billy.” Martha and Marshall stood, smiled at the group, then took their seats near the head of the conference table where Barry, Lillie, the musical director Patricia, and costumer Cynthia all sat.

Next Barry introduced the actors who would play Carrie and Mr. Snow, Nettie Fowler, Mrs. Mullin, and Jigger. Lillie was happy to see that George, her student from Dance Aerobics and the *Sombras*’ handyman, had been cast as the Starkeeper.

Lillie’s eyes wandered around the room to Melissa, the high school junior who had been cast for the female dance lead. When Barry introduced Melissa and Shane as Louise and the Carnival Boy, Lillie pretended to mark cuts in the

score while she surreptitiously observed Shane move around the room to join the teen.

"Hey, kiddo," Lillie heard him say, as he squeezed in beside her. "I get to pick you up."

After the introductions, the read-through took a full two hours. When Barry excused the assembly with a brief, "Thanks for coming everyone. We'll see you at rehearsal," the cast didn't seem ready to leave. They mingled and visited, chatted and joked. Lillie made small talk with a few of the dancers, then packed up her satchel and went in search of the musical director.

"Patricia? I've got the music cut for the hornpipe and 'June', but I'm still working on the ballet. Can I get those to you later in the week?"

Before Patricia had time to answer, Shane stepped in between the two women.

"Hey, Pat, do I need a songbook?"

"Nahh. Carnival Boy only sings during the curtain call."

Barry reached across Patricia to take Shane's hand. "Pretty impressive audition yesterday. Got any other hidden talents?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"Like to sell some ads for the program?"

"Oh, boy! Begging for dollars!" Shane turned to Lillian, "Do you have a ride home, Lillie?"

"Yes, I do, Mister Eckland."

"Home?" Barry asked.

"Could you give me a lift, then?"

"I have to go to the market."

"Great!" He turned to the director. "I'd better pass on the sales job, Barry. I've got to study sometime."

"I'll wait for you at the car," he said to Lillie and followed Julian and Melissa toward the door.

Lillie and Barry were now the only ones remaining at the table.

"So confident; such a bright future ahead of him," Barry murmured as he watched Shane depart.

"That's not confidence, you louse." Lillie also had her eyes glued on Shane, who was practicing with Melissa where a partner should place his hands on the girl's waist so he wouldn't crush her ribcage. "That's fat head."

"You gotta like him," Barry said.

"Usually, Barry, we're in dress rehearsals before I wished I'd told you where to get off."

"Aw, it'll be fun. Remember our first summer show? Those were the good old days."

"Don't remind me," she said.

"So, are you coming over tonight?"

"How can I put this gently? Thursday was a mistake."

"No way! We make a great team, Little Bit. Always did."

"Let's not try to relive the past, okay?"

"So we've got some history ..."

"I only came to do a job."

"A night or two at my pad. That's all I ask. Please ... until some cute chorus girl throws herself my way."

"Barry, Barry, Barry ..."

"I just want the show to be good."

"That's why you hired me, remember?"

"You won't forget us peones when you make it big?"

"Too late for that, Barry. Good night."

He called out to her as she headed for the exit. "I appreciate the ride on your coattails. Any little bone you can toss my way."

Lillie had delayed for as long as she could manage. When she got to the parking lot, Shane was leaning against the trunk of her car.

“Fuck!” *Did I say that out loud?*

“Some right brain expansion might help that temper.”

“Mind your own business . . .”

Shane was just coming out of the college book store the following afternoon when he saw Gail walking down the street with a load of shopping bags.

“Hey, Gail, wait up!”

“Do I know you?”

“I’m Shane. A-1. The Johnsons? We met on Saturday.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Can I take those?” he said and reached for the handle of one of the bags.

“I’m not really used to having help. But, sure.”

“What happened to them anyways? The Johnsons . . .?”

“Uh, nothing. Sort of a freak accident . . .”

Shane had unburdened Gail of most of her load and was now shifting the packages around. “Is that like sort of pregnant?”

“Classes started today, right?”

“Yep. I think I may have to drop the Introduction to Forecasting. The prof’s a jerk. Except it’s my major.”

“Statistics, huh?”

“Well, MBA.”

“Who’s the jerk, Williams?”

“How did you know?”

“I’m smarter than I look,” she said.

“You do look different today, somehow,” he replied.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Some brightness about the face, maybe; a little sparkle in the eye.”

“What are you, some kind of psychic or something?”

“I see some things. To be honest, I channeled a dolphin once.”

“Oh, right. What did he say, this dolphin?”

“She,” he corrected. “If you don’t bet, you can’t win.”

“Bet what?”

“Whatever . . .”

“Well, that helps a lot. What else did she say?”

“I don’t know. I blacked out.”

“Yeah, right,” Gail smirked.

They had arrived at the *Sombras*. Shane pushed the gate open with his shoulder and carried Gail’s packages to A-3, then set them down on the bench by the door.

He reached his arms up and opened his mouth in a big yawn. “Aaaaaaaah! I gotta get some shut-eye. Six-thirty’s pretty darn early around here.”

As Shane crossed the courtyard, a taxi pulled up to the curb outside. The cabbie helped an older woman and an ancient latina out of the back seat and began unloading several bags from the trunk.

Holding the gringa with one arm around her waist, the latina carefully led her mistress through the gate.

“Bring my bags up, young man,” the apparent boss lady said as she passed Shane.

“Me?” He looked around. The two women had reached the spiral staircase and already begun their ascent. “Yes, Ma’am,” he called up after them.

Shane retrieved the bags from the driver and set them down in the hallway of B-1 where the caretaker instructed.

Then he returned to A-1, lay down on the pallet in the bedroom, and was unconscious in minutes.

After she got Violet situated comfortably in front of the TV, Santos unpacked her mistress's bags, started a load of wash, and pulled out the vacuum cleaner. She was rustling up a light supper, when Lillie bustled through the front door.

"Hola, Miss Lillie. I fix you somethin'?"

"No, thanks, Santos. I'll grab a sandwich in a minute."

Lillie heard *Court TV* playing loudly and did a double-take when it registered that her great aunt was sitting in front of the set. She hurried into the living room. "What are you doing here?"

"I don't appreciate being ganged up on."

"We talked about this, Vi. Paul says you need the surgery."

"Like hell I do. He just had to figure some way to pay for his new swimming pool."

"It's not like you to give up so easily," Lillie said.

"I'm not," Vi answered.

"Says who?"

"I'll do what Maxon does. Starve the cancer out."

"He's starving himself to death."

"I don't need a knife happy oncologist running my life, thank you very much."

"Be sensible, will you? Please, Vi . . ."

"Hush, now. They're going to the sidebar. If I put on my glasses, I can almost read their lips."

Lillie fumed and cursed while she changed for rehearsal. She grabbed a slice of cheese, folded a piece of bread around it, and was leaving when she saw Violet standing in the hall.

“Where are you going?” Violet asked.

“To rehearsal, if you don’t mind!” Lillie slammed the door.

The first dance rehearsal of a new show was typically a baptism by fire. When she realized that Shane hadn’t deigned to attend tonight’s rehearsal, instead of beginning with the duet, Lillie started at the beginning of the scene with Melissa, as Louise, and Julian and Sergio—Number Ten and Number Two from auditions—as the Ruffian Boys.

For half an hour, they worked through the choreography where the Ruffian Boys cavort with Louise on the beach.

“Let’s see how it looks,” Lillie said as she cued the music and turned the volume on the jam box all the way up. The dance started with a series of children’s games: hop scotch, piggy back, leap frog, and cartwheels.

Lillie swore under her breath and stopped the music. “Melissa, what’s that? You’re supposed to do *sissonne ouverte*.”

“I changed it.”

“You what?”

“It looks better if I do *piqué arabesque*. See?”

“Come here a minute . . .”

“I just wanted . . .” Melissa said as she moved off to the side with Lillie.

“You don’t change the steps.”

“But Miss Marsha says . . .”

“I don’t have to defend my choreography to you, or Miss Marsha, or anyone. All rumors to the contrary, I do know something about my work. Okay?”

“Yessum.”

“What do you think would have happened to Ginger Rogers if she tried to change the steps? She’d be out on her keister with fifty girls scrambling to take her place.”

“Who’s Ginger Rogers?” Melissa asked.

“Oh, Christ!” Lillie threw her chin up and rolled her eyes at the heavens. “Just go back and do the sissone.”

Lillie had re-started the music when Brad, the stage manager, came up to her. She watched the dance with one eye, while Brad spoke quietly into her ear.

“Shane Eckland doesn’t have a phone. Do you want me to go over to his house and get him?”

“No, no. Thanks, Brad. You’ve got enough to do.”

They got through the eight count without Melissa improvising again.

Then Enoch Snow, Jr. marched through the scene with his family—who were mostly imaginary at this stage in the rehearsal process. A real actress, who played the part of Enoch, Jr.’s little sister, stayed behind to be taunted by Louise, beat up (off-stage), and relieved of her fancy hat.

“That went pretty well, everyone.” Lillie called out. “Let’s take a five-minute water break, then go through it a few more times. We won’t be able to work on the duet tonight, so I’ll probably just keep Julian and Number Two—Sergio, afterward, to get a head start on the first act horn-pipe.”

When Lillie came into the courtyard ninety minutes later, she saw Max standing at his spot on the balcony, taking in the night air. She gave him a little wave, shook her head, and pointed to A-1. “GD, SOB,” she said through clenched teeth.

Lillie stomped across to A-1 and pounded on the front door. It took several minutes of banging and yelling before the door opened just a crack. Shane stared out, a dull expression on his face, a towel wrapped around his nude form, while the noise of several alarm clocks buzzed in the background.

“What is it?”

“Where do you get off skipping the first dance rehearsal?”

“I did? What time is it? ... I guess I fell asleep.”

Shane turned around to head back inside. Lillie followed as he wandered through the apartment, turning off the alarm clocks which had been strategically stationed throughout the premises. The debris had been cleaned out, but the place remained mostly unfurnished. In the living room, she noticed a wrought iron chair and table from the patio. There was a sleeping bag on the floor in the bedroom. In the kitchen, a package of paper plates and an expensive chef’s skillet sat on the bar. Several packing boxes were stacked in the otherwise empty dining room.

“The stage manager said you didn’t have a contact number on your sign-up sheet,” Lillie said.

“That’s right,” Shane replied.

“So, what is it?”

“I don’t have a phone. I don’t need a phone.”

“We have to be able to reach you.”

“You, and who else ...? Come on, we practically live together. You see me every day.”

“I’m not going to babysit you, Mr. Eckland. I will not ...”

“It’s Shane.”

“I’m not your mother.”

"That's for sure."

"And I don't care what Barry says, if you miss another rehearsal, you're out."

"All righty, then."

"I don't need this, I really don't."

"So, are you through disparaging the help?" Shane asked.

"If I could just smack something!"

Shane turned and offered his bare butt, but Lillie didn't indulge. Instead she slammed her fist on the kitchen counter and stormed out the front door.

She could just hear Shane's parting remark before the door closed behind her. "Très, très douche."

Max beckoned to Lillie, lifting a pitcher of Margaritas in toast as she hurried up the spiral staircase. Once at the top, he handed her an icy glass with salt around the rim.

"Salvation!" she said.

"What'll you give me for it?" he said.

"How about a big wet one?"

After thirty minutes with her feet up on the balcony rail drowning herself in tequila, Lillie was finally feeling no pain. She drained her glass. "Huhhhh . . ."

"That's better," Max said.

"I sometimes wonder if I'm gay."

"I know a party of questionable gender who might help you figure that out," he said.

"No, no, I'm not . . . I mean, I don't think I am. But, you know, I am slightly butch. Just a little on the dykey side," she said.

"Really?"

"I cut my hair short. Swing my arms when I walk. Hold the doors for other women."

"You don't have enough holes in your ear," Max said.

“Sure, because it’s men that I like.”

“Well, I’m with you there.”

“Hair, bald; short, tall; fat, skinny,” Lillie said.

“Straight, gay.”

“Men. Period.”

“Yes, yes, we all know your wayward accomplishments,” he said.

“I just wanted them to like me,” she said.

“Uh-huh.”

“Come on, I wasn’t that bad.”

“No?” said Max. “You made Jeffrey at the bath house look like the Archbishop of Canterbury.”

“Do you suppose I could be a gay man trapped in a woman’s body?”

As they mused over that question, Lillie and Max observed Ned and Gail entering the courtyard, each lugging a laundry basket.

Max called out to them, his voice echoing through the *Sombras*. “Did you know they make washing machines that go inside the house?”

“Not on my salary,” Gail called back.

“You two up for Margaritas?” Max returned the ball.

“No, thank you,” said Gail.

“That’d be great!” said Ned.

“One yes and one no,” Max said to Lillie. “What you want to bet Gail joins us anyway?” He carried the pitcher down to the courtyard.

“I’ll get some more glasses,” Lillie said. “Be right there.”

The four drank until nearly midnight, at which point Max poured the last drop into Ned's glass. "Shall we go another round?"

"God, no," Gail said, rising to her feet. "I've got to get up tomorrow."

"Someone in this family has to make a living," Ned said, swilling down his last gulp.

"Here, here," Max said.

"He's applied everywhere. Even some girls' school in Georgia. But no one's hiring English teachers." Gail had walked as far as the door to A-3. "Are they, Edward?"

"It's the wrong time of year," Ned agreed.

"Are you coming, or not?" she asked, then went inside without closing the door behind her.

"Good night, fellow travelers," Ned said, bowing slightly at the waist.

"'Night," Lillie said.

"You ought to leave her, son," Max said.

"I can't." Ned smiled a little embarrassed smile, went into A-3, and shut the door after him.

"No one else will pay the bills," Max spoke in a low voice.

"That is the sorriest, most co-dependent couple I have ever seen," Lillie said.

"Ahem."

"Besides me and Rick."

They were clearing up the impromptu party when Shane came out of A-1 wearing his jogging clothes.

"Well, hello! You guys are up late," he said.

"We were just calling it a night," Max replied.

"Rehearsal's over. Where are you heading at this hour?" Lillie asked.

“I got my body clock all screwed up. Can’t get back to sleep. Thought I’d take a run.”

Shane went through the gate, closing it after him. “See you,” he said, and jogged toward the west.

“You better be there tomorrow!” Lillie hollered.

“Don’t wait up!” she heard as she followed Max up the stairs.

Shane trotted to a hill near the outskirts of the city. When he had driven to the studio his first day in town, he’d seen a sign warning of limited sight distance due to the steepness of the looming hill. Just past the sign, the street changed for a short distance, from two lanes, to add a third passing lane. It was there he had noticed a second sign—the one that could use a little improvement. “Pass with Care,” the sign said.

At nearly one in the morning, the street was completely dark. Shane ran past the sign and then all the way up the block to confirm that the neighborhood had gone to sleep. He circled around and back to the sign, then jogged in place for an additional half-minute, listening for any sounds that might disturb the peace.

He pulled a can of spray paint out from under his shirt and shook it for a good three minutes while the ball bearing mixed the paint. With one more glance around to determine the time was right, Shane reached up with the can and deftly sprayed out the “E”. After returning the can to the waistband of his sweatpants, he sprinted down the hill and headed toward home.

Chapter Seven

Pas de Deux

Just to keep Lillie on her toes, Shane came early for Tuesday's rehearsal—even though being early meant waiting for two hours while they blocked the final half of Act One.

To pass the time, Shane went out to the hall and took himself through a forty minute warm-up routine he'd devised utilizing a series of isometrics and calisthenics exercises. After warming up, he went to sit in the auditorium—for what seemed an interminable length of time—his muscles getting stiffer by the minute.

The whalers had just sung their whaling song, *Blow High, Blow Low*, and the men's dancing chorus were having a blast with Jigger. Lillie gave cues to the men as Julian and Sergio cradled Jigger in a basket hold, swinging him forward and back. Then Jigger stepped up onto Julian's knees and pretended to search for whales through a spyglass while Julian held onto his legs in a counterbalance pose that mimicked the figurehead of a ship.

During an instrumental section, Lillie mirrored the moves for the dancers while standing just in front of them

on the stage. Julian, Sergio, and a half-dozen men from the dance auditions followed Lillie while they danced the hornpipe, fingers clasped with arms pressing down as they shifted their weight from one foot to the other in fifth position. Then they moved into a sort of Popeye step hopping to the side on one foot with one forearm crossing the waist at the front, the other behind.

Shane had never seen the play before, and the read through on Sunday had not included the songs. Billy's *Soliloquy* at the end of the scene was surprising and shocking. The play, it turned out, was more opera than musical theatre.

With no chorus behind him and only a piano for accompaniment, Marshall Reed sang Billy's solo as if he were a ringer from the Met. The first part of the aria—*My Boy Bill*—was rich in feeling, sentiment, and humor as Billy Bigelow, who had just been informed that Julie was pregnant, day-dreamed about having a son. When Billy suddenly realized that the baby might be of the female persuasion, the song changed to the sweet ballad *My Little Girl*, after which Marshall finished in truly operatic style.

Applause erupted at the end of Billy's song and a loud wolf whistle right behind him made Shane instinctively cover his ears. Having been yanked back to the present, he turned to find Melissa sitting just behind him.

"Where did you come from?" he asked.

"I snuck in, in the middle of the song. You seemed hypnotized. Didn't want to shatter the magic. He's wonderful, isn't he?"

"A real sweetheart."

"Act One Finale!" Brad, the stage manager, called out. "Everyone to the stage!"

The auditorium cleared as the chorus and principals now moved to the stage. Once the cast for the Finale were situated, Barry proceeded to describe the scene. "Billy has realized he will have to find work to support Julie and the new baby. As the townspeople prepare to row to the island for the clambake, the opportunistic Jigger convinces Billy to be his sidekick in an armed robbery."

"I never dreamed I'd get Louise." Melissa placed a hand on Shane's shoulder.

With everyone else having moved onstage, Shane and Melissa were now the only two company members remaining in the audience. "Lucky break," he told her.

"Not really . . . It's like my whole life has been leading up to this moment. *I've* been dancing since I was two. But Julian said you've never danced before. I hope you don't mess it up for me."

"Don't worry, kiddo. I think I'm up to the task."

"I don't know why Billy kills himself." Melissa couldn't seem to hold on to any thought for very long. "I mean, Julie is so pretty, and they're going to have a baby, and Mrs. Mullin said he could have his old job back."

"He wants to make her life better . . . and the baby's."

"But it's not! I mean Louise is so unhappy. And Julie is old and tired."

"You think they'd have been better off *with* him? He beat Julie."

"No he didn't. Not really. Besides she loves him so much and . . ."

"He'd do it again."

"Unh-uh."

"He would, though. And he'd hurt the kid. It's the only way he knows to keep from messing up again."

"Well, I don't see why they need it in the play, anyway. All this wife beating and suicide stuff."

"It's what it's about. People with problems who love each other." Shane's last statement had been a little too strident.

"Okay, okay. I was just expressing my opinion. I have every right to, you know!"

"Sorry, kiddo."

This evening Melissa had seemed to grow younger and more immature by the minute.

"And why do you call me that? I'm not a child, you know."

"Sorry." Shane blew out a sigh. *What have I gotten myself into?*

The chorus sang the last verse of *June Is Bustin' Out All Over*—such a joyful song before the tragedy of Act Two—then there was the murmur of voices as the actors collected their script-sides and songbooks.

"Louise and Carnival Boy!" Lillie's voice called out above the din.

"That's us, Shane!" Melissa brightened in an instant. "Come on!"

"You two ready?" Lillie asked when they reached the stage.

"Yes, Ma'am," Shane said.

"Let's get after it then. We only have an hour tonight."

"Shouldn't we warm up first?" Melissa asked.

"What have you been doing all this time? Five minutes ... you have five minutes!" Lillie stomped off the stage.

"You warm up *before* rehearsal, kiddo," Shane said.

"How was I supposed to know that?"

Shane followed Lillie off stage and found her at the water fountain in the scene shop.

"Melissa's not really a flake."

"I could just wring Barry's neck sometimes. 'She looks the part. She looks it!'" Lillie fumed. "Don't tell her I said that," she said, her hazel eyes flashing.

"She's young, is all."

"I don't know why I told him I'd do the show," Lillie mumbled.

"If you hate it so bad, why do you do it?"

"Fucking show biz," she fumed, shaking her head.

"I could show you a right brain expansion exercise to help with anger management," Shane offered.

"I don't do meditation," Lillie said. "I'm hyperactive. I can't sit still that long."

"This isn't meditation, exactly. Though I'd swear the results are just about the same. It's more a mechanical process ... and practically instant. I invented it myself."

"Is there anything you haven't done?" Lillie asked.

"I've never danced in a show before."

"That's great, just great," she muttered as she returned to the stage.

After working on a lift for half an hour, Lillie cued the music, then stood back to watch. "That was the easy part, kids. Let's see how you do with the music."

Shane was Center Stage and Melissa far Stage Left. Melissa took a little hop and ran toward Shane, then leaped into the air. He caught her in a press at the height of the leap and lowered her slowly. Once again on her feet Melissa took him around the waist, then slid down his left side to the floor.

"That looked pretty good," Lillie said, shutting off the tape player. "But now, it gets complicated. And we've got to make some progress here tonight, or I'll have to cut out the next sixteen measures."

"We can handle it, can't we, kiddo?" Shane said.

"Miss Marsha says I'm ready for the Joffrey," Melissa agreed.

"Not with that turnout, you're not," Lillie said.

"Come on, Lillie," Shane said. "Throw it at us."

"You've just slid to the floor, Louise. Grab his ankle and do a *développé arabesque en penché*."

"Huh? You mean this?"

"The other leg. And point your toes!" *God, do I have to tell her everything?*

Melissa attempted the move. "Okay," Lillie continued. "Now he grabs Louise around the waist and lifts her over his shoulder."

Shane expelled a lungful of air as he lifted Melissa's dead weight and heaved her upside down and backwards over his shoulder. She appeared to Lillie to be heavy as a bundle of shingles.

"This can't be right," he said.

"You've got to help him, Melissa ..." Lillie said, just before Melissa started to slip.

"Help, help me!" Melissa cried.

"You're losing her, Shane. Grab her arm!" Lillie yelled and sprung around behind him just as he lost grip of his partner. Lillie managed to break Melissa's fall, and the two women tumbled to the floor.

There was a big grin on Shane's face. "I somehow don't think that's what you had in mind!"

"I can't dance with him, Miss Cloutier."

"It's like you're doing a walk over ... over his shoulder. A candle into the walk over. Then open the legs into a vee ... but you have to help him. Keep your core engaged. You can't be dead weight ... You'd better try it with me, Shane. Spot us, Melissa."

"Yes, ma'am."

Lillie moved into the penché arabesque. Then, upside down, Shane began to lift her over his shoulder.

"Take my arm as I come over and twist." Lillie and Shane were now back-to-back, their arms entwined, with Lillie's shoulders resting on Shane's upper back. Her lower body was suspended in the air, her legs in a vee.

Shane spun her around as he untwisted his arms, and then set Lillie gently down in front of him.

"PFA!"

"Let me try!" Melissa said.

Lillie called out corrections as the two dancers attempted the lift several more times. "Keep your turnout, Louise. Knees straight. Point those toes. Come on, how many years of ballet did you have?"

Melissa was upside down hanging in the penché. "Twelve."

"Criminy. Arch, arch, arch your back! Keep your head still, Louise. Look behind you, Shane," Lillie coached as Shane lifted Melissa to his shoulder.

"Now?" he asked.

"Yes, go, go, go!" Lillie yelled as Shane held Melissa in the star shape and spun around with her.

Shane lowered Melissa to the ground where she unceremoniously sank to her bottom.

"Not half lame," Shane said.

"Try it again," Lillie said.

"I'm seasick," Melissa complained.

"Come on, kiddo. You can do it!" Shane said.

"Okay, okay," Melissa said as Shane pulled her to her feet.

Another ten minutes of work and the lift was getting better. "That's good," said Lillie. "Again, let me count this time. Five, six, seven, eight."

The next time through was almost perfect. Lillie suddenly—accidentally—found herself in the "Now" and Shane's comment at the water fountain came back to her.

If you hate it so bad, why do you do it? he had asked.

"Because I love it! That's why," she spoke quietly to the spirit of Terpsichore, the goddess of dance.

Shane took a jog after classes Wednesday. When he was doing his cool down in the courtyard, he noticed several shrubs in various stage of droop as well as a hungry looking blue butterfly. The plants had obviously forgotten to get watered in a while and the butterfly ... who knew when she'd last had a square meal.

"'Bet you like fruit." Shane went into A-1 and came back out with half a papaya which he lay in a patch of shade. Then he found the hose and was methodically going around from one thirsty bush to another when Gail bounded through the gate.

Though he was bent over at the north side of the garden, he knew someone had entered the courtyard. And that someone was trying to slip into A-3 without him noticing.

"What happened to you?" Shane said in his best Rachel-the-Psychologist voice. When he turned toward the intruder, she froze in her tracks.

“You’re the psychic.”

“Wait. Don’t tell me ... Number One in the Fifth?”

“Unh-uh.”

“Three Dollar Scratch Off?”

“Charlatan!”

“New lipstick!”

“Well ...”

“Hah! I knew it! So, you want to help me move some furniture?”

“Edward will.”

“He got called to the department.”

“I’m in my good suit.”

“Well, change, girl! Daylight’s wasting.”

While Gail went to change, Shane sorted through the furniture that was stored in apartment A-2. He was in the former living room squeezed behind a sofa and dusting off a chest of drawers, when Gail came in wearing her jeans and a ragged flannel shirt of Ned’s.

“How does this look?” Shane stepped to the side of the antique piece and patted the chest.

“You couldn’t wait for Edward?”

“Don’t put off ’til tomorrow what you can grab today.”

“Another platitude from the dolphin?”

“Nah, I made that up myself.”

“It looks kind of heavy.”

“It’s all about leverage, my dear,” Shane said, holding up a large sheet of corrugated cardboard. “And prestidigitation.”

“What’s that for?”

“Let me show you ...” Shane handed Gail the cardboard and heaved up one edge of the chest. “Slide that under the leg.”

With Gail dragging the cardboard and Shane lifting and guiding from behind, the pair slid the chest out to the hallway.

“Stop a minute.” Shane stood, stretched his back, and inspected a floor-to-ceiling frame of 4x4s that had apparently been constructed in the recent past. There was still a sprinkling of sawdust on the floor where the posts had been erected.

“That for the elevator?” he asked.

“Yes, but they realized they’ll have to remodel B-1 and B-3 before they can finish it,” Gail said. “It’ll sure be nice for Miss Cloutier when they do, though. I worry about her climbing that staircase.”

“And Santos. She could be older than Vi by five or ten years.”

“It’s hard to tell, isn’t it?”

“Okay, break’s over.” Shane squatted to reach for the cardboard. “Let’s drag this thing out of here.”

After they got the chest of drawers and a mattress into the bedroom, Shane popped the tops off a couple of Dos Equis and handed one to Gail where she stood at the kitchen bar.

“Let me get that out of your way,” he said reaching across her for his favorite All-Clad pan. “Sorry, I should have cleaned it last night.”

“Whatever did you cook in that? It smells heavenly.”

“Boeuf bourguignon. You want some?”

“Really?”

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

Shane had a knack for squeezing out the intimate details of one’s life in what might start as a ‘how’s the weather’

conversation. While he heated the leftovers in a make-shift double boiler, he worked his magic on Gail. By the time he served her plate, well . . .

"I do this menial work. For a temp agency. Monkey stuff. Answering the phone, data entry, making coffee. Then yesterday I sucked it up and asked for something different."

"And?"

"I interviewed at a law office today!"

"Well?"

"I got the job! I won't be a superfluous piece of office equipment any more. My opinions are important for a change."

"That's good."

"To Greg—my boss—that's what he told me. I mean, a friggin' attorney!"

"Is there a possibility that this Greg is just coming on to you?"

"Why would he do that?"

"Oh, I see what you mean."

"There hasn't been much of a glow about me in some time."

"Maybe not, but it has been building all afternoon."

Gail's attention had turned to an invisible spot in the hallway.

"That's where they found them."

"Huh?"

"The Johnsons."

Shane often used obfuscation to mine information from his unsuspecting marks. He blew out a long breath. "Yeah, that's really tragic."

An alarm clock on the kitchen counter started to ring. Then one in the bedroom and another in the living room.

“Oh, my gosh, look at the time! I’ve got to go.” Gail dropped her plate in the trash can and carried her utensils to the sink.

Shane reached to turn off the buzzer. “No, no, that’s just for rehearsal. I’ve got a couple of hours before my call.”

“I really have to go. I’ve got to pick out an outfit for tomorrow.”

Chapter Eight

Breakfast of Champions

Maxon Moore was on a mission. A chronically early riser, on Thursday morning he was up before the sun and got busy with the Vita-Mix. He poured a cup of water into the blender, then washed the vegetables and added them into the whizzing processor, while keeping an eye on the second hand of the clock.

After three minutes had elapsed, Max emptied the contents into a large glass and took it out to the balcony to watch the sunrise. As he had almost every morning for the last year, Max took in a big gulp of air, pinched his nose with his left thumb and forefinger, and tossed down the sludge.

“Bleah!”

After the sun peeked out above the horizon, Max returned to the kitchen. He rinsed out the carafe, blended up another batch, and carried the concoction to B-1.

Decked out in her brocade dressing gown, the matriarch of the *Sombras* studied the Wall Street Journal through her ruby-red, Swarovski crystal-encrusted reading glasses.

Violet looked up when Max tapped on the door. "What are you doing here?"

"You said you wanted to try my miracle cure . . ."

"So?"

"I've brought it."

"That's it? That looks like pond scum."

"Drink up." Max pressed the glass into her hand.

Violet took a tentative sip, then almost dumped the glass over. "That's awful!"

"Come on, Violet. It's not so bad."

"What is it?" Max held the glass to her mouth like she was a toddler, forcing her to drink.

"Carrots, beets, cucumber, kale. It cleanses the liver."

"I changed my mind," she said, pushing the half-emptied glass away. "Santos!"

Santos appeared at the door. "Sí, Miss Violeta?"

"Bloody Mary!"

"No alcohol, Vi!" Max spoke sternly.

Max looked over his shoulder to the grandmotherly lady's maid. "A glass of filtered water, please, Santos."

"Sí, Señor Max."

Max began to count out a pile of pills onto Violet's bed tray.

"Germanium, CoQ-10, beta carotene, selenium, vitamin E."

"So, it's do as I say, not as I do."

"My treatment has progressed to another level."

Max was still counting out pills, when Santos returned with the water and handed the glass to her mistress.

“Well, I still want a Bloody Mary.”

Max continued his catalog, “Pycnogenol.”

“Pick what?”

“Pycnogenol. It’s a powerful antioxidant from the bark of the yew tree.”

“Did some witch doctor give you these?”

“My chiropractor.”

“As good as ... This stuff can’t be cheap.”

“Cheaper than death by torture. Besides, you can afford it, right? Finish them up, now.” He gave his patient no choice but to swallow all the pills as she downed the glass of water.

“That’s a good girl,” Max said. “Tomorrow we’ll start the ascorbic acid flush.”

Santos entered the room with Violet’s Bloody Mary, a cheerful stalk of celery decorating the cocktail.

“That’s more like it!”

“Awwwwwwwww, no. Please don’t ...”

“V8 and vodka. Breakfast of champions.” Violet clinked her glass with the empty tumbler Max held in his hand.

“This isn’t going to work, is it?”

Santos was standing beside the bed, a bright smile lighting her face. She nodded her head happily.

“Professor Brother Miguel give me a charm for the lotería and I win fifty dollars!”

Shane’s summer course Introduction to Forecasting and Simulation met Monday-Friday for three hours each morning.

After the break on the second Thursday of classes, Dr. Williams had just picked up with his boring lecture, when a

tap on the door interrupted the professor's drone. The office secretary entered and spoke quietly into Williams's ear.

"Shane Eckland," Williams said, "you're wanted in the office."

"What's up?" Shane said.

"You're excused. Just go with Mrs. Flores ... Then P of A is a real number called the probability of event A ... " Williams continued, not skipping a beat.

Shane picked up his books and followed Mrs. Flores into the hall. "Telephone call," was all Flores could tell him as they walked to the Dean's office.

Dean Linka met them at the door. "Take it in here, Shane," he said, escorting Shane into his inner sanctum. "It's more private."

"Thank you," Shane said.

"The call's on hold," Dean Linka said. "Just push that blinking button when you're ready to pick up."

"Yes sir, thanks."

Shane didn't pick up the call right away. After the door closed behind the two, he listened through the crack.

"Did they say what kind of family emergency?" Linka said.

"I hope no one died," Mrs. Flores said.

Shane made himself comfortable in the Dean's high backed chair and punched the hold button.

"This better be good," he said into the receiver.

"When did you think I'd find out you'd arrived safely?"

It was Rachel-the-Psychologist on the other end of the line. He could picture her, Roman-nosed and sharp featured,

her black witch-hair hanging like dirty straw around her face.

"I was sure DPS would let you know about the accident."

"Is an address too much to ask?"

"I don't have a place yet, Rachel. I'm staying with friends."

"Their address will be fine."

"I take that back. They're acquaintances, really. I'll probably never see them again after I move out."

"Meanwhile, what am I supposed to do with this check? I have a trust to administer, you know. It seems you closed out your account before you left town."

"Look, I'll send a card when I can."

"And what are you planning to do after the money you took runs out?"

"NOYB, Rachel."

"You can't exactly go begging on the streets like the poor ancianas in Juarez." Rachel seemed to be daring him.

"I'd rather do that than have you monitor every nickle you roll my way," Shane replied.

"You know you could benefit from a visit to the University therapist. And it won't cost you a cent."

"I'd love to chat, Rachel, but you got me out of class for this nonsense."

"Ask for Dr. Rosenbaum. She's a friend from my university days."

"I don't need a goddamn shrink."

"You're in denial, Shane."

"Gotta run."

"Express your feelings, babe. Don't keep them all bottled up."

"Right!" Shane said and slammed down the receiver.

Dean Linka and Mrs. Flores hovered apprehensively as Shane emerged from the inner office.

"Is everything all right, son?" Linka asked.

"Yes, sir, thank you."

"No one's dead, are they?" asked Mrs. Flores.

"Only very ill," Shane said as politely as he could, considering the blood pounding in his skull.

He decided to skip the remainder of forecasting class and was half-way downtown, before he allowed his fury to fully take over.

"Fuck you, bitch," Shane yelled and dropped his twenty pound book bag in a back swing. The momentum produced when he slung the bag forward up the sidewalk would have made a strike—if he'd been at the bowling lanes.

Chapter Nine

Fine Mexican Food

It wasn't his night for choreography practice, but even after a sandwich at Schlotzsky's, an afternoon beer at the taproom, and some time in the garden at home watering the plants and feeding the butterfly, Shane remained pissed about Rachel's call. He decided to hike over to the outdoor amphitheatre to clear his head and check out the new rehearsal site.

A raised stage and stone benches had been constructed in ages past at the far end of a natural hollow on the campus of a prep school that had since been absorbed by the college. A friends of fine arts group, organized several years previously to renovate the amphitheatre, had installed state-of-the-art sound and light systems—operated from a tech booth at the top of the hill—and de-mossed the benches that extended in orderly rows down to the stage at the bottom of the hill.

The cast had begun blocking the opening of Act One, a pantomime and dance sequence to *The Carousel Waltz*. As Shane made his way down the stone steps, Julian was following fast on his heels.

"I'm late," Julian said as he passed Shane. Then Julian stopped abruptly and turned around. "What are you doing here? It's Act One, tonight."

"I just thought I'd come down and swat some mosquitoes for a while."

"Enjoy," Julian said and hurried down to the stage.

Shane found a seat in the middle row with an unobstructed view of the happenings and made himself comfortable. Quickly bored with the tediousness of Barry's direction, Shane lay sideways on the stone bench, cradled his head in the crook of his arm, and closed his eyes. "Time for a little nap."

He'd been joking about the mosquitoes, but he woke in the evening air to the sensation of a large bloodsucker resting on his neck, perilously close to the jugular vein. He shuddered and slapped his neck.

"Here, try some *Off*," a voice behind him said. Melissa had apparently sneaked up on him while he dozed.

He sat up as she began to rub the familiar-smelling greasy oil onto his arms and neck.

"Ummm. That feels good . . ." he said.

"It's Act One tonight. Why are you here?" she said, slipping her hand under his shirt.

Shane shoved himself a foot away from the teen. "I just thought I'd drop by and check it out."

"I've got something to show you," Melissa said wedging deeper into his personal space. "See?" She held a printed card up to his face, too close for his near vision to adjust.

"What is it?"

"My report card! It's official. I'm a senior now!"

"That's good."

"And you're what, in grad school?"

“That’s right.”

Lillie was walking up the aisle from the stage. She didn’t stop to visit, but waved at the two as she passed.

“She doesn’t even wear a bra.” Melissa twisted her lips and gnawed at the cuticle on her index finger. “I guess she doesn’t really need one . . .” she said, and pumped out her own chest for effect.

He had to look, of course. For being a new high school senior, it was obvious that the teenager was stacked. *You can look, but you can’t touch . . .* he said to himself. *You can look, but you can’t touch . . .*

“I’m starving. Do you like Tex Mex?” she said.

“That’s a silly question. I’m from El Paso.”

Shane followed Melissa up past the light booth and across the grass to a set of metal steps built into the hillside that came out at a small parking lot just above the amphitheatre. He put his book bag in the back of Melissa’s car, buckled up in the front passenger seat, and sat quietly as the young woman drove to the far side of town.

Not much in the way of urban sprawl had yet reached *El Sombrero*. The restaurant and parking lot stood alone—taking up a full city block—with only a couple of residences on either side and a lonely car wash across the street.

“I like to park in the back,” Melissa said as they drove past the main entrance.

Floodlights lit a giant sculpture of a sombrero sitting on a strip of grass just in front of the restaurant. A sign stood to the right of the sculpture.

“‘El Sombrero Fine Mexican Food’ . . . That’s some *hat!*” Shane said, admiring the enormous sculpture. *That sign could definitely use some improvement*, he thought to himself. *Fine Mexican Hats*. He almost broke out laughing at the

thought. *File that one away for an important statement to you-know-who.*

The restaurant itself was built in the style of a Mexican hacienda, with adobe walls, red tile roofs, and hanging lanterns illuminating the archways that surrounded the building.

"It's my favorite place," Melissa said. "I hope it measures up for you."

"Let's give it a whirl." Shane stepped out of the car and walked around to open Melissa's door.

They came first to an expansive candlelit courtyard situated behind the restaurant. Rustic benches and straight backed chairs were placed around tables constructed of wooden slats on top of wine casks, that combined to give the impression the pair had landed in Old Mexico.

"Reminds me of home," Shane said.

"You want to sit out here?" Melissa asked, in what Shane could only describe as a 'baby doll seductress' voice.

No one else was taking advantage of the courtyard's obvious intimacy. "Kind of hot, tonight ... not to mention the mosquitoes. Let's go inside."

They walked around the covered corridor to the front entrance and stepped through the coat room into another world. An enormous chandelier draped with crystal hung from the ceiling thirty feet above. The walls were covered with brilliantly colored frescoes of señoritas basking in the Mexican sun, while los músicos serenaded them with guitar and bandoneón.

For being such a huge facility, only a few patrons occupied the restaurant tonight. Shane and Melissa took a small table in the corner where he had a view of all the comings and goings.

“Gracias,” he said, when a waiter handed him the menu. Shane opened the leather-bound album and gazed at the bill of fare. “Whew! ‘Fine Mexican Food’ is right.”

“I can pay. I invited you, after all.”

“No, no, that’s all right. I’m just reminded it’s time to refill the coffers.” Shane looked up from the menu to see a man and woman entering the restaurant. The woman was Gail. The man was *not* Ned. “¡Dios mío!”

Melissa turned to look behind her. “What? Who’s that?”

“Just someone I know.”

“Your girlfriend?”

“Nope. Someone else’s girlfriend. And that must be Greg.”

Greg led Gail to a table just across the room from Shane and Melissa. Gail turned as Greg pulled out her chair and spied Shane. He caught her eye and held up his water glass in a toast. She took her seat, her back blocking any further communications.

Shane politely returned his attention to his date. “So, kiddo. Tell me about yourself.”

The meal and tip cost him \$45. With tuition and book fees, after tonight’s dinner, Shane had barely \$2 and change to last him until the rent for July was due. At least he didn’t have to jog home with a belly full of enchiladas.

As he was about to climb out of Melissa’s car at the gate of the *Sombras*, Melissa said, “It’s my birthday the night before opening. I’ll be seventeen.”

“That’s good.” *One year closer to being legal.*

“You’re thinking ‘jail bait’, right? Like the Carnival Boy.”

“No. I’m thinking, ‘We’ve gotta practice for the play sometime.’” He leaned over and kissed her gently on the lips.

“’Night, Louise,” he said, sliding out of the car.

“Goodnight, Carnival Boy.”

When Shane entered the courtyard, he could just make out a dark shape lying in a lounge chair on the other side of the fountain. The body groaned and then began to cough.

“Max? That you? You all right?”

“Nothing a bullet in the brain wouldn’t cure.”

“Geeze, don’t say that.” Shane reached for Max and put a hand on his shoulder.

“I came down here. Thought it might help to walk around some. But the moth stepped on me.”

Max was sitting up now. Shane squatted beside his chair.

“Can I get you something? Whiskey? An aspirin?”

Max started coughing again. Through the hacks he said, “I gave up smoking for this.”

“Look, you want me to take you to the hospital?”

“Just help me back upstairs.”

It took a while, but with his arm around Max’s waist, Shane lifted the retired professor to his feet. With the gentleman holding him for dear life while he continued to retch and cough, Shane crab-crawled Max up the staircase.

Shane guided Max into B-3. “You should see a doctor.”

“What’s he going to tell me? ‘You’re dying, Max. Let me cut your lungs out and help you along’?”

“He could give you something . . .”

“Not on a bet,” Max choked out his response and began another coughing fit.

Holding most of his weight, Shane helped his neighbor into the apartment. “Bathroom . . .” Max pointed down the hall.

Once they had reached the bathroom, Shane turned away politely while he listened to Max hawk up what

sounded like half a lung and spit into the commode. Max concluded the discharge with more disgusting noises, rinsed his mouth and face at the sink, then staggered out without flushing.

Shane peered into the toilet. A mass of grey-black sludgy something floated in the bowl. He held down the handle and counted to ten.

Max was sitting on the bed when Shane found him again.

“Are you okay?”

“Better.”

“Want me to stay?”

“No, no, kid. I’m fine.”

“Let me get you to bed first.” Shane knelt and slipped off Max’s loafers.

“Maybe some other time, sweetie. I don’t feel really *fresh* tonight.”

Shane put the shoes down beside the bed and stood.
“You’re sick. You know that?”

“Not any more. Go on. Go.”

“Okay, I’m going.”

“Shane?”

“What?”

“Thanks.”

“Sure. Any time.”

Max flopped backward onto the bed and moaned.

“I’ll just show myself out, then.” Shane walked down the hall and closed the front door behind him.

Chapter Ten

We Heart Our Children

Gail sat at the reception desk of Greg Garrison's law office. Dinner last night had been a complete surprise, but had really brightened her mood. She was absorbed in her typing and humming to herself the theme song from Johnny Depp's new movie, when she noticed Greg standing at the corner of her desk, his arms crossed and a grin stretching from ear to ear.

"Hey, good lookin'!"

"Hello, yourself, Mr. Garrison."

"It's lunchtime. How about a quick bite?"

"Don't you have that meeting?"

"Think I'll skip it. Come on."

They wheeled through town in Greg's Saab. He was driving a mite too fast, but Gail thought it would be impolite to say anything.

"Whoa!" Greg hollered. "Red light. Hold on!" He stopped with a screech before the crossing, just under the overpass. Three guys in jungle fatigues—each sporting scruffy faces and matted hair—were panhandling from the

occupants of the stopped cars. One guy held up a sign that said, "Will work for food."

"Poor guys," said Greg as he eased the Saab forward a foot. "Probably vets. I know how it'd feel."

Greg powered down his window and reached for his wallet. The vet with the sign moved closer. His clothes were rags. He had long ratty hair and blackened teeth. He peered through the open window and stared right at Gail. It was Shane.

"Here you go, fella," Greg said, handing Shane a twenty. "Have a hot meal."

"Thanks, man," Shane said. "God bless you."

Shane stepped back as the light changed and Greg gunned forward through the intersection.

"You all right, hon? You look like you've seen a ghost ..."

"If he's a vet, I'm Lady Di," was all Gail had to say.

If Shane hadn't seen her at the restaurant last night, she'd be ahead. As things stood after the underpass, the score was even.

Shane had spent his free time through the weekend hustling for handouts at various well-traveled locations along the freeway. On Sunday night, he counted the coins and bills and stashed them in a jar inside the kitchen cabinet. He now had enough cash to see him through to July.

"Go fuck yourself, Rachel," he said aloud, pulled a Dos Equis out of the fridge, and headed for the courtyard.

Shane climbed the staircase when he saw Max on the balcony sipping a Perrier. Max had been a physics professor before he retired and the two chatted about his favorite

subject. Shane could hold his own in almost any conversation, but after an hour, he was getting a little tired of Max's tendency to lecture.

The discussion had begun with chaos theory and circled back around to fractals and the butterfly effect before Shane could get a word in.

"So you're saying we might do something for show, but not for effect?" Shane asked.

"Some little thing sets everything in motion. We can't control the outcome," Max replied.

"Then why try to cure your cancer?"

"Perhaps I'm meant to."

"By whom?" Shane asked.

"The laws of nature," Max said.

"Well, say that's so, Max. Then why not just keep on doing what we know will make us happy? If nothing comes of it, so what? At least we're happier during our time above ground."

"Interesting," the physicist agreed. "One might still get hit by a car, or fall off the balcony, or sally forth the way of the Johnsons, but one goes out with a sense of brightness instead of gloom."

Finally, someone will tell me about the Johnsons! Shane smiled inside.

"What did happen to the Johnsons?"

"Coroner ruled it a freak accident."

"They got sucked up in the vacuum cleaner? What?"

Before Max could reply, Lillie wandered out of B-1 holding a glass of wine.

"What are you drinking?" she asked, and plopped down in the rocker next to Shane.

"Beer," Shane said.

"Perrier," Max said.

"No booze?" Lillie asked.

"I've sworn off. Again," Max said.

"Like hell you have." Lillie stuck a foot up on the rail and crossed her creamy dancers thighs. *So thoughtful of her to wear shorts tonight*, Shane thought to himself as he took another swallow of beer.

"I'm a new man," Max said.

"You look like an Auschwitz survivor."

"Ah, but I feel fantastic!"

So absorbed was he in Lillie's legs, that Shane failed to notice Gail had entered the courtyard.

"Shane? Is Shane up there?" a voice called from below.

Shane shook himself from his thoughts. "What?"

"Telephone for you," Gail said.

"Who? How?" he asked.

"There's a telephone call for you, Shane. In my apartment."

"Oh, thanks. Be right down." Shane stood and scooped out in front of Lillie, who had to remove her lovely legs from the rail to let him by.

"I'll be back," Shane said to his companions, then took the stairs down two at a time.

Max and Lillie's commingled gaze followed Shane's form as he crossed the courtyard and entered Apartment A-3.

"I've been trying to figure that boy out," Max said. "Did you know he made fifty grand trading commodities last year?"

“Did you know if you added up all the years it took for him to do everything he says he has, he’d be older than Santos?” Lillie replied.

“It was only on paper, of course,” Max said.

“My point exactly.”

There was no sign of Ned in Gail’s apartment.

“I need to talk to you, too,” Shane said, after they got inside. “On Friday, when . . .”

“The phone’s in there,” Gail pointed to Ned’s office.

“What?”

“Chop chop, Shane. I’m expecting a call. And you’d better not give out our number anymore.”

Give out your number? Shane mused to himself as he wandered into the office. *I don’t even know your number.*

“Uh-oh,” he said to the computer screen as he lifted the receiver from its housing.

“How did you get this number?” he demanded, his voice barely controlled.

Rachel’s voice came over the line. “I just thought you should know I’m on to you.”

“Give me a break.” Shane took his wallet from his back pocket.

“And I don’t appreciate a bit the fact that you can’t be trusted.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” He pulled a yellow sheet of paper from his wallet and began to unfold it.

“I told you to make an appointment with Ethel Rosenbaum, and have you done as I asked? No. So, I spoke with her myself, and she’s expecting you in her office Monday at eleven.”

"Oh, is she?" Shane stared at the writing on the yellow sheet.

"I'd worry about you a lot less if you'd do this one thing for me. For yourself, babe."

"No."

"It can only help."

"Yeah, like a sharp stick in the eye. Besides, I'm not the one who's all fucked up." Shane re-folded the paper and put it back in his wallet.

"No need for that superior attitude with me, babe."

"Listen, Rachel. I've got Scotty's gun."

"What?"

"And I'm not afraid to use it."

Shane picked up a stapler from Ned's desk and held it against his temple.

"And what do you think that will solve?"

"You'll drive me to it, I swear . . . if you don't quit meddling!"

"Don't be stupid."

"It's not like it doesn't run in the family, or anything."

Gail heard most of Shane's side of the call. He had been so involved in his tirade against the caller and his pantomime to reinforce his words, however, that he hadn't realized she was eavesdropping until he looked up after holding the stapler to his head, primed to shoot.

Stunned, she stared at him from the hall. He made a face at her, then carefully replaced the stapler onto Edward's desk.

"You can't hold those crummy checks over my head," he said, and shook his head when the reply came over the line.

"I *have* a job," he said.

He snorted a blast of air through his nostrils like a bull facing the matador. "It doesn't matter where."

He sat down in Edward's Aeron chair and threw his head against the back rest.

"No, because if I do, you'll bother me there, too."

He reached a hand up to his face and wiped an eye.

"No, it's not," he was now whining like a spoiled child.

"Goodbye," he said, returning the receiver to its cradle with a loud whack. Shane stood and marched past Gail into the hallway. "If she calls again, I'm not in!"

"Shane!" Gail said. "About Friday afternoon ..."

"Look, Gail ..."

"I won't tell, if you won't tell ..."

Shane stopped at the front door and turned back to face Gail. He stuck his hand out. "Deal!"

They were still on the balcony when Shane came out of A-3. And there was no way they were going to let him escape without saying something.

"Who was that?" Max called down.

"Flee for your lives!" Shane called up to them. "All is discovered!"

"Is it now?" Max said.

"Old girl's getting pretty good," Shane said.

"What old girl? Who?" Lillie asked.

"My mother, god bless her. Dr. Freud's worst nightmare. Two weeks and two days to find me. That's got to be a record, huh?"

"If you say so," Max replied.

“Good old Rachel. The bitch!” He blew out an angry breath. “Well, guess I’d better go for a run to calm down. Night, folks.” Shane grabbed a hip pack sitting by the front door of A-1 and headed for the gate.

Lillie called out, “I’ll come get you for rehearsal tomorrow . . . give you a ride.”

“Why?”

“Do I have to have a reason?”

“Sure, all right.”

They watched as Shane jogged out into the night.

“What was that all about?” Max said to Lillie.

“I don’t even want to guess.”

“I mean you . . . getting soft on him all of a sudden.”

“Don’t be silly,” she huffed. “Max, does anybody get it right?”

“What?”

“Raising children.”

“I’d say that Vi and I did a tolerable job with you.”

“But, besides me. Didn’t you want kids of your own?”

“Unfortunately, Jeffrey and I never broached the subject during our child-bearing years. After he split, I was kind of glad we hadn’t.”

“But you were married before. Vi told me.”

“Oh, Lillie Belle, when you feel these maternal urges, the thing to do is get a baby chimp for a while. They’re cleaner than children and better behaved.”

“Is it so much to want to bring a new life into the world?”

“In my humble opinion, we are all old lives being recycled.”

“I swear, Max. I’d sell my soul to have one.”

“Seems I remember Dr. Faustus also making a pact with the gentleman. And you know how that turned out . . .”

“One measly chance . . .”

“*Sombras del Pasado*,” Max sighed. “Such an appropriate setting for our little drama.” He held his bottle out and clinked it with Lillie’s glass of wine. “To shadows of the past.”

“Shadows of the past.”

It was near midnight and Gail was in bed talking on the phone with Greg, when she heard Edward bolt the front door.

“He just came in. Gotta go.”

Greg’s voice spoke over the line, “I love you . . .”

“Me, too. Bye,” she said and quickly hung up the receiver. Just as quickly, she turned away from Edward’s side of the bed, nestled under the covers, and played possum.

She could hear the rustle of clothing as Edward undressed. She could picture him as he climbed into bed wearing only his boxer shorts. She played dead as he attempted a cuddle and tried to give her a kiss. He missed her cheek and got only a mouthful of hair. Then he sighed, “’Night . . .” and rolled over.

Shane had reached a residential neighborhood near the historical district where several homes displayed markers in the front yards proclaiming them to be official members of the list of historic places in Texas.

He ambled past his project for the night. The sign said, “Please Drive Slowly We (icon Heart) Our Children.”

There was a street lamp nearby that he wished wasn’t working quite so well and the soon-to-be full moon seemed huge in the sky. As tonight’s job would not qualify as a

“spray and dash”, he would have to take special care not to appear to be loitering. Shane jogged to the end of the block to scope things out, then doubled back to the sign.

There was no traffic on the street and all the homes were dark. “Let’s just fuckin’ do it,” he said to the empty neighborhood.

The easy part came first. Shane pulled the can of white paint out of his hip pack and shook it while he trotted to the end of the block and back. When the paint had been sufficiently mixed, he sprayed out the red icon heart and exchanged the white paint for a can of black.

He made another circle around the neighborhood while he shook the second can and waited for the white paint to dry. When he was satisfied all was in order to complete the final stage of the transformation, he placed a stencil over the place where the heart had been and sprayed the black paint.

The sign now read: “Please Drive Slowly We (icon Club) Our Children.”

“That’s for you, Rachel,” he said. There was a small grin on Shane’s face when he jogged home in the moonlight.

Chapter Eleven

Another Opening, Another Show

Life soon took on a routine of its own. By indulging in a good, long nap in the afternoon, no matter how late his bedtime, Shane could get to his morning class without being tardy.

On the evenings he had rehearsal, Lillie would come down to wake him from his nap in time to eat and get ready, and then give him a lift to the amphitheatre.

Sometimes after rehearsal, he'd hang out with Melissa or excuse himself for a jog to case out the site for his next spot of art work.

On the nights he didn't have rehearsal, he'd study a little, then sit on the balcony with Max and occasionally Ned and/or Gail.

Finals came the week before opening. Since he felt he had an *A* in the bag, Shane took another couple of days from his studies to panhandle for gold under the interstate.

On the day before opening, he awakened as, one-by-one, his three alarm clocks began to ring.

“Hey!” he said, when Lillie entered his bedroom and flicked on the lights. She didn’t even have to shake him by the shoulder any more.

“Dress rehearsal tonight,” Lillie said.

“Right.” Shane promptly sat sideways on his mattress on the floor and reached for his rehearsal clothes—a dance belt, his smelly sweat pants that had never been washed, and a tight-fitting tee-shirt. For obvious reasons, the costumes were kept in the dressing rooms at the amphitheatre.

After tying his shoes and making a pit stop, he went into the kitchen where he found Lillie stirring up a glass of *Instant Breakfast*.

“Not exactly haute cuisine,” she said handing him the drink.

“Another day, another dollar.” He lifted the glass in a toast and downed the contents without taking a breath.

“Ready?”

“Yep!”

Shane reached for his backpack and followed Lillie out the door.

That night at dress rehearsal, Patricia was busy in the pit conducting the orchestra. The three remaining directors had nothing left to do but watch from the audience and take notes.

As was the usual case for any rehearsal—musical, straight play, opera—the reading of the notes after rehearsal by director, choreographer, musical director, and costumer made for late nights even when the run-through went

without problems. Tonight's run-through, however, had not been so smooth. With a 6:00 start, it was nearly 9:30 before the music began for the Act Two, Scene Four ballet.

Cynthia noticed something about Melissa's costume she wanted to fix and leaned over to tell Barry.

"Hush, Cyn. We're getting to my favorite part."

Most of the actors and crew members had come out front to watch the ballet. The dance corps—who were supposed to be out of the sight line of the audience—had begun slowly inching their way inside the curtain legs for a closer view of the pas de deux from back stage.

"Get back! Get back," Brad called out to the intruders. "If you can see the audience, they can see you!"

Melissa was standing in front of Shane with her back to him. As she raised to her toes, he bent her into a backbend and kissed her hungrily from above. Clearly the two had got the face-sucking down.

"Whooooee," Cynthia hooted. "Is it hot in here, or is it just me?"

"Very nice, Lillie," Brad whispered.

"It's terrible," Lillie said, and mumbled to herself, "Melissa, turnout going into the penché. Melissa, softer landing in the grand jeté."

Brad uttered the stage manager's usual reply, "A bad dress makes for a great opening."

"I know ..."

Though she had seen a ton of mistakes—more than the typical eighteen she memorized before switching to her notebook—Lillie was too polite to point out all the flaws to those sitting near her. She would reserve her notes for a quiet discussion with her dancers after the dress rehearsal.

Shane now had Melissa perched on his left knee. She caressed his face and they smiled into each other's eyes. The Carnival Boy lowered Louise to the floor, then she rolled over him in a log roll until she was facing him from the top. He raised her on his knees and she brought her legs into the "fish" pose.

Louise pushed herself off the Carnival Boy and rolled to her back. Sitting on his heels, his knees bent beside her, he leaned to kiss her from above. She arched her chest into the kiss.

Barry reached a hand across to pat Lillie's arm. "You did it again, Little Bit!"

It took lots of practice to pull together everything they'd been working on for the last several weeks, but with the addition of live music, dancers sometimes lost their way in the choreography. Lillie didn't respond to the director. Besides keeping track of her notes, she counted aloud to herself until the end of the pas de deux.

The Carnival Boy brought Louise to her feet and then swung her in their final circle just before he spied the Carnival People who had returned to call him back to the carousel. Almost violently, he wrestled himself away from Louise and ran to follow his associates, leaving the child alone on the beach.

The applause from tonight's stand-in audience of actors, dancers, and stage hands started as Shane and Melissa exited to opposite sides of the stage. The ovation went on for minutes.

In spite of the hour, after the curtain had come down and the notes were given, the gang headed to *El Sombrero* for a late dinner to celebrate the last rehearsal before opening.

The rest of the company had arrived and several cast members had already been served by the time Shane escorted Melissa into the restaurant. Shane waved to Herman, the leader of the house mariachi band, and Herman strummed his guitarrón and led the band in a rousing rendition of *Happy Birthday*. The folks from the show and other patrons soon began to sing along.

Shane struggled to keep his place beside her as the crowd swarmed the birthday girl. "Happy Birthday, Louise!" Barry said.

"Bet you thought we'd forgot!" Julian said as he handed Melissa a tiny box. "This is from your Ruffian Boys ... and the Carnival Boy."

"Oh, everybody, thanks!" Melissa said. She opened the little box to find a James Avery ring with a silver star charm dangling from the side. She handed the ring to Shane and held up her left hand. What else could he do but slip the ring on her finger? "I love you," she said and kissed him on the cheek.

After devouring their enchiladas, the hungry thespians ate birthday cake until the plate held only crumbs. Barry had paid the band to stay late and the men from the show were all taking turns dancing with Melissa. Shane could tell she was enjoying the attention.

Whenever he looked up from his place at the table, however, Melissa seemed to have him in her sights—batting her eyelashes and smacking her lips in tiny bird kisses.

"Oh, how sweet!" Lillie said, as she moved beside him.

"You wouldn't think five years would constitute a generation gap," he replied.

"Feeling a little May-December are we?"

"The blush wears off the bloom fast, don't it? Oh, Melissa's bright enough, I guess ... pretty. But, boy, is she self limiting."

"I was the same way," Lillie said. "Thought the only thing I could do was dance. Things might have been different if I'd studied physics or anthropology ... exercised my brain. I might have been somebody."

"What do you mean? You did *Chorus Line*!"

"Actually, it was *Chicago*."

"Don't think I've heard of that one."

"Yeah, well, it was a long time ago. You were probably in diapers."

"You're so funny ... Anyways, a Broadway show is more than most performers have to brag about."

"I've got a studio that barely operates in the black. A megalo-something ex who, now, won't leave me alone. And no hope of children to spread my marvelous genetic material ..."

"You have us ... you're adoring students."

"Ah, but when the season's over, you're all outta here. Kids. My own. At least they'd visit sometimes."

"Don't count on it."

"I promise you, children are a gift. If I had one, I wouldn't mess it up. Not in a million years."

"You should have one, then."

"First you have to have a date."

Shane let out a big sigh and rolled his eyes—the way he'd seen Max respond when Lillie made an inane comment. "You're doing it again."

"What?"

"Tell me if I'm wrong, Lillie, but you seem to have an ever so slight complex in the inferiority department."

“Unlike some . . .”

“If you’re referring to my many talents, I’ll tell you a little secret.”

“What?”

Shane put his mouth close to Lillie’s ear, “It’s partly misdirection and slight of hand.”

The Friday night Opening went without a hitch. Shane had done some tech work in high school, but had never acted before. Even though his was a non-speaking role, he amazed even himself with his flair for the dramatic in the Act Two ballet. As a matter of fact, he was certain that the seed for the night’s standing ovation began when he and Melissa took their curtain call at the end of the show.

Barry couldn’t seem to keep his hands off Lillie. He stood in front of the stage, his arm wrapped protectively around the choreographer, accepting all the congratulations as if he, alone, deserved the credit for the “tender” . . . “amazing” . . . “thought provoking” . . . “sexy” . . . “brilliant” . . . dream ballet.

Standing near the first row of benches, Shane and Julian overheard every compliment Barry received on Lillie’s behalf.

“Hard to get a word in over all the self congratulations,” Julian spoke into Shane’s ear.

“I haven’t done this kind of thing, before,” Shane said. “When is it polite to leave?”

“Not yet, I’m afraid. Here come ‘Louise’ and her parents. On your best behavior, now, Shane. They’ve just witnessed you chewing off their daughter’s face.”

“Uh-oh!” It was too late for Shane to bail.

Melissa trotted up to him and took his arm. “Mommy, Daddy, this is Shane.”

Shane reached out to shake Mr. Gipson's offered hand, but Barry stepped in front of his star dancer and grabbed it first.

"That was wonderful, Mr. Siefert," Mrs. Gipson said. "Oh, Miss Cloutier! Melissa's dance teacher was here tonight and she was bowled over by the ballet ... couldn't believe how good it was."

"Thank you," Lillie said.

"Great work!" Melissa's father said to Shane and Julian. "Nice job," he said to the Barry/Lillie conjoined twins.

"And so nice of you, Mr. Siefert, to let Melissa off for her cousin's wedding," Mrs. Gipson chimed in.

Melissa stepped around her folks and gave Shane a plain vanilla hug. "We're leaving for the airport as soon as I get my flowers and stuff from the dressing room. I'll miss you, Carnival Boy."

"Have fun on your trip," Shane said.

"I'll see you all next Thursday. See you, Shane," Melissa said, giving his hand a squeeze. Then ignoring the rules of propriety she had just been enforcing, Melissa kissed him firmly on the lips, turned, and headed for the dressing room with her parents in tow.

"Barry? What did she say? She'll see us **next** Thursday?" Lillie's confusion brought an edge to her voice.

"The kid's supposed to be in her cousin's wedding. I couldn't say no."

"Did you forget that we have a show tomorrow? A matinée on Sunday? There's no understudy for Louise."

"It's you, Lillie. You're the understudy."

"And when were you going to tell me this?"

"I thought she told you ..."

"Did you know, too, Shane?"

"I guess . . ."

"And you didn't think to say anything to me . . .?"

"I *did* wonder why you hadn't scheduled a rehearsal . . ."

"I just wish I could be your Carnival Boy," Barry interrupted, all smiles. "Wouldn't it be great?"

"That's very funny, Barry. So tell me, how long *have* you known about this? We could at least have been rehearsing Sandra."

"Yeah, Barry," Julian agreed. "There's no way Sandra could be ready by tomorrow . . ."

"I want *you* to do it, doll!" Barry said.

Barry had turned to head for the aisle when Lillie, still standing in front of the stage, yelled at full voice, "**Fuck you, Barry Siefert!**"

A troop of Cub Scouts and their female leader stopped as they passed by Lillie.

"Did you hear what she said, miss?" a small boy said.

"When Daddy says fuck, miss," another boy said, "Mommy makes him go out to the garage."

Without missing a beat, Barry took the Scout leader by the arm. "Lovely evening, isn't it? Let me help you and the boys get to your bus."

When the swearing started, Shane and Julian ducked their heads and scrunched down in the first row to hide. While Julian continued to shake with quiet laughter, Shane peeked around to see Barry escorting the Scouts and their leader up the steps of the amphitheatre toward the parking lot across the street.

Lillie continued her rant, yelling at the top of her voice throughout the Scouts' exit, "**Goddamn you, you fucking ratchafratch! Fucking bastard!**"

Shane moved in beside Lillie. “I think it’s time for that right brain exercise. I’ll drive tonight and take you through it when we get home.”

Chapter Twelve

Understudy

Thanks to Shane's magic exercise and a good night's sleep free of alcohol, by Saturday morning Lillie seemed to have gotten over her upset with Barry. She was more resigned than cheerful, however, as she and Shane worked their way through the pas de deux. They conversed while they "danced" marking the counts without bothering to use the taped music.

"I have to say, you turned out to be a pretty fair ballerina," Lillie said.

"Thanks," Shane said, as he bent his new Louise into the backbend. "Uh, should we do the kiss?"

"God, no ..."

"We have to do something ... how about a stage kiss?"

"Whatever ..."

Shane gave her a closed mouth peck on the lips and shuddered for comic effect. He saw Barry enter from Stage Right just as he swung Lillie into the pivot move.

"Looking good, you two," Barry said. "Are you ready for your line run?"

Shane noticed her tensing up, again. Still hanging upside down, she made a nasty face at Barry, "I hate you."

"That's how we want her. Go with it, Little Bit."

Shane brought Lillie/Louise up straight and she crossed to Stage Right.

"What's my line?"

Barry handed his script to Shane. "You read with her. I'll watch."

"Enoch's part?" Shane asked.

"Yeah, there," Barry said, pointing to Enoch's place in the master script.

Shane had to spoon feed Lillie several of her lines. She'd call, "Line?" then Shane would read her line, or the first part of the line. Sometimes Lillie would pick it up, sometimes she'd remember the full line and even the next one. Always, she'd aim an evil eye at Barry.

"Relax will you?" Shane finally said. "Think about what she wants ... she met a feller—who said he was the advance man ..."

Lillie recited her line like a school child while she scowled at Barry.

Enoch, Jr. had no intention of letting Louise run away to the carnival. But Barry had every intention of getting his way with Lillie. "Come on, Little Bit. I thought you were a professional."

Lillie glared at the bastard, fire flashing from her eyes.

Shane coached Lillie's next line, which she parroted back to him with a lead-in, "I really do hate you, Barry."

"Someday you'll thank me, Little Bit," Barry said.

Enoch's plan to stop Louise from running away was to marry her. Shane read Enoch's line as if it were his own.

Lillie, however, had tolerated enough indignity at the hands of her director. She spit out her final line with no attempt at staying in character, yelled “Stuck up buzzard,” and stomped off the stage.

When Shane handed him back the script, Barry said, “That went well, don’t you think?”

Lillie scraped some chopped tomato into the bowl of salad greens for her pre-show dinner Saturday. She was rinsing a can of tuna under the faucet when Max came into the kitchen with a nearly full glass of green juice.

“She’s worse than a kid,” Max said.

“Yes, but she’s our kid . . . I’m dancing tonight. You want to come watch?”

“We’ll see . . . Can’t promise, though,” Max said, wagging his chin in the direction of Violet’s room.

Santos came into the kitchen—her bolsa strapped over her left shoulder, her sun-brella crushed into her right fist. “I go home now, miss.”

“Good night, Santos.”

“Got your lottery ticket?” Max asked.

“I pick it up on the way home,” Santos said. “I have a special store.”

“Hope you win big for us.”

“I be backs, if God is willing,” she said and turned down the hall heading for the front door.

“You shouldn’t encourage her,” Lillie said.

“Can’t win, if you don’t play.”

Shane spent Act One warming up at the track not far from the amphitheatre. When the intermission was called after

the Act, he went to the men's dressing room to put on his costume and makeup.

Carnival Boy's costume was much like the outfit Shane had worn to try-outs—dark jeans, dance shoes, suspenders, and bare chested under a black leather vest. At the auditions, Barry had thought Shane and his Black Irish looks sexy beyond words, and he convinced the costume designer to keep the same sensual look for performance.

They were two scenes into Act Two when Julian called to Shane in the dressing room.

"Nellie just finished *You'll Never Walk Alone* and the Heavenly Friend is escorting Billy to heaven."

"Thanks, Julian. Be right out!"

When Shane came backstage during Scene Three, Marshall/Billy was standing up in heaven with the Starkeeper. Dressed in chambray overalls, Lillie's student George, stood atop a wooden ladder and hung stars on a line strung high across the stage.

There was a kid standing in the wings. Long blond hair. Skinny legs and arms. Barefoot. And wearing a raggedy dress. It took a minute for Shane's normally quick-acting brain to register that the "kid" was Lillie, in wig, makeup, and costume for the Act Two ballet.

As the Scene Four ballet music began, Shane moved closer, silent as a cat, and put a hand on Lillie's shoulder. "Break a leg, Louise," he whispered.

"Thanks. I'm going to need it . . ." Lillie said, and danced out onto the stage.

While Louise roughhoused with the Ruffian Boys and was taunted by the Snow Family, Shane crossed quietly behind the scrim to Stage Right. The Carnival Ladies, dressed in satin leotards with feathered headdresses and colorful

capas, waited for their cue—the strings that built to announce the start of the *Carousel Waltz*. As the Carnival Boy made his entrance, they followed him out onto the stage.

Max arrived at the amphitheatre just in time for the Act Two ballet. He stood behind the last row of stone benches and leaned against the tech booth to watch the story unfold.

Lillie cavorted on the beach with two boys. The three scurried to hide behind a rock when Shane suddenly leapt out onto the stage. Shane was then joined by a group of women who danced in a large circle around him as if they were the horses on the carousel. He soon spied Lillie and her friends and handed them tickets to the carnival. But Lillie didn't want a ticket. She mimed to him that she wanted a royal blue satin cape that one of the ladies from the carnival had handed to the boys to hold for her while she danced with the others on the beach.

Infatuated by the young girl who seemed determined to join the carnival, Shane sent the carnival ladies away, minus one blue satin cape, and wrapped the cape around Lillie's shoulders.

The pas de deux began with one poetic lift that melted into another, after which Shane spun Lillie to face him. Standing on one leg, with the other foot pointed at her calf, she arched into a backbend. He bent toward her face and planted a real kiss over her mouth, his tongue searching for hers as the music built to crescendo.

Shane looked half-stunned to Max when he pulled out of the kiss. The boy quickly got back into character as the ballet continued. But another hot and heavy kiss preceded Lillie grabbing Shane's ankle in a head-down standing split.

Shane twisted Lillie up and onto his back in a cross. As he spun and swirled her through several positions, the air—charged with drama and energy—wafted its way out to Max and the rest of the audience like smoke from a fog machine.

Lillie stood close to Shane, her body language saying, “Take me with you.”

The Carnival Boy woke from his trance to see a teenage girl standing before him. There was no place for her in his life except when he passed through town. He could have no part in bringing a child on tour with him. He cast her arm away from an entangling embrace, and raced after the Carnival People, leaving the pitiful soul alone on the beach.

After Lillie collapsed on the stage, there was an instant blackout. With applause and cheers erupting around him, Max turned in the dark and climbed the hill to the parking lot.

While the audience continued its wild ovation, Lillie left the stage and, breathing hard, stumbled to the wall behind the scrim. A body materialized beside her. It was Shane.

She turned to leave, but Shane had placed his hand on the wall beside her head, his arm blocking her way. His darkened irises stared into hers.

As electric as their performance had been, the air between them now was sizzling.

“Louise, you’re on.” Brad’s voice to her right broke the spell.

She turned her head from the intensity of Shane’s gaze.

“What’s my line?”

“No line. You go on. Julie gives you the cups. You take them into the house.”

Shane had hold of her hand when Lillie stepped toward the curtain leg behind which she was to enter.

“Go!” Brad called in a frantic whisper.

Lillie ripped her hand from Shane’s and hurried onto the stage—once again in character as Louise—as she hid the carnival cape from her mother, Julie, before running into the house.

Brad stepped in beside Shane as they watched Lillie’s cross. “The dance was fab.”

The audience rose to its second standing ovation of the run when Lillie and Shane came out for their curtain call at the end of the performance. Shane had a tight hold on Lillie’s hand throughout the remainder of the bows, but she was nowhere to be found when he came back from the dressing room after changing out of his costume. And, even though he had ridden to the amphitheatre with Lillie, her car was missing from the parking lot when he got to the top of the hill. He caught a ride to *El Sombrero* with Julian.

When they arrived at the restaurant—packed with celebrating theatre people—the only person Shane could see was Lillie. She stood across the crowded room being groped by the show’s lascivious director.

Shane had studied American Sign Language and he could also read lips.

“You were fantastic tonight, Little Bit! Where did that come from?”

“Age and experience, I guess.”

"What do you say we go to my place? I'll spring for some champagne."

"Well, I really . . ."

"I won't take no for an answer, Little Bit."

"Barry . . ."

Shane didn't want to hang around for a ride home with Lillie, only to have her drop him at the *Sombras* while she went to celebrate at Barry's. He lit out the door of the restaurant and took off running, not stopping until he reached the river. When he got to the railroad trestle, he jumped feet first into the ice cold water and swam to the island.

It was after 1:00 when Shane finally got back to the *Sombras*. He closed the gate behind him and turned toward A-1. A shadow flashed from the balcony above. Lillie.

He climbed the stairs, then moved close beside her and knelt at her feet. "You didn't go home with Barry."

He put his head in her lap and reached around her waist. "I couldn't. I wouldn't. That's not me anymore."

His head nestling in her lap, Shane's hands slid up along her spine to encircle her shoulders. She moaned and lay her head against the back of the rocking chair.

"Oh, god."

He lifted his head and slipped a hand underneath her shirt. His fingers brushed across her navel, and crept across to her right breast. She moaned again when he ducked his head under to explore her abdomen with tiny kisses.

"No, please . . . for once in my life, I have to say no."

He lifted his head, searching her face.

"What do you want, Lillie?"

"I want to do what's right."

Shane smoothed Lillie's shirt back into place. He pulled himself up to his feet, leaned against the balcony rail, and gazed down at her. "Tell me what's right, then."

"I'm too old for you."

"And how old is that?"

"I'm almost twice your age."

"In years perhaps."

"I'm a child! A spoiled child. A china doll. I've been spoiled my whole life."

"You're an adult. You can make your own informed decisions."

"Then I decide I shouldn't do this."

"Do what, exactly?"

"Have sex with you."

"I like to think of it more as making love. Have you ever made love?"

"I don't know. I suppose so, but ..."

There was always the temptation to let someone else complete the thought for her. Instead, Shane remained silent. "... but it was always just sex. If I really loved someone ... or loved myself, there would be an element of respect involved. Afterward I usually just hated myself and the guy."

"Even when you were married?"

"Rick was a terrible mistake. I wanted someone to take care of me ... I thought that would be enough. But having every minute of my life programmed by someone else, every independent thought considered a joke. In trade off for a studio, a place to call my own."

"Was it really that bad?"

"You have no idea."

"May I make love to you?" Shane asked.

"I don't know what to say ..."

Shane let out a heavy sigh. "That's all right. 'Night, Lillie."

He turned, heading for the staircase.

"Yes. Yes, please. Shane!"

In one smooth motion, Shane picked her up and cradled her in his arms. He kissed her hard on the mouth, willing his legs not to collapse under him. Then he carried her down the stairs.

Chapter Thirteen

The Magic Words

Still holding her gently, Shane opened the door to A-1 and carried her down the hall. He bent and sat her down on the mattress on the floor.

Lillie gripped the bottom edge of her tee-shirt and began to pull it off over her head. Shane put out a hand to stop her. “May I do it?”

“Okay.”

He rolled the tee-shirt gently up her chest, the action lifting her arms. Then, in one smooth motion, he swept the shirt off over her head. He fiddled with the button on her shorts, then bent to try to see the buttonhole in the dark.

“Let me . . .”

“Thanks.”

After Lillie undid the button, Shane lowered the zipper and slid her shorts and panties down her legs. Lillie sat naked on the edge of the mattress. She planted her feet on the floor, pushed off from Shane’s shoulder, and came to her feet.

“My turn,” she said pulling him up beside her.

They stood silently in the moonlight that came through the uncurtained window. Shane backed up a step to look down at the child-woman who stood almost a foot shorter than he.

“All right.”

Lillie bent to untie his shoes, then removed them one-at-a-time, while he balanced like a stork. She repeated the motion with his socks, folding them neatly across his shoes. His sweat pants and briefs came next.

Still kneeling at his feet, she reached for his cock with her mouth.

He shuddered when he felt her tongue, then put his hands on her shoulders. “Not yet.”

She stood on tiptoe to lift his shirt off over his head. Now they faced each other both completely naked. He bent to kiss her—the kiss every bit as ardent as during the ballet several hours earlier. But this time he was certain it was Lillie, and not Louise, kissing back.

Shane leaned her down onto the mattress and rested himself next to her. He continued the kiss while he scissored his legs alongside her. He was hard and he knew she was wet, but he had no intention of forcing her. She would have to consciously invite him in.

Lost in the dreamy sensation, Shane was surprised to feel himself being rolled to his stomach with Lillie now sitting on top of him. The warmth where she straddled him was beginning to drive him mad, but he knew he’d have to relax and go with the flow if he wanted to put Lillie’s pleasure before his.

With practiced hands, she rubbed his back and neck. Then she moved beside him, half-on half-off, continuing the massage from his shoulders to his buttocks, finally shifting

to sit on her heels as she smoothed out the kinks from his calves to the soles of his feet.

"That feels good."

"You're not the only one with hidden talents."

"My kingdom for a kiss," he said and pushed himself onto his back.

She lay beside him now as they kissed, with one leg across his chest. Her crotch was hot—he could feel the heat seeping into him. Their mouths were locked, but before he would slip inside her he'd have to hear the magic words.

Lillie let go of the kiss and gave him a brief peck on the lips. She gently grazed his Adam's apple with her tongue as she licked down his neck and proceeded to nibble and kiss from his sternum to his navel. Then she took his penis between her teeth.

"Whoa, whoa! Ow! ... I don't mean to turn you off ... but ... ouch!" Shane pushed her away from the sensitive area.

"Sorry, sorry! What did I do wrong?"

"I'm sorry ..." Shane sat up and scooted himself to the support of the wall. "You just surprised me ... I wasn't prepared for teeth."

Lillie bent forward, her head in her hands. "I'm an idiot! That's how Rick always wanted me to give head." She turned toward the other side of the mattress and stared at the wall.

"Whew! He's a braver man than I am! Must have a cock of iron ..."

"He was perhaps a little masochistic ..."

"A little!"

"Look, Shane, I may be twice as old as you, but you're going to have to teach me how to make love. I've never really done this kind of thing before. 'Til now, it's always

been ... just ... sex." She twisted her head to look at him—a sorrowful look, tears brimming in her hazel eyes.

"So you're saying you want to make love?"

"Yes, please! I want to make love with you."

The magic words. "Come over here, beautiful. Let's start again."

"Rick would say I had ruined the mood. This is where he'd stomp out and go turn on ESPN."

"I'm not Rick." Shane put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. Then he lifted her out of the way and leaned across the mattress to find his Dopp kit that sat nearby on the floor. He reached inside and pulled out a condom.

"You don't really need that. I can't have children."

Shane tore the packet open with his teeth and blew the strip to the floor. "We'll adopt," he said, then dressed his little friend for a lesson in lovemaking.

Chapter Fourteen

Mixing Household Chemicals

They didn't sleep much that night, but Lillie felt more rested the following morning than she had in years.

While Shane fixed breakfast, she took her double serving of espresso out to the courtyard to celebrate the rising of the sun. It was a glorious new day. Birds twittered and splashed in the fountain and nibbled at the birdseed that Santos had thrown out for them. In the shade of a gardenia bush, a blue butterfly sipped juice from an over-ripe mango.

With a thud, Gail's Sunday paper flew over the gate, landing at Lillie's feet.

"She won't miss it," Lillie said to the butterfly. "Let's check out the reviews, shall we?"

Small town newspapers were never very hard on their local productions, and today's review was nothing less than glowing.

"Listen to this," Lillie said, when Shane came out of A-1 with their Eggs Benedict.

"Taste this first," he said, feeding her a forkful.

"Umm. Food for the gods," she said before swallowing. "You really do know Le Cordon Bleu. I'm impressed . . . now, listen," she repeated, and lifted the paper in front of her face.

As with any musical, the heart of Carousel is the love story, in this case the ill-fated relationship of Billy Bigelow and Julie Jordan. Equally compelling is the love story enacted in the second act ballet between the Carnival Boy and Billy's daughter, Louise. Their elaborate duet conveys the pathos and tenderness of young love and offers one of the most emotionally charged scenes of the play. All the dances in this production were brilliantly choreographed by our own hometown-girl-made-good, Lillie Cloutier, who—by the way—stepped in as a last minute substitute for the part of Louise on Saturday night.

The show will play Fridays through Sundays through the last weekend in July. Come show your support for San Mateo's Community Theatre production of Carousel!

Lillie had torn out the review for her scrapbook and re-folded Gail's newspaper when Ned stepped out of A-3.

"Have either of you seen Gail?" he asked.

"Unh-uh," Lillie said.

"It's not like her to . . . she didn't come home last night." Ned paused for a response, but Shane and Lillie remained silent. "She's a big girl, right?"

Lillie replied first. "If something were wrong, I'm sure she'd let you know."

“Sure. Of course. Sure.”

“You want some breakfast?” Shane offered.

“He makes Hollandaise from scratch,” Lillie said.

“No, thanks. I don’t eat eggs.” Ned turned and shuffled back into A-3.

“Poor guy. I think Gail moved out a week ago,” Lillie said. She shook her head soberly and felt the brightness leave her eyes.

Shane hadn’t noticed her change of mood. He grinned, then closed in to plant a big kiss on her Hollandaise covered lips. “Yum. That is good sauce!”

Lillie stood, their lips still locked. When she broke away, Shane held onto her at arms’ length and stared into her eyes.

“I don’t want to be one of your famous flings.”

Lillie looked at her wrist. “Oh, gee, look at the time. I’ve got to shower for the matinée.”

“Did you just change the subject?” Shane asked.

Lillie didn’t know what else she could say.

“Well?” he asked again.

“You can’t expect great things from me, Shane . . .”

“Why not?”

“Because everything you’ve heard ’til now is true.”

“And I’m nothing special. Is that it?”

“I didn’t say that. Can we discuss this later, please?”

Lillie handed Shane her plate and headed for the staircase.

“Sure, fine,” she heard him say. “As you wish, Buttercup.”

Santos was serving Violet her lunch at the dining room table when Lillie came out of the bathroom in a fluffy robe, rubbing her hair dry with a towel.

"Afternoon, ladies!" Lillie called.

"Buenas tardes, Miss Lillie," Santos said.

"So, did you hit the jackpot last night?"

"I win three dollars."

"Wonderful!" Lillie said to Santos's rear end as she disappeared into the kitchen. "Hello, Auntie. Lovely day, isn't it?"

"And where were you all night?"

"A friend's ..."

"I don't know why you even try to lie anymore, Lillian."

"We've had this conversation before, Vi. I'm a grown woman. What I do ..."

"Grownups behave like adults. They don't seduce young boys."

"That's crazy! Shane is a consenting adult. He's already older than I was when ..."

"When you had your second abortion?"

"They had to do the first one. It was an ectopic pregnancy. The fetus would never have survived ..."

"So it's all right, then."

"And the sad truth is, I couldn't have a baby now, no matter how much I wanted one."

"Is that why Rick kicked you out?"

"You know why I left, Vi."

"I would just like to believe you had achieved some degree of maturity after all this time."

"Geeze, if I'd known I was going to get this grilling, I'd have ..."

"Not slept with him?"

"Vi, for god's sake, it's not the first time I've had sex ..."

"And it won't be the last."

"I'm out of here!" Lillie stomped out of the dining room. She made for her bedroom, dressed hurriedly, and then began throwing clothes, CDs, makeup, her hairpiece for Louise, and other belongings into her large hard-shelled suitcase.

When she decided she had all she could conveniently carry, she dragged the suitcase, a backpack, her beach bag, and large purse toward the front door. "I'll forward your mail!" Violet called out as Lillie trudged past the dining room.

Lillie next heard Violet speak in a more conversational tone to her caregiver. "*Santos, bring me those 'pick' pills of Maxon's.*"

"Yes, Miss Violeta."

"*And some gin,*" Lillie heard, as she slammed the door behind her.

Lillie dragged her luggage toward B-3. Before she could ring the bell, however, Max had opened the door.

"Vi called," he said, picking up the heaviest bag.

"I promised myself I was going to behave," Lillie said as she followed him to the guest room.

"Now, now. You're talking about a major lifestyle change here."

"I need a twelve step plan, or something. Do they have them for sluts?"

"Step One: Come to Uncle Max," he said opening his arms wide. Lillie let her weight sink into Max's embrace. A light kiss grazed the top of her head. Max heaved a heavy sigh and rocked her side to side.

Max was still cuddling Lillie, when they heard a knock on the door and Shane stepped into the room.

"We gotta go, Lillie. Call is for twelve-thirty."

"I'll be outside in just a minute," she said.

"Okay. Later, Max," Shane said as he left.

When she heard the front door click shut, Lillie said, "You coming to see the show?"

"Maybe some other time, sweetheart."

"Your last chance to see me dance ..."

"You dance every night in my dreams."

Lillie grabbed her wig and make-up kit and headed for the door.

Lillie had the purest of intentions at the start of the matinée. She would absolutely not take advantage of Shane's obvious infatuation. *I mean, he could be your son, couldn't he?* she told herself. *It's nice that you get along ... he lives right downstairs, after all. But, even if this is something different, you know who you are. You really have to behave like a grownup, this time.*

In spite of her earlier resolution to keep things professional in her performance that afternoon, Lillie returned the ravenous kiss when Shane pulled her up from the backbend.

By the time the lights blacked out at the end of the scene, her mind was swirling in confusion. Lillie stumbled off the stage as if she had never performed in front of an audience before. Then she tripped awkwardly over a stage brace that had been screwed into the floor to hold the seashore flat in place.

Shane caught her just after she whacked her shin and carried her to the hallway behind the stage. He had her in a clinch with his tongue halfway down her throat when Barry appeared beside them.

“Lillie! Lillie,” Barry called in a stage whisper. Still involved in her half of the kiss, she caught Barry’s eye.

“Disgusting!” she heard Barry say—a little louder than the stage manager might have wished, had he been in earshot.

In spite of moving in with Max earlier that afternoon, Lillie stayed the night again with Shane.

For being so young, Shane certainly knew how to make love to a woman. This time, *he* went down on her. He licked and nibbled while she writhed in ecstasy.

“I want you inside me,” she begged.

“All in good time,” he lifted his head to whisper, then returned to the job at hand.

His head deep in her crotch, Shane reached up with his right hand and tweaked a nipple. She had wanted to wait—tried to wait—but she came anyway.

After the orgasm, Lillie pushed against Shane until he rolled to his back and then positioned herself astride him. Somehow, he still managed to take charge even with her on top. He took her tiny breasts with his fists and squeezed. Then he let go and slid two fingers inside her.

She moaned when he pulled his fingers out to grab her tits again.

“Hold that thought,” he whispered as he once more reached for his Dopp kit.

She pulled his arm back. “No. I don’t want a condom.”

“I have a strict policy . . .”

“It’s my rules, tonight.”

“Lillie . . .”

“I want to feel you—you—inside me.”

“Have you not heard of STDs? Do you really want me to catch something from your ex?”

“Rick doesn’t ... I’d know if ... Oh, god, just put the damn thing on. Hurry!”

When he finally allowed her to slide onto his cock, the gathering sensation built again quickly as he pumped her up and down above him.

“Don’t stop, don’t stop,” she begged.

Shane heaved himself to sitting, her legs wrapped around him, and brushed her tits as he reached around her back. When he had pulled her flat against his chest, he bit her lip, thrust his tongue deep into her throat, and exploded inside her.

When she came, she wept.

Lillie was sleeping hard when she felt Shane’s weight shift as he crept out of bed Monday morning.

“Where you going?”

“New term starts today. I have class.”

“But, you can’t have.”

“Afraid so.”

“Don’t go. Stay with me.”

“Unh, unh, unh, now. Is that the example you want to set for an impressionable youngster?”

“I’m just a little spooked being here with the Johnsons.”

“Aw, they can’t hurt you. For all I know, they never even existed.”

“If they hadn’t, you wouldn’t be here now.”

“Will someone please tell me what happened to the Johnsons?”

She lifted her weight to her elbows as she watched Shane pull on his jeans. “You know how the label on the tile cleaner always says to use in a *well-ventilated area*?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, Mr. Johnson was cleaning the bathroom and he passed out from the fumes. He cracked his skull when he fell.”

Shane slid his shirt on over his head. “It killed him?”

“That and everything else,” she replied.

“Everything else?”

“You know how the label on the drain cleaner says to *never mix with chlorine*?”

“Uh-huh . . . Walk this way,” Shane added as he led the still-naked Lillie into the bathroom.

“How was Mr. Johnson to have known that—earlier in the day—Mrs. Johnson had been trying to unstop the sink?” Lillie said while Shane took a quick pee.

“What happened?”

“Boom!”

“It got her, too? Some explosion . . .” Shane flushed.

“No. Mrs. Johnson was a tad overweight. She had a heart attack trying to drag Mr. Johnson out of the bathroom.”

He turned on the tap to wash his hands. “Wow!”

“Vi called 911 when they heard the blast, but they were too late to save them.”

“Wow!” He dried his hands and reached for his toothbrush.

“The ceiling was covered with gunk. Toxic sludge all over the place. The carpet in the hall was soaked. The mirror was peeled and melted.”

Shane made a grunt in acknowledgment, his mouth foamy with toothpaste.

“Their toothbrushes were little lumps of plastic.”

He spit and rinsed, then gave her a peck on the lips.

“Will you be home for lunch?” she asked.

“Sorry, my love. I’ve got to work this afternoon.”

“I don’t even know what you do. Is it something in the grad department?”

“It’s hard to describe.”

“I’ve got aerobics at 4:00,” she said.

“I’ll meet you over there after,” he said.

“It’s a date.”

He had located his backpack and was heading down the hall.

“Shane! Miss you.”

He came back to Lillie’s side, pressed her into the wall and kissed her until she saw stars.

“Miss you, too!” he said, and then the new love of her life skated out the door.

Chapter Fifteen

Watch for Trucks

Shane found himself in rare and jovial form for his pan-handling stint after class Monday. He had again dressed in his desert camos and army boots to perpetrate the fraud, but instead of the hard-on-his-luck image of the last couple of sessions, today a scruffy, but cheerful veteran performed under the overpass juggling a Chinese string top.

For a break from the circus act, Shane would sing to the passersby, rotating through his new favorite songs *Have You Ever Really Loved a Woman*, *Total Eclipse of the Heart*, and *Scream*.

At the end of his “workday” Shane pocketed \$300 and change, metamorphosed back into his college student persona, and hiked over to the studio to meet Lillie.

George from the play and a couple of other students were leaving when he walked into the sitting room.

“Hi, Shane,” George said. “Nice job in the show!”

“You saw me?” Shane asked. “Oh, right, the show. *Carousel*. Thanks, George. I like your Starkeeper, too. You have a real sincerity and depth of character.”

"Thanks. Who'd have thought I'd get bit by the acting bug so late in life."

"You're a natural."

Lillie was saying goodbye to some of the stragglers and straightening up the sound cabinet when Shane came into the dance room.

"I'll just be a minute," Lillie said.

"I'll sweep up," Shane said. He found the dust mop in the dressing room and began walking up and down the sprung floor pushing the mop at a leisurely pace.

He shook out the mop and was returning through the back entrance to the dressing room, when Lillie threw herself on him and wrapped her legs around him.

"I missed you!" She fastened her lips on his for a lengthy kiss. Shane leaned the mop against the wall while he simultaneously clutched her around her lovely bottom. Then he carefully maneuvered their combined weight to sit on a nearby bench.

"Ow!"

"Did I hurt you?"

"No, I just leaned back on a coat hook," he said, speaking into her mouth that had maintained airlock during the athletics.

"Make love to me," she said.

He snapped his head away and broke the lip lock. "What? Here?"

"There's a gymnastics mat in the other room."

"You're kidding!"

"Go lock the front and bring the mat. I'll meet you back here," she said before sliding into the restroom. Lillie stuck her head out, "You *do* carry a condom with you?"

"Yes, ma'am," Shane said to the closing door.

Shane had never been a slam, bam, thank you ma'am and it was an hour before he had rogered Lillie to his satisfaction. He rolled off her after her second climax and lay on his back looking up at the ceiling of the narrow little dressing room.

"That was glorious!"

"I'm starving," Lillie said.

"Buy you dinner? I got paid today."

They ate fried catfish at the River Pub, then walked across the spillway and along the river to the island.

"Look, Lillie! A blue heron."

Shane held Lillie in his lap and they sat on a rock to watch the lovely bird catch fish for its supper while Shane nuzzled her neck and let his hands explore under her tee shirt.

For weeks, Shane had worked at his computer set up on the table he'd borrowed from the patio. He'd been sitting on patio chairs in the living room and eating standing up at the bar in the kitchen. His four-day love affair had been conducted on a mattress on the bedroom floor. It was time to appease the dragons by balancing the yin and yang.

On Tuesday after class, Shane changed into his flannel shirt and torn blue jeans, tied a grey bandanna around his head, then climbed the stairs and knocked at B-3. Max opened the door.

"Is Lillie ready?"

"What's on the agenda for today?" Max asked.

"Taking some furniture from the storeroom and calculating the feng shui. You want to help?"

"Sorry, I'm not much for heavy lifting these days. Nothing heavier than a pitcher of frozen daiquiris. That sound

good for later when you're through with your ... calculations?"

"Super, Max. It's a date."

Lillie had just stepped out of her room wearing a paint-splattered khaki jumpsuit.

"There you are!" Shane said. "Let's get the wind-water in equilibrium."

"Yes, sir!" she said and followed him down the spiral staircase to the door of Apartment A-2.

They stopped beside the framework that had been constructed to house the elevator at some date in the future.

"What are you looking for?"

"Everything. Gail helped me get a chest of drawers and mattress the other day. But I still need a sofa, dining table, chairs, bed frame, box springs ... You've seen my place."

"I've stayed there a night or two, yes. But it was dark. And I'm not sure I saw anything but the ceiling."

"There's a lot of stuff here. Was it all the Johnsons's?"

"Actually, we gave that to St. Vincent de Paul's. This is Vi's from before her last remodeling."

"It's gorgeous!"

"Rick always pretended that it would be his one day. He really loves, uh, loved the elephant trunk table in the living room."

"Do tell ..."

"I think I see a bed frame against the wall over there. Oh, and a desk would be perfect for the study. Please follow me, sir." Lillie made her best imitation of a furniture showroom salesperson.

Shane stood with his hands in his back pockets and chewed on his lip. "A hand truck would be nice. We had to use cardboard the other day."

“I know we have one somewhere.” Lillie wandered into the back room—the apartment’s former bedroom. “I found it!”

After two hours of hauling furniture across the courtyard and moving it into just the right places to satisfy the dragons, Shane and Lillie lay on the bed in his newly furnished bedroom and admired their handiwork.

“So what makes this feng shui?” Lillie asked.

“We’re not under a beam or on the same wall with the bathroom.”

“Uh-huh . . .”

“We have a clear view of anyone entering the bedroom.”

“Okay.”

“And most important . . .”

“Yes . . .”

“It feels right! Don’t you think so?”

“It feels great!”

“All we need is a crystal on the nightstand and we’ll stick some stars up. I’ll get some after the show’s over. I’ve got more stuff in my trunk over there.”

“Like what?” Lillie asked.

“There’s a lava lamp for the bathroom and a stained glass ornament of the sun to hang in the window.”

“Nice.”

“A mirror and a moon sculpture for the kitchen. We’ll have to go shopping for a bamboo plant for the living room.”

“Let’s do it.”

An hour later, the flow of energy in the apartment felt almost perfect.

“I should have taken care of this ages ago. I feel like a new person.”

"I'll feel as good as that after I've had a drink," Lillie said. "You ready?"

"Lead on, McDuff," Shane said and followed Lillie out to the courtyard.

Max and Ned were sitting at the table near the fountain sipping away at their daiquiris.

"We brought the party down here, in case you were both too exhausted to climb the stairs," Max said.

"Thanks, Max," Shane took the offered glass. "Hey, Ned. How's it hangin'?"

"Gail moved out."

"I suspected as much."

"She didn't even leave me a note. I just realized yesterday all her stuff was gone."

"That's tough," Shane said.

"You know where she is, don't you, Shane?" Max said, his voice heavy with inflection.

"You do?" Ned asked.

"Aw, Ned. She's been gone two weeks and you only figured it out today? Best not set yourself up as an idiot. Just wait a while. She'll come around."

"But, when? What am I supposed to do until she's ready to talk?"

"Come tubing with us tomorrow ..." Lillie offered.

"You sure?" Ned said.

"Absolutely! It'll be fun!"

"Well, I might just do that."

On Wednesday after returning from class, Shane put on his swimsuit and ratty tennis shoes while Lillie went to get Ned. She gave them a bit of her tour-guide spiel on the drive over to the tube rental place.

"It'll be cold," she warned. "The river is spring fed and the water temperature year-round is seventy-eight degrees."

Shane loaded up the ice chest while Lillie and Ned waited in line for the tubes.

"Above the falls is the lake where the springs have their headwaters. The Tonkawa converges with the Guadalupe River way east of town. The river goes all the way to the Gulf."

"Amazing," Ned said.

After acquiring their tubes, the trio hiked upstream through the college park and across the street that bridged the river and bisected the town. A waterfall poured over a small dam beside the historic ice plant that had recently begun its new life as a steak house. Below the falls was a swimming hole accessed from the gravel bed that extended out from the river bank where they had set their gear.

They walked down the gravel bar and stood in the river while acclimating to the temperature. "Ready for me to show you how to get in your tube without flipping it?" Lillie asked Ned.

"Ready as I'll ever be . . ."

While Lillie helped Ned with his gymnastics, Shane strapped the ice chest onto its own flotation device, then dove into the water and came up inside his tube.

"Whoa, it's cold!" he hollered as he floated past them holding around the rubber ring.

"Wait for us," Lillie called. "You'll get away with the beer. We have to make a chain."

Shane held onto a pylon just under the road, then caught hold of Ned as he came by. Lillie—who had many years of tubing under her belt—sailed past the men, then used her

hands to spin herself in a circle while she waited for her two companions to link up.

The first leg of the trip took them through the college park where most of the students seemed to live all summer. After the park, they sailed by the tube rental place where city ownership took over.

Just past a little bend, was a forest of elephant ears and then a quiet stretch of river, where people fished from the bank. On the opposite side, residents sat rocking on the porches of their historic riverfront homes. Occasionally a kid would swing out over the tubers on a rope and take a belly flop into the water.

Shane had just handed out the beers when Lillie cried, "Look a butterfly!"

Sure enough, a humongous blue butterfly was sitting on Ned's tube.

Ned squealed like a girl and swatted at the butterfly. Out of balance from reaching for the insect, he dropped his beer. Then, when he reached for the koozie, his tube flipped, and the newbie tuber toppled face first into the ice cold water.

While Lillie rescued his beer, Ned somehow climbed back into his tube—but his teeth didn't quit chattering until they came to the railroad trestle. There on the trestle, standing high above them, were a couple of kids waiting to dive-bomb any unsuspecting tubers who floated beneath.

On their way under the trestle, in an attempt to avoid a bomber, Ned flipped himself again.

This time he stayed in the water. "I'm going in," he said, holding onto the edge of his tube. "Looks like a shallow place down there."

Just past the island was the spillway that Lillie and Shane had tiptoed across two nights earlier, after their dinner at

the River Pub. “Don’t you want to go over the dam?” Lillie called.

“I think I’ve had enough adventure for one day,” Ned replied. “I’ll just wait for you guys.” He pointed to an empty picnic table sitting in the sun. “Over there, where it’s warm.”

After hiking back to the parking lot and turning in their tubes, Lillie and Shane dropped Ned off at the *Sombras*, then went to the studio to get ready for aerobics with the seniors. On the way home after class, they picked up some burgers and sat in the courtyard to eat supper.

Shane was sprucing up the trash when Lillie said, “What shall we do next?”

“Let’s go jogging.”

“I had in mind you’d say . . . you know . . . wink, wink.”

“We can do that later. Come on, it’ll be fun.”

Going at half his normal pace, Shane led Lillie to the amphitheatre. They jogged down the aisle to the stage and sat on the apron to watch the “show”. After the sun had sunk and the orange sky dimmed into deep purple twilight, Shane stood and reached for Lillie’s hand.

“Let’s dance.” Shane stood up and moved to Center Stage.

Shane and Lillie had the entire stage—the whole amphitheatre—to themselves. They danced without music, but without missing a note. They did every lift, every hold, every kiss, as if they really were the Carnival Boy and Louise alone on the beach. But this time the Carnival Boy didn’t leave Louise at the end of the dance. He pulled her to the floor, log-rolled her upstage, and slid with her under the cyclorama to the back wall of the stage.

Shane kissed her like a sailor returning from the sea, a soldier home from the war, a carny reuniting with his groupie year-after-year when the circus comes to town.

Lillie was still in her own little dream ballet when Shane, suddenly standing above her, took her by the hand and pulled her to her feet.

“Ready for an adventure? A spot of skulduggery?”

“Anything.”

While the full moon began its ascent, they hiked down the hill and turned right at the city’s main street. The sidewalks disappeared at the edge of town where the street became a state highway. Facing the oncoming traffic, they carefully picked their way along the verge for what seemed to Lillie like miles.

There wasn’t a lot of traffic on the road this time of night, but there were plenty of farm houses on the way out of town and, just past the city limits, the entrance to San Mateo’s classiest subdivision.

“Watch out!” Lillie hollered, when a truck zoomed past a little too close for comfort. She pulled Shane after her into the ditch. “People have been killed here,” she said pointing to a wreath of well-dried flowers attached to a barbwire fence behind them.

“It’s gotta be around here someplace,” Shane said after they got back on their feet.

“It would help if I knew what we were looking for . . .”

Shane let go of her hand and sprinted down the shoulder. “I knew it!” He was suddenly jumping up and down. “Hurry!” he called. “Bring the knapsack!”

Lillie shook her head and speed-walked toward him. Shane was looking up at a highway sign near the entrance to the cement factory south of town. The sign said *Watch for*

Trucks. “There’s one on the other side, too,” he said. “We’ll get it on the way back.”

“Whatever you say.”

“Give me the paint can, will you? And there should be a piece of cardboard in there.”

Lillie fished inside the backpack and pulled out a can of white spray paint. “Here you go.”

Shane took the can and jogged in a circle while he shook the ball bearing.

“Get in the ditch!” Shane pulled her down beside him when a pickup truck sped by.

“The moon’s huge tonight, so much light,” Lillie said while they waited for another car to pass.

“I should have thought through the timing of this excursion a little better,” he mused.

“It looks like you could touch it,” Lillie said.

“All clear!” Shane pulled the top off the paint can. “Got the cardboard?”

He lined the cardboard cutout around the “U” and sprayed. “Great! While that dries, I’ll spray out the other one. You shake up the black,” she heard as he scurried across the road.

“Yes, sir!”

By the time he returned, Lillie had her can of paint well-mixed and had found the other cardboard stencil in the backpack.

“I’m worn out. Can you make it quick?”

“Won’t take a minute, love.” Shane traded implements with Lillie, then deftly lined up the stencil over the newly painted area and sprayed the black.

“What’s it say?” She was sitting on the backpack.

“Well, come and see for yourself.”

"I'm too tired. Just tell me."

"Watch for tricks. Come on," he said reaching a hand down.

They crossed to the north side of the highway and hiked twenty yards toward town, where Shane improved the second sign.

Lillie was so exhausted for the return walk home, she didn't remember much except for the huge bright moon that lit the way.

When they got to a convenience store at the edge of town, she sat on the curb, put her elbows on her knees, and rounded her chest forward. Then she reached her fist up in the air, her keys dangling from her index finger. "Go get the car, I can't move another step."

"I'm not leaving you here. It isn't safe."

"I don't care."

"Stand up."

"No."

"Stand up, Lillie." He slid his hands under her armpits and pulled her up. Then he turned his back to her chest and bent his knees.

"Hop on. I'll carry you."

Lillie had hardly more mass than a middle schooler. Shane piggybacked her the last eight blocks to the gate of the *Sombras*. They fell asleep the minute they crawled into bed.

Chapter Sixteen

Curo Estilo Mexicano

Lillie began to stir into consciousness when she felt Shane's hands massaging from her calves to her glutes to her shoulders.

"Hello, beautiful," he said when she opened her eyes. "Thanks for helping me last night. That was fun!"

"Not for me, it wasn't," she replied. "Committing acts of vandalism has never been high on my list of fun."

"It's not vandalism. I'm an artist. A humorist and an artist," Shane said.

"You may not think it's so funny when they haul you off to the hoosgow."

"Oh, come on. It's a hilarious joke. Admit it."

"Committing crimes, even misdemeanors, is not a laugh-matter," Lillie said. "You may think it was worth it, but I'm here to tell you that I won't be visiting you in jail."

"You won't? I was hoping you'd bring me some smokes, or a cake with a file in it. Maybe kiss me through the glass in the visitor's booth. Come for a conjugal visit?"

"You don't deserve a conjugal visit. And if you ever do that again, I'll ... I'll ..."

"How about one last screw before they haul me away?" Shane lifted his leg and flipped her onto to her back. He kissed all her ticklish spots, spending a little extra time with her small but sensitive breasts, then he climbed between her legs.

After their dawn awakening, Shane stood up from the bed.

"Why do you do it, anyway?" Lillie asked.

"What? Make love to beautiful women?"

"No, silly. Deface public property."

"If you had ever met my mother, you'd understand."

"Perhaps so, but can't we find some other outlet for your 'artistic' needs?"

"Just let me do one more, and then I promise I'll quit."

"No."

"Don't you want to know what it is? It'll be the one I'm remembered for."

"No, thank you."

"It's for El Sombre ..."

Lillie put her hands over her ears and started to sing, "Nah, nah, nah, nah ..."

"Okay, okay," Shane said as he reached to pull her hands down. "I'll quit. But you're going to have to stay with me every minute of every day to make sure I don't fall off the wagon."

"Absolutely," Lillie said. "Where are you off to?"

"I've got to get to class," he replied.

"See you later, then," Lillie said. After she heard the front door click shut, Lillie rolled over and returned to the land of Nod.

A taxi pulled up to the curb in front of the *Sombras* just after Shane closed the gate on his way out. "Can I help you?" he called to the driver.

"No, thanks. Looks like they're on their way down."

Shane waved to Violet and Santos as they descended the staircase. He hadn't seen Violet use a walker before, but she had one today that she opened at the base of the staircase. No point in rushing them, he stood—a cheerful smile on his face—as they slowly crossed the courtyard. Shane re-opened the gate, assisted the women into the back seat of the cab with a "Have a nice day, ladies," and headed up the hill.

Santos directed the cab driver to a little house near the Mexican market just east of the Interstate. The house—decorated year-round with Christmas lights—sporting all manner of additional liturgical and secular decor. The cabbie pulled up to the curb then ran around the car to assist Violet with her walker.

There were piñatas hanging from the porch ceiling and a three-foot plaster Santa Muerta in the corner. A professionally painted sign filled the front window, "Professor Herman Miguel - Curo Estilo Mexicano".

Santos took Violet's arm and helped her up the steps.

On the front door was a colorful bas relief crucifix with Christ in the middle of the cross and the Four Evangelists depicted at each end. At the top was an eagle, to the left a winged lion, at the bottom an angel, and to the right a creature that looked more like a ram than the ox with wings that typically represented the Apostle Luke.

When Santos rang the bell, they heard the the melody for *La Cucaracha* chime, and Professor Brother Miguel opened the door.

“Please, won’t you come in Señora Violeta? Buenos días, Santos.” Professor Brother Miguel placed a gentle hand on each woman’s shoulder and ushered them through the shop into his sitting room.

The wall of the shop was covered with note-card sized shadow boxes housing calacas in various costumes and poses: a skeleton in flip flops and straw hat walking his skeleton dog; a skeleton in a hammock reading a miniature book; a skeleton ballerina in tutu, tiara, and pointe shoes; a child skeleton with a headful of golden ringlets tap dancing down a staircase with the skeleton of “Uncle Billy” Robinson.

Professor Brother Miguel called his maid to bring the ladies a cup of *Yerba Buena* then began his examination.

After Shane returned from class, he and Lillie made love again and both took another nap.

Shane hadn’t seen Gail in a while and, except for their previous afternoon on the river and daiquiris the night before, Ned had been conspicuously absent from their recent happy hour gatherings. When Lillie was in the shower, Shane started a pot of coffee and went out to the courtyard to filch the newspaper that had lain in the courtyard all day.

“Hello, Tinker Bell,” Shane said to the blue butterfly that sat on an azalea near the front door. “Enjoying your vacation still? Tubing was fun, wasn’t it?”

Shane took the paper inside, settled into an arm chair in the living room, and opened the sports section.

He had kind of gone off baseball during the strike and hadn't bothered to watch a single game since play resumed that April. It was dumb luck that reignited his interest in the sport when, the week before opening, a couple of the guys had a little battery TV going in the back row at rehearsal and he got to see McGwire's grand slam.

Still busy with school and the show, the best Shane could do these days was check the sports page for yesterday's stats. "Maannn!" he said when he saw he'd have to miss the Rangers play Boston tonight. Barry had scheduled an Act Two run-through to bring Melissa back into form for Friday's performance.

Just wait 'til the show's over, Gulliver, and you can watch all the baseball you want, he heard his big brother console him.

Shane was considering whether he should accost Lillie in the shower, when there began a loud banging on the front door and a woman's voice hollered.

"Shane! Is Lillie there? Open up!"

Santos's granddaughter, Rosa, stood on the threshold, her face contorted in agony.

"Rosa? What's wrong?" Shane took her gently around the shoulders and steered her into the kitchen.

"It's Vi ..."

"Lillie, come quick! Something's wrong with Vi!" Shane called out, then turned back to Rosa. "What is it? What's wrong?"

Lillie hurried into the hall wearing only a towel.

"Santos called from the hospital. The EMS took them there. They were shopping after they went to see Professor Brother Miguel, and Violet had some kind of fit ... or collapse, or something."

“Oh my god!” Lillie said.

“Santos thought Lillie would be here with you and wanted me to call her here, but you don’t seem to have a phone.”

“We’ll go to the emergency room as soon as Lillie’s dressed. Do you want to ride over with us?”

“No, I’d better just meet you. I’ll have to take Santos home later.”

“We’ll see you there, then,” said Shane.

While Lillie dressed, Shane grabbed a few things together. He was certain he’d end up going straight to rehearsal from the hospital. He found Lillie’s purse and car keys, then raided his stash in case they’d need to buy food or something later.

Lillie drove much too fast, wailing all the while, “Oh god, oh god, oh god!”

“Damn, slow down,” Shane yelled as she sped through a red light. “We’ll all be in the ER!”

Lillie charged out of the car as soon as they pulled into the medical center drop off, leaving Shane to park. When he reached the waiting room, Santos was praying loudly on her Rosary while Lillie and Rosa murmured in a corner. He sat next to Lillie and put his arm around her. “Nooooo!” she wailed, turning her face into his shoulder.

Rosa stomped over to her grandmother. “Yaya, tell Lillie what happened!”

Santos made the sign of the cross and looked down at the floor like a child about to blame a kitchen disaster on the cat.

“Professor Brother Miguel give her some kind of potion ... I don’t know what’s in it. But some big magic. It cost more than two hundred dollars.”

"I could just kill her!" Lillie spoke between clinched teeth.

"Take it easy," Shane said. "It's gonna be all right."

"My grandmother has taken his tonics for years with no ill effects," Rosa said. "They're just placebos, I'm sure of it."

"I hope you're right," Lillie said, shaking her head. Her eye caught the clock above the door. "Oh, no!"

"What? What's wrong?" Shane and Rosa both spoke.

"My class starts in ten minutes. Can you go over there and tell them I have to cancel today?"

"Of course," Shane said. "Will you be all right here?"

"Yes, yes, thanks," she said.

Shane gave her a bear hug and planted a kiss on her down-turned mouth. "Good thing Melissa's back," she said, pulling out of the kiss, "or we might have to cancel the show tomorrow."

"I'm thrilled," Shane said. As the door for the hallway to the exit closed behind him he could hear Lillie's angry words, "I'm going to kill her!"

A few minutes after Shane left, Paul came in from the emergency room. He reached out a comforting arm to Lillie.

"Oh, Paul ..." Lillie wailed.

"We pumped her stomach. The lab took a look at the contents. As best we can tell, she drank some weird concoction of bile, ashes, metal filings, urine ..."

"Urine?"

"Those were the good parts ..." Paul replied. "You don't want to know what else they found."

Lillie's students were waiting in the parking lot when Shane pulled up to Miss Adeline's Studio of Performing Arts.

"Where's Lillie?" someone asked.

"There's been a medical emergency ... her aunt," Shane said. "If you want, I can sub the class for her."

"We're already here," George said. "Might as well."

Shane unlocked the door with one of Lillie's keys and the over-forties followed him inside.

Since the first day he arrived in town, Shane had observed Lillie's class many times. Between his photographic memory, a few hours at the nursing home when he was a Scout teaching the residents Jack Lalanne exercises, and the happy coincidence that he'd spent some of his youth in front of MTV improvising dance moves, once the music started for the Country & Western set, the class continued without a hitch.

Later, at the amphitheatre for the second act run-through, Shane stood backstage and actually sang along with the men's chorus during Jigger's song *Stonecutters Cut It On Stone*, before Jigger and Billy Bigelow took off to do their dirty deed.

Marking their choreography for the ballet, the kisses with Melissa were generic. Instead of the hot and hungry passion of their opening night performance, Shane used the "stage kiss" version Lillie had showed them the first time they rehearsed together.

When he went back to the hospital after rehearsal, Lillie and Violet were both dozing in Violet's room. Shane shook Lillie gently.

"Hi, you're back. How did it go?"

"Okay. Melissa's nothing like you. But how is *she*?"

“She’s allergic to something called magnetite. I can’t believe she did that! Stupid ... stupid ...”

“Can you leave?”

Lillie nodded, rose from her chair, and moved to the bed. “Vi? Auntie? We’re going home now,” she whispered.

Violet stirred awake. “You’re a good girl, Lillie Belle.”

“I love you,” Lillie said.

“Don’t give Santos a hard time,” Violet said. “It was all my idea.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t. See you in the morning,” Lillie said, kissing her great aunt on the cheek.

Lillie mumbled loudly as they walked down the hall, “It’s *her* I want to strangle!” Then, in an almost cheerful voice she said, “She never calls me Lillie Belle!”

It was pitch black when they entered the courtyard, but Shane could sort of make out the shadow of a woman sitting there in the dark.

“Gail?” he asked.

“Look what the cat dragged in!”

“Shit!” Shane said.

“Who is it?” Lillie asked.

“The boy’s mother,” the voice spoke inflected with a cynical chuckle. “And you are ... I guess we’d have to say ... Freud’s dream come true.”

Chapter Seventeen

MIL from Hell

“Jesus, Lil,” Shane whispered. “I never thought she’d come here.”

Rachel rose from the wrought iron chair. “I’m starving. I’ve been driving since Ozona.”

Shane replied, his lips pulled tight against his teeth. “Right this way.”

Rachel followed Shane into A-1, gesturing toward Lillie as she went through the door. “Care to join us?”

Rachel returned from the bathroom at about the time Lillie had composed herself enough to enter the apartment. Shane’s mother smiled a fake smile. “Nice place. Yours?”

“My great aunt’s, actually.”

“Of course.”

Shane had been cracking eggs into a bowl when Lillie followed Rachel into the kitchen. He looked up, his gaze dark.

“You could have called.”

“A taste of his own medicine. I did call. Didn’t your neighbor ... I think his name is Edward ... didn’t Edward give you the message?”

"We've been out."

Rachel turned to Lillie. "Yours is not an uncommon perversion, you know. A few years in therapy could do wonders."

"Mother . . ." Shane said through gritted teeth.

"That really put me in my place," Lillie said.

"I saw part of the rehearsal tonight," Rachel said.

"I thought you said you hadn't stopped since Ozona."

"Not for a potty break . . ."

"Well? What did you think?" Shane improvised a little shuffle-hop-step. "Ta-daaaa!"

"I'm not so sure Grandfather would approve how you've been spending your time and his money."

"You know he wouldn't care."

"I don't know a damn thing."

"And who's fault is that?"

"You can be honest with me, babe. When could you not tell me anything?"

Shane banged the skillet on the stove, the color rising through his cheeks. Lillie could see the pulse pounding at his temples.

"That's fine, clam up," Rachel said and turned to Lillie. "The boy's always had a difficult time expressing his feelings. He prefers the silence of omission, right, babe? Not lying. Not really telling the truth."

She stared at Lillie, her eyes like tractor beams. "How old are you, exactly?"

"I'll be leaving, now," Lillie said.

"Stay, please . . . Communication is the most important thing for reaching understanding. I'll facilitate."

"I think I'd rather just go," Lillie said.

"You think? Not used to making your own decisions, are you, babe?"

Shane slammed the plate down in front of Rachel. "Rachel, I'm warning you!"

Lillie swallowed with difficulty and forced out her parting words. "You know where to find me."

After Shane heard the front door click shut, his mother turned her attention back to him. "Classic Phaedra complex."

"Oh, come on," Shane said. "It's more straightforward than that. She's after my vast fortune. Can't you tell?"

"That reminds me," Rachel said. She held out a small sheet of folded paper.

"No, thanks."

"You need it. Grandfather Watson meant for you to have it."

"Not with all these strings. Not with you holding money over my head every time you want attention."

"You won't make it alone."

"You've seen to that, haven't you?"

"I didn't come here to argue about money, babe."

"What did you come to argue about, then?"

"We're going to see Ethel Rosenbaum tomorrow."

"No, we're not."

"It's time you quit blaming yourself for Scotty."

"And time you started blaming yourself. Give it up, will you?"

"We've both had a lot of demons to wrestle with since he died. It's no shame that you need help to deal with yours."

"I don't need a shrink to tell me who the demon is."

"You were only a child. You couldn't have saved him . . ."

"Who then?"

"There's no good answer to that. Even trained professionals can't detect that an otherwise normal, happy person will take his own life."

"Tell me something, Rachel. Be honest, now."

"Certainly, babe."

"That time in high school I stayed with the girls in the dorm at UTEP ... hadn't come home in three nights?"

"Um-hum."

"Why did you have me hauled up to the psyche ward in a straight jacket?"

"You make a simple effort to help sound so malicious."

"We're just your guinea pigs, right?"

"Don't think so little of yourself."

"You *want* me dysfunctional. You wanted Scotty ... Dad's long gone. You've gotta have someone to manipulate."

"That's the way. Let it out, babe."

"Your own patients can't stand you. Whoever heard of a chip on her shoulder feminist treating a bunch of male chauvinist vets? You can't get a job in the real world, so you practice on the poor, injured soldiers in the mental ward. All your grand theories of the human mind. You don't have a clue, do you?"

"Now, doesn't that feel better?"

"How many other perfectly good people have you ruined?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean, besides Dad and Scotty, I mean."

"Now, just a minute ..."

Shane picked his jacket off the floor and slid his left arm into the sleeve.

“You can stay tonight, but I want you gone in the morning.”

“Shane, babe,” she was starting her cynical chuckle, again. “You don’t think I’m responsible?”

“Just be gone.”

Before the door closed behind him, Shane heard her final swipe.

“That’s one for the books!”

Chapter Eighteen

Sonnets for Food

Shortly after helping Lillie carry her things back to B-1, Max heard another knock on the door.

“Forget something, Lillie Belle?”

It was Shane, not Lillie, who now stood on the threshold.

“Is Lillie, here?” the boy asked, his voice shaking.

“She thought she’d better go back to Vi’s, in case you needed a place tonight.”

Shane shuddered, then crumpled against Max’s chest sobbing like a child who’s world had collapsed.

Max walked Shane into the living room, the young man’s weight heavy against him, and helped him sit. Shane crossed his arms over the armrest, lay his head down, and wept, his heart breaking more with every shudder.

Max spotted a yellow piece of paper that had fallen from Shane’s hand. He picked up the paper and opened it.

Sorry, Gulliver. I can't take the hag anymore. You're better than me—smarter, too. And you've got a thousand more survival skills. Study hard and you'll get through this and one day make your escape. Too late for me, I'm afraid. I'll be rooting for you from Lilliput.

— Scotty

Max led his still-weeping visitor to the recently vacated guest room, helped him remove his jacket, shoes, socks, and jeans, then covered him with the quilt and patted the grieving soul until his sobs faded into sleep.

Shane woke in the twilight, dressed, and carried his shoes as he tiptoed down the hall in the dark. When he stepped outside, the sky was dim, the sun beginning its journey into dawn.

The door to B-1 was unlocked. He let himself in and quietly made his way to Violet's guest room. Lillie stirred when he climbed into bed beside her.

"Is she gone?"

"I haven't checked yet. I'll give her another hour before I call the cops."

"You're kidding."

"Maybe . . ."

They lay side by side in the dark.

"And how are you?" she asked.

"I've had better nights," he said.

"I'm sure."

"Why did you go? Why did you leave me all by myself?"

"You know how to handle her. I'd have only made things worse by sticking around."

"I mean, why did you leave Max's?"

Lillie put her arm around him. "I couldn't have him thinking we were ... in the next room."

"Why would I want to make love, the place I was last night? I'd have liked some company, is all."

"Max is the best port in a storm I know. He took care of you, didn't he?"

"Yes, but ..." Shane choked down a sob. "I don't want to lose you over her."

"Used to be someone like that would send me packing, but not this time."

"Bless you for that."

"Uh-oh." Lillie shot up and reached for the lamp on the nightstand.

"What?"

"I was supposed to go to San Antonio this week."

"What for?"

"Classes start the end of August. I have to get the letters out, clean the place, hold registration ..."

"I'll come with you."

"You've got school ... you can't just pick up and leave."

"I'll transfer ..."

"You've got the show, Shane."

"But ..." he said

"What?"

He choked out his reply, "Rick's there."

"I'm not going to see Rick."

"What if he comes to see you?"

"Shane, we're divorced. We've moved on. Why would he come to see me?"

"I don't know."

"Besides, what did you think was going to happen when I went back?"

"We hadn't really talked about it."

"San Antonio is only forty-five minutes away. We're grownups. We'll have a short distance romance."

"Where will you stay?"

"I'll be at my house ... shit ... Rick's house. I've still got to arrange the financing to buy him out. See, another reason I need to get back ..."

"Will you at least call me every day?"

"Have you forgotten you don't have a phone?"

"I'll get one."

"In the meantime, why don't you just send me love letters?"

"Sure, absolutely. I'll need the address."

"I'll write it down for you. But right now, I need to pack."

"And what about Vi? Are you just going to leave her?"

"She's got along fine without me before this summer. I'll check in at the hospital on my way out of town."

By the time Shane carried Lillie's luggage down to the car forty minutes later, it was obvious that Rachel had moved along. The only evidence of her late night visit was the trust account check propped between the salt and pepper shakers on the kitchen bar.

Lillie kissed Shane, then climbed in behind the wheel. He shaded his eyes from the morning sun and watched the car as it turned right at the light and headed for the interstate. Feeling oddly empty with his new love gone, instead of getting ready for class like a responsible person, Shane climbed the spiral staircase and lowered his bottom into Lillie's rocker.

Upon awakening Friday morning, Max fixed a pot of *Puro Scuro*, then tapped on the guest room door. When there was no answer, he stepped quietly into the room to see only an empty bed.

"Shane," he called. When he failed to locate the lad in the bathroom, Max headed outside where he found Shane sitting in Lillie's chair on the balcony. His gaze far away, Shane rocked fiercely and automatically, like one might expect an autistic kid at school, an old man in the park, or a patient in the mental ward of a hospital.

"There you are . . ." Max handed Shane a mug.

Shane stopped rocking. "She's gone . . ."

"Well, good! That's what you wanted, wasn't it? Get rid of your busybody mom."

"I mean Lillie . . . Lillie left this morning."

"But your mom?"

"She's gone, too."

"Why did Lillie leave?"

"She's got to send out the letters and handle registration . . ."

"Oh, sure. That's right. You okay, son?"

"I'm fine. Just a little bummed."

"Don't you have to get to class?"

"Think I'll cut today." Shane revved up his rocker.

The blue butterfly that had been occupying the chair next to Shane, fluttered up and into the breeze. "Think I'll join you," Max said, taking a seat in the now-empty chair.

After a few minutes of comfortable silence, Max started to hum a Bill Withers tune, then sang, his voice deep and soft, "Ain't no sunshine when she's gone . . ."

After Max finished the verse, they rocked quietly for another hour. They came back to life enough to say hello to Santos when she climbed the staircase to begin her workday and afterward waved at the postman when he dropped off the mail.

Shane clunked his feet from the rail with a start. "Damn! She forgot to give me her address ... and phone number. I'm going to have to get a phone. Max, do you have it?"

"Lillie's address? I don't think I've ever been there. Not too fond of Rick. And Rick's not particularly fond of ... Gs, Ls, Bs, or Ts. Vi will have all that stuff."

"Of course."

Just before noon, Santos brought out sandwiches and sweet tea and set their plates on the little table where usually sat the pitcher of drinks. After both ate in silence, Max pushed himself up from his rocker.

"Come on, son. I'll walk you down. You've got a show tonight. Better get some rest."

"I don't want to."

"You don't have to want to."

At the door to A-1, Max put a kindly arm around Shane's shoulders. "I'm going to visit Vi, see when she'll be ready to come home."

"Guess I'll take that nap, then,"

It was almost 3:00 when Shane woke to the sound of a loud banging on the front door.

"Shane! You in there?" It wasn't Rosa or Max knocking. Today the interruption came from Ned.

Somehow in his sleep, Shane had moved from the comfort of the bed to huddle in the corner of the room near his feng shui altar. He pried his arms from around his knees,

creaked up to standing, and trudged out of the bedroom in his tee-shirt and briefs.

Ned stood in the hallway holding his massive CRT monitor.

"The door was open," Ned said. "You all right?"

Shane tried to shake the sleep out of his eyes. "A question yet to be answered. What's up?"

"The bastards cut off the power. I'm in the middle of my dissertation. Could you let me set up over here?"

"Aw, Ned ..."

It seemed impossible to consider taking in a stray during the recent turn of events. Instead, Shane had the inspiration to pull a heavy duty extension cord out of his storage closet, plug it into the outside socket by the front door, and string it across the courtyard, while Ned led the way back to A-3 lugging the monitor.

Even with his unwieldy burden, Ned managed to skip over a landslide of mail that blocked the front threshold into the apartment.

Shane, himself, slid on the pile of envelopes and catalogs and banged his elbow against the wall in an effort to block his fall. "Don't you check your mail?"

"I keep forgetting it."

Shane followed Ned to the doorway of the study, where they were disappointed to find the cord's length had run out.

"Well, shit," Ned said. "What are we gonna do?"

"Let's set you up in the kitchen. Then we can power the refrigerator, too."

"Great idea!"

"So, how long since you've seen her?" Shane asked, retracing his steps toward the front of A-3.

“Since then. That day.” Ned put the monitor on the kitchen table and returned to the study.

“You’re kidding.” Shane plugged a lamp into a massive power strip which he connected to the end of the cord. The kitchen lit up.

“Unh-uh. I’ve been working.” Ned returned from the study with a stack of papers which he dropped haphazardly onto the table.

“On this?”

“Uh-huh. Ever since she left it’s like my writer’s block lifted.”

“You wrote all of this since . . . ?”

“Sorta.”

“But what about Gail?”

“What about her?”

“Aren’t you going to try to get her back?” Shane said as he followed Ned into the study.

“I suppose I ought to, but Greg’s a pretty nice guy. She seems happy. And, you know, she wasn’t all that . . . cheerful with me. Good thing we never got married, huh?”

Ned lifted the heavy CPU and Shane grabbed the keyboard and a few other items from the desk. Sitting next to the dictionary and Ned’s copy of Swift was an empty can of cat food with a fork resting in it.

“Where’s the cat?” Shane asked.

“Dunno. With Gail, I guess.”

“You didn’t eat this, did you?”

“What?”

“Ned, it’s cat food!”

“We were out of Blue Bell.”

While Shane plugged the refrigerator into Ned's new power station, Ned sat down at his makeshift desk and began to neaten the mess of papers.

"Can you aim that light a little more this way?"

"Sure." Shane adjusted the lamp, then left the *littérateur* to his important work. He had just reached the door when it occurred to him he'd better see what other bills Ned had been neglecting. He thumbed through the stack of mail and periodicals at his feet and returned to the kitchen with a selection of envelopes.

"Ned, there's letters from three prep schools here. Delinquent notices for telephone and gas. Electric's not the only thing they're cutting off."

"Huh?" Ned was already deep into his creative process.

"Where's your checkbook?"

"Gail, I guess."

"Got any cash?"

"What for?"

Shane held a wad of envelopes in front of the monitor. "You have to pay the bills."

"I don't have time to think about that, right now. I've got to write while the muse is hot."

"Hey, stupid. Whether you like it or not, you have to take a breather from your book and fill up the coffers."

"Hell, you know I've been looking for months now. There's nothing out there."

"Jesus, Ned. You've got letters in that pile there from ..."

Shane chewed on his lip and inspected his watch. "Look. You might as well just come to work with me."

"But ..."

"I'm only going to offer once. It's better than minimum wage and no withholding. If I take you out right now, I

should just be able to make it to the theatre in time for the show.”

“Take me out where?”

“Put on your rattiest clothes and meet me in the courtyard in five.”

Ned looked up at Shane, his face glowing in the thrall of the muse. How he had managed to keep a clean-shaven face throughout his recent abandonment and still dress in stylish clothes when he was eating cat food, was a mystery to Shane. Nevertheless, combined with the receding hairline, cleft chin, and Aquiline nose, Ned the writer looked as handsome in his Twentieth Century poverty as any poet of the Romantic Age.

“On second thought, don’t change anything. Just give me a minute. I’ll be right back.”

As he hurried out of A-3, Shane saw Max pull up to the curb. He waited for Max and opened the gate.

“How is she?”

“They’ll discharge her in the morning. Lillie stopped by to see her on her way out of town.”

“She said she would . . . Say, Max, can I borrow your car to run Ned on a quick errand?”

“Sure.”

Shane took the keys from Max, hurried into A-1, and put on his desert camos and greasepaint in record time. Then he found a wide tipped marker and quickly crafted a poster for his new partner in crime.

At the underpass, Shane showed Ned where to stand for the best coverage and most efficient collection of hand-outs. When the northbound cars stopped at the light on the east side of the overpass, Ned started with the first car while Shane hotfooted down the shoulder to the eighth.

They worked their way toward each other, encouraging the drivers with facial expressions and body language to give them anything they could spare.

They'd been at it for twenty minutes when a woman about ten cars back rolled down her window and called to Shane.

"You in Desert Storm?"

"Yes, ma'am." She was holding a ten-dollar bill.

"You look too young. What about him?"

"Starving grad student."

"He's got a sign, but I can't read it from here. What does it say?"

"Will Write Sonnets for Food."

The cars were inching their way forward in anticipation of the coming signal change.

"Tell him I want a sonnet. I'll be back in thirty minutes."

"Yes, ma'am."

"You look so familiar . . . " She rolled up her window and drove off without handing him the tenner.

Hoping he hadn't blown his cover, Shane ducked his head and pretended to search the ground for something when she passed. Then he ran up the new line of cars to Ned.

"That lady . . . the one in the red Taurus . . ."

"Uh-huh?"

"She wants a sonnet. She's coming back later. Can you do it?"

"You bet! Take over here for a while?"

"Sure."

"We can split the profits."

"Absolutely."

Ned was sitting on a curb under the overpass and scratching away in his notebook when a half-hour later Shane saw the red car again. He sprinted to the poet's side.

"How close are you? She just went through on the cross street. She'll probably take the U-turn at the next intersection. Could be here in about three minutes."

"Done!" Ned said. He tore a page from the notebook and handed it to Shane. "Be honest, now. What do you think?"

Shane glanced at the paper.

*Two mortals similar in dignity,
In San Mateo, where they breathe and live,
From past mistakes, find they need some money,
And beg a kindly-hearted soul to give.
Outside the walls of Sombras del Pasad,
Oh, if these two had any moral shame
Their misadventures could be thought just odd,
Instead their prank becomes unlawful game.
The wrenching loss of a too recent love
Make men do things they shouldn't ever do.
Though lightning strike these sad saps from above,
They'd spend two hours' in traffic conning you.*

*If you extend your hand in lavish aid,
Though we're still jerks, electric will be paid.*

"She's here!" Ned said pointing to the red car making its way toward the intersection.

"Take it to her."

"I can't, I . . ."

"Take it, you schmuck . . ."

"Oh, all right!" Ned grabbed the poem and ran to the Taurus which was now stopped at the side of the feeder road, its hazard lights flashing.

Shane watched as Ned scribbled a note on the paper. The lady handed him something just as the light changed, then disappeared into the crush of commuter traffic.

"What was that all about?"

"She wanted me to autograph it in case I get famous some day."

"Did she give you any money?"

"A hundred dollars. Fifty for me and fifty for you." Ned handed Shane a fifty-dollar bill.

"For me?"

"She wanted me to tell you something."

"What?"

"She said, 'Well done, Carnival Boy!' And, if you ever want work as a male stripper, she knows a great club in Austin."

"Damn, she recognized me. Damn . . ."

"I'm going to have to see you dance before the show closes. Or have I just missed it altogether?"

"The show! Shit! I've got to get to the theatre!"

Chapter Nineteen

Entropy of Isolated Systems

Lillie had hit the road well before the start of morning rush hour and was making the best time ever. The ride past New Braunfels—where the worst traffic usually started—had been a breeze.

Tootling down the interstate, Lillie had to smile at herself in the rearview mirror. With her arched brows, almond-shaped eyes, and short, chic haircut, she had often been compared to Audrey Hepburn.

She put on her sunglasses. “You just need a convertible, a scarf around your head, and Peter O’Toole sitting beside you to look like a million dollars,” she said to her reflection.

The traffic started to pick up by the time she turned south onto 410, but most of it seemed to be going in the opposite direction. She’d been on the road well less than the usual three-quarters of an hour when she pulled into the driveway of the gorgeous, two story, Mediterranean home she and Rick had occupied in Alamo Heights.

Lillie unloaded the car and lugged everything to the front porch, found her key, and let herself into the foyer. The air seemed stale, as if the air conditioner hadn't been turned on in days.

"I know I left it on," she said to the empty house which echoed with a haunted-sort of feeling ... as if a ghost were now inhabiting her residence.

Lillie hurried to the studio, an unwelcome tightness gripping her chest. Instead of leaving her dance/workout space like a shrine awaiting her return, Rick had moved in a weight bench, treadmill, and total body gym. There was a gouge in the hardwood floor she knew hadn't been there when she left in May.

"He was supposed to be moving *his* stuff out."

Obviously, he didn't get the memo. Lillie's adult self had been conspicuously absent the last few weeks.

"I got the house in the divorce."

Didn't you read the fine print? You have to get it refinanced first, then he'll sell it to you. Not exactly the same thing.

"And where are my things?" The furniture, towels, linens, and decor were all in place. But, search as she might, Lillie couldn't find a personal article of hers anywhere. Not in her office, her bedroom, the closet in the guestroom, or her reading nook just off the second floor balcony.

The house looked occupied, but was clearly uninhabited. Not by her. Not by Rick. "No one lives here."

It's ready for the tour of homes.

"What's going on?" A worried feeling began to niggle at her. "I've only been gone two months ... and he said I could have six months to refinance and switch over ownership ..."

Like I just said ...

Outside below the balcony the sparkling pool called to her two selves. *Come take a break . . . relax your minds.*

“Fuck it. I’m going out. You wanna come, too?”

Lillie rolled up her pants, pulled her sunglasses out of her purse, and went to the refrigerator in the party room.

Usually stocked with beer, wine coolers, and juice, all she found to drink was an expired bottle of orange juice and a jug of water. She unscrewed the orange juice and sniffed. The unmistakable aroma of fermented fruit hit her nostrils. “Water it is, then.”

She poured herself a drink of water, opened the glass door, and sauntered out to the pool. She brushed a cobweb off her favorite lounge, made herself comfortable, and in ten minutes was sound asleep.

It was past noon when Lillie woke. She’d only had a gulp of coffee at B-1 that morning and her stomach growled unhappily. “I’ll have to eat something soon, or I shall expire.”

‘Expire’. Well, *don’t you sound like one of Mrs. Goodman’s ‘baby girls’?* Lillie’s adult self had also awakened from their nap.

“Mrs. Goodman was a Southern lady, after all. She was only trying her best to instill in us good manners and deportment.”

Looks like it worked on you, honey lamb. You seem to have come out of drill team camp thoroughly brainwashed.

“Well aren’t we glad we quit after only one semester?”

Would you listen to yourself?

“Who else is there to listen to?”

I’m starving. Let’s get something to eat.

There was no food in the kitchen. Nothing in the refrigerator, nothing in the cabinets, nothing under the breakfast island.

“Why did he do this?”

To teach us a lesson, perhaps?

“He could have called and told me.”

He called you a million times, honey lamb. Left a million messages. Did you listen to any of them?

“He always just said, ‘I need to ask you something’ or ‘Let’s talk’ ... he never said what about. Let’s order some lunch.”

Good idea.

The phone was dead. “Why would he disconnect the phone?”

You’re asking me?

When the living person and her imaginary friend saw the *For Sale* sign in the front yard, things began to make a lot more sense.

Lillie locked the deserted house, hopped in the car, and headed toward civilization.

The Alamo Heights High School was quiet when she passed—though in another couple of weeks it would be bustling with football and band practice for the new school year. She turned up a side street along the northern edge of campus and came out at Broadway—the main street that bisected the incorporated city of Alamo Heights, known to many of its residents as the “Bubble”.

Lillie turned right, then drove another several blocks to the Lincoln Heights shopping center where she grabbed the lunch special at her favorite sandwich shop.

Though the place she’d be going next wasn’t very far from the house, it was in the opposite direction from where she found herself licking the last bit of salt off the last fry. She got back into the car and headed for *Miss Lillie’s School of Dance*.

One of the perks—the only perk, it turned out—of Lillie’s brief courtship and seven-year marriage to Rick Pappas had been his promise to fund the establishment of her own dance studio. *Miss Lillie’s* took up the section that had previously been a washateria in a strip mall just past the “Y” where Broadway intersected the Austin Highway.

“Home!” Lillie breathed a contented sigh when she pulled up in front of the studio. Being a one-teacher dance school, Lillie had always closed shop for the summer to attend conferences, run up to New York to see friends, and vacation with Rick in the Rockies.

She didn’t realize that the lights were on until after she had unlocked the front door and stepped into the waiting room. “That’s funny . . .”

Lillie took another doorway into the studio proper—the lights were also on—and slid a CD into the changer. While the music played for the plié exercise, she rummaged through the sound cabinet and pulled out a pair of tights, a dance trunk, and the ballet shoes she always kept there. She stood in a corner out of sight of anyone who might be peering through the front window and slipped on her dancewear. Then with a sigh bordering on contentment, Lillie started her Barre.

Doing a ballet barre is the meditative exercise that every professional dancer uses to begin his or her workday. In Lillie’s case, she hoped the ritual would help quiet some of the tensions from her return to the empty house.

The slow exercises at the beginning of the Barre helped to unglue the fibers and warm up the muscles. The beautiful music of the Masters—Chopin, Brahms, Schubert, and others—was as calming to Lillie as it was inspirational. The barre work progressed from slow, calm exercises to faster

ones that strengthened the muscles, increased the extension, and improved flexibility.

But Lillie hadn't yet come to the quicker part of the workout. When she finished the tendus and fondus and was just about to start the rond de jambe, she heard the incongruous sound of a vacuum cleaner.

A woman came out of the dressing room, using the handle of a mop to roll in a large bucket. A few seconds later, the noise of the vacuum stopped and another woman came in pushing a commercial sander.

"We've cleaned the restrooms and scrubbed down the dressing room, Mrs. Mahaffey. We're about ready to start refinishing the floors in here."

"Excuse me?"

The second woman spoke. "You called us to come and redo the floors?"

"I didn't call."

The first woman pulled a work order out of her coverall pocket. "The owner called us—Commercial Clean—to give the place an overhaul."

"I'm Lillie Cloutier. I'm the owner."

"It says here the owner is Frances Mahaffey."

Lillie went to the phone in the outer office and called the number from the cleaning lady's work order.

"Frances Mahaffey, please."

"Speaking."

"This is Lillie Cloutier. I think there's been some mistake."

Rick Pappas opened his office door with a big grin on his face, "Lillie, you're back!"

Her temper had got the best of her during the drive over to Rick's shop on the north side of the Loop. "You sold my studio!" Lillie screamed loud enough for everyone in the plant to hear.

"Actually, if you recall, I own that property. You just filed the dba for the business."

"That's not true. It's community property."

"I'm afraid not. I bought it before we got married. Remember?"

"But I got the studio in the divorce."

"You got the *business*, not the property."

"That can't be right."

"It's in the decree ..."

"Can I see it?"

"I don't have it here. Besides, your attorney should have sent you a copy. She was at the hearing ... though I don't recall seeing you there."

"I was in San Mateo. We had everything signed. My attorney said I didn't have to go. And the house! You said I could have six months to re-finance the house."

"Turns out, the business is a little strapped for cash. I've gotta sell it pronto. I called you at Vi's a thousand times to talk about it ..."

"You should have said something ..."

"I thought saying, 'Call me' on the answering machine would be enough. You never called back."

"I was working ... and Vi was in the hospital. I wasn't going to waste time talking to my ex if he wouldn't say what it was about ..."

"Well, sorry ..."

"And where's all my stuff?"

"It's safe in storage."

“Well, that’s all right then!”

“No harm done, right?”

“No harm? How do you figure that?”

“Look, Lillie. This isn’t the best place for a quiet reunion. Let’s meet at Paesanos, the one near the house, at ... say six o’clock. How ’bout it?”

“What do we have to discuss, exactly?”

“Meet me at six. All will be revealed.”

“All right. Okay. I’ll be there.”

Lillie went shopping at Ann Taylor’s. She bought a sophisticated, yet summery, cocktail dress that Audrey Hepburn would have been proud to wear to Cannes, and a pair of heeled sandals with a cute gold strap around the ankle. She picked up some supplies on the way back to the house, turned on the A/C full blast as soon as she came in the door, and headed for the walk-in shower.

“Thank god the hot water’s still on,” she murmured after checking the spray before stepping in.

Chapter Twenty

Sangria and Tapas

Shane was late to the amphitheatre Friday night after dropping Max's car and Ned back at the *Sombras*, but, hell, he didn't come on until the middle of Act Two. When the strings built in their minor key to start the ballet, he stepped onto the stage with the Carousel Ladies and performed his part competently, though his mind was in another place. *You're just not Lillie*, he thought to himself as he lifted Melissa in the opening straight-armed press. *You never will be.*

Max was sitting in his rocker on the balcony when Shane returned to the *Sombras*. He threw his duffel bag down near the door for A-1 and hurried up the stairs.

"You heard anything?" he asked hopefully.

"Well, I got Lillie's home address and phone number for you." Max handed him a folded sheet of paper.

"Super! Thanks!"

"But I've already tried the number. It's disconnected."

"Shit."

“Santos found Vi’s address book and the Rolodex for me. Nothing in there about the studio or an address for Rick Pappas ... But, I think we could figure out where the studio is, if we could get our hands on the San Antonio phone book.”

“What about information?”

“Sure, if we knew how it’s listed ... I don’t have any idea the name of the business or the location. There have got to be dozens of dance studios in San Antonio.”

“I didn’t think about that.”

“The library’ll be open tomorrow. They’ve got phone books ...”

“Good idea. I’ll run over there in the morning.”

“Great.”

“Do you think she’s staying at the house?”

“Would you? With no phone? Oh, wait ... you would.”

“She wouldn’t go back to Rick, though. Would she?”

“Damn ... I didn’t want you to ask me that ...”

“Just tell me, Max. I’m a big boy.”

“She’s had a million arguments with Rick Pappas and gone back to him a million times. They’ve just never been divorced before.”

Shane didn’t usually oversleep, but on Saturday morning, it was close to noon when he woke up. Discombobulated, he took his espresso out to the courtyard and was about to filch Ned’s paper, when a cab pulled up to the front gate. Santos exited the cab after the driver opened the curbside door. Then the cabbie pulled a wheelchair out of the trunk while Santos assisted Violet from the back seat.

“Young man, can you help us up the stairs, please?”

“Of course, Vi. No problem.”

Shane met them at the base of the spiral staircase and carefully lifted Violet from the wheelchair.

Even though she appeared almost as short and round as Santos, when he carried her up the stairs, Violet seemed to Shane to weigh less than her great niece.

Santos had refolded the wheelchair, and was yanking it up after them, one noisy step at a time.

“Santos, let Shane do that,” Violet called down.

“It’s okay, miss. I help my sister all the time with hers.”

Watching Santos over Shane’s shoulder, Violet shuddered and grimaced with every bang, scrape, and “Bueno, Señor” that came from her companion’s ascent.

Shane could only imagine what kind of trouble Santos was getting into. But at the top of the steps, he heard an ominous “¡Ay, María!”, then “¡Socorro!” accompanied by the sound of the woman’s cries as she tumbled down the staircase.

“Santos!” Violet shrieked. “Put me down!” she ordered Shane. He stooped to set Violet in a nearby chair. “Hurry, you fool!”

Shane scrambled down to the little lady who seemed to have gotten twisted inside the wheelchair half-way down the steps. “Santos!”

“¡Dios mío!” She held her right arm limply across her chest. “¿Quién me maldijo?” she fretted, and attempted to make the sign of the cross with her left hand.

Shane held onto the stair rail and vaulted around to the opposite side of the injured woman. “¿Estás bien, Santos? Déjame ayudarte.”

“I think I break my arm.”

He helped de-tangle Santos from the mess of metal and leather, then carried Violet into B-1 to set her up near the telephone. While Violet called EMS, he went back to wait with Santos until the ambulance arrived.

He never made it to the library.

After her meeting at the studio with the new owner Saturday morning, Lillie drove to the Hotel Contessa on the River Walk for lunch with her best friend. Brittney Price had been a dancer for the San Antonio Spurs in her younger years and had just been named as the new drill team director for a Division 5A high school located on the northeast side of town.

"You're a sight for sore eyes." Lillie hugged her friend.

"I love your dress," Brittney said. "And those shoes ... fantastic!"

"Thanks. The dress is more for night, but I'm kind of low on clothes right now. Rick put all my stuff in storage."

"Let's go in, shall we?" Brittney said.

"Absolutely."

Over sangria and tapas in the bar, the two women caught up on their summer activities, not the least of which included Brittney's new job and Lillie's divorce and recent love affair.

"I'm wondering if I should even try to buy the house, now," Lillie said. "How can I pay for it without the income from the studio?"

"But Mahaffey said you could teach for her some, right?" Brittney said.

"Sure, but it wouldn't be anywhere close to full time. How can I pay a mortgage on a mansion?"

“At least he’s letting you stay there now, rent free.”

“Don’t know how long I can get that concession, though. Rick’s strapped, right now, and if I can’t put some cold, hard cash in his hand pretty soon, he’ll be asking for payment in kind.”

“But you said he was a gentleman last night.”

“If you call groping my ass and trying to french me being a gentleman. Still, the old Lillie might have gone home with him.”

“Or invited him home with you,” Brittney said.

“Been there. Done that. Bought the tee-shirt,” Lillie said.

“What about moving back to San Mateo? I’m sure your great aunt would love . . .”

“She’s not really crazy about me dating Shane . . .”

“The poor thing’s been sick. She probably feels bad most of the time. You could cheer her up, make her last days happy ones.”

“Don’t say that! Vi’s not gonna die. She can’t.”

“She loves you, you know that. You said she paid for school . . .”

“I dropped out after one year . . .”

“But she sent you money to live in New York . . .”

“No, she didn’t. She disapproved of me going there. So, I sponged off friends. There were five of us living in a one bedroom apartment when I got *Chicago*. And when I went on tour, I didn’t need a place.”

“After that?”

“I met Rick Pappas. Since I’ve been married, Vi hasn’t paid for anything. I’ve been completely self-sufficient.”

“Except you told me Rick paid all the bills.”

“Well, I had my studio income. I paid for some things.”

“Like what?”

"My clothes, dancewear, sound equipment ..."

"So, you weren't really self-sufficient ..." Brittney said.

"Well, no, I guess. When you put it that way ..." Lillie paused. "Last night he mentioned getting married again."

"He's already going to marry that hussy?"

"No, *me*, silly. Marry *me*. He suggested we should start a family ... He *never* wanted a family."

"But, I thought you ..."

"No, I can't. But he said we could adopt. He refused to even entertain the idea before."

"But why would Rick want to get back together with you ... if he has *her*?"

"I don't know. Maybe things didn't work out. When do they when you're dating someone half your age?"

"Tum-tee-tum ..."

"Oh, shit. I'm ..."

"I didn't want to say ... So you *will* be staying in San Antonio?" Brittney asked.

"I guess," Lillie replied. "But what'll I do?"

"Too bad you didn't get your degree. I could hire you for an assistant at my new school."

"Except that I always hated school, maybe I should just go back there and try to finish."

"You should at least run all this by your boyfriend."

"God, I don't know."

"Or Max. Run it by Max."

"Jesus, poor Max. What am I supposed to do about him? I think his feelings are kind of hurt that I'm dating Shane."

"You said he knows and loves you better than anybody. So, ditch Shane and move in with him."

"So many options ... It's hard to make a decision."

“The main thing is, you shouldn’t get back together with Rick Pappas. Maybe you shouldn’t even stay in the house. And you’re going to have to get a real job. Can you wait tables? I heard that every starving dancer in New York has waited tables.”

Later that night, after a lonesome supper and watching *Sleepless in Seattle* on the VCR, Lillie thought seriously about finally phoning Shane.

He’s in performance, you dope.

“Oh, yeah.”

Besides which, he doesn’t have a phone, and neither do you.

“So, what shall we do now?”

Time for that right brain expansion, don’t you think?

Lillie closed her eyes and, for the first time since he’d taken her through it the night the play opened, she tried the exercise on her own.

Chapter Twenty-One

Rebalancing the Portfolio

Shane was asleep in Lillie's rocker Sunday morning when Violet wheeled herself out of B-1 and rolled up beside him.

"Young man! Young man!"

"Huh?" It took a few seconds for Shane to pull himself out of Delta.

"What are you doing out here? Why aren't you downstairs in your own apartment?"

"I fell asleep."

"I've been calling you all morning."

"But, I don't have a phone."

"Well, who was I calling then? They said the number had been disconnected. But I've been calling that number for years."

"Maybe it was the Johnsons' ..." he said.

"Even so. Everyone should have a phone, young man. No civilized person lives without a phone," Violet said.

"It's just healthier this way."

"If you ask me ... you're not doing much healthy."

"I'm doing the best I can."

"Get up and come inside and help me."

It was an order, not a suggestion. "Yes, ma'am."

Shane followed a step behind Violet as she wheeled herself back into B-1, through the living room, to the doorway into the dining room. Still sitting in the wheelchair, she attempted to shove an ornate Chinese buffet away from the wall.

"I can't get this thing to move."

"Just hold on a second, now." Shane scooted around her into the dining room. "Where do you want it?"

"We'll have to put it downstairs. There's not enough room to get around in here with this stupid wheelchair."

Shane put a shoulder to the chest, but couldn't budge it. "What's this thing made of, anyways? Cement?"

"It's teak, and you know it."

"Heavy sucker ..." With Violet watching from the living room, he somehow managed to shove a corner out, then back and forth, wiggling from one side to the other, he inched the buffet toward the hall.

"Put it over by the front door."

"Yes, ma'am. ... So are you and Santos going to help me take it down? I mean, she's the expert maneuvering the staircase. And you're ..."

"Shhh. She's sleeping in the next room ..."

Shane dusted his hands on the seat of his ratty jeans. "Well, call me when she's up, because I'm going to need some help."

"The sort of help you need, Santos can't give you."

"What kind of crack is that?"

"I've seen you moping around since Lillian left."

"She just went back for registration."

"Is that what she told you?"

"It's true . . ."

"Have you heard from her since she left? Has anyone?"

"Well, no . . ."

"She always goes back to that louse."

"But, they're divorced . . ."

"They wouldn't be the first divorced couple to get back together."

"The woman I know wouldn't . . ."

"You don't know her as well as I do. Let me tell you something, young man. I love my niece, but she deserves what she gets. You've got to forget about her and get on with your life."

"Like it's your business, anyway."

"I was wrong about you, you know. You're much older than Lillian. Even so, you can't do anything for her. She's never going to change."

"You don't know that."

"The silly child hasn't changed a speck since my niece-in-law dumped her on my doorstep when she was fourteen."

"So you're saying people can't change?"

"Not if it's not their idea. Now, you and I. We're smart. We can manage our own self improvement. Even at our advanced age."

"Sure we can, kiddo."

"Kiddo?"

"Don't get your feathers up, Vi. It's a term of endearment."

Shane spent the rest of the morning "helping" Violet haul various items of furniture out to the balcony.

Late in the morning, Santos fixed him a sandwich with her good arm. Violet was snoozing in her armchair when he went to make his goodbye.

“Good idea, kiddo,” he whispered, patting her on the shoulder.

When he woke from his own nap just in time to leave for the matinée, Shane saw several Brobdingnagian men up on the balcony rigging a system of ropes and pulleys. He watched with a sense of amazement and admiration as the workmen lowered the massive buffet down to some equally strong-looking fellows in the courtyard below. The door to A-2 stood open. A quick glimpse inside revealed that these professional furniture movers had been busy.

“They probably get paid more than I do ... and on a Sunday, to boot,” he said aloud as he latched the gate behind him.

Shane had been a bit lonesome through the weekend without the company of his new best friend. *But, with her studio in San Antonio and me in school here, ours would have to be a short-long-distance relationship at some point, anyways. Might as well get a little practice,* he consoled himself in the mirror after he brushed his teeth.

Max was standing on the balcony drinking his daily sludge when Shane came out of A-1 Monday to head for campus.

“Hey, Shane!”

“Hey! You heard anything?”

“No. But, do you remember last week or so you said you’d drop over to look at my portfolio ... see if it needed rebalancing? Could you come this afternoon?”

“Sure. Three o’clock okay?”

“Great. See you then.”

That afternoon, Shane found himself sitting at the desk in Max’s study, pouring over the retired professor’s fund information. While Shane worked with pencil and calculator, Max alternated between rubbing his temples and forehead, resting his head against the back of the chair, and excusing himself for the bathroom “in case I might throw up.”

“You okay?” Shane asked.

“Since I woke up from my nap after lunch, my head’s been killing me.”

“Migraine?”

“I’m not sure ... maybe.”

“So, have you taken anything for it?”

“I ... no. Just been resting and rubbing.”

“Let me run down, get you some Tylenol.”

“Sure kid.”

In three minutes, Shane returned with a bottle. He filled the little medicine cup to the top mark and handed it to Max.

“Down the hatch.”

“I don’t usually take drugs ...”

“What do you think all those herbs and supplements are?”

“You’re right.” Max chugged down the medicine.

“And no drinking.”

“I haven’t been.”

“Well, that’s good, anyways. Let’s move over where you can lie on the couch.”

“I think I’d rather stay sitting.”

“Sure, I’ll get you some extra pillows.”

With Max resting more comfortably, Shane carried the paperwork to the coffee table where he quietly studied the

investor statements. After the better part of an hour, he moved around beside Max and spoke.

"I think you need to change out some bonds for stocks. Look how the S&P's been moving up since the first of the year. Gold's just holding its own right now, but you want to try for a nice balance. You've got too much cash."

"Let's just cash everything out."

"That would be a really bad idea. The interest rates have been going down. You could get in on the ground floor with a new company—there seem to be a ton of them right now. Make a bundle ... be set for life."

"Life. You make it seem like such a long time. When all we have to look forward to is the same old boring parade, who cares if I just cash it all in?"

"You mean ... cash it all out, right?"

"What's the point, when she ...?"

"Take it easy, Max. She just had to go home for a few days. I'll check at the college library tomorrow for a San Antonio phone book ... find that listing for the studio. Then you ... or we ... can give her a call. Tell her we miss her. How 'bout it?"

"Yeah, okay. Days like this would make a body want to go back on the sauce."

"Try not to take it too seriously. Let me get you some juice, or something ..."

Shane rummaged in the cabinets and found an unopened bottle of V8. He poured some over ice and handed the glass to Max.

"Here you go, Max."

"Thanks, kid. I owe you."

"Eh, we owe each other. I'm heading down. Come get me, if you need anything."

Although he missed her, Shane was weathering Lillie's abrupt departure fairly well. He was sleeping in his own place at night, keeping up with his studies, and grocery shopping and cooking for himself again. And though he hadn't been giving one hundred percent, he hadn't missed any performances, though he was definitely counting down the minutes until the final curtain.

Violet was sitting on the balcony on Wednesday when Shane came in from class.

"Young man! Shane," she called, as he stepped through the gate. "Come up here a minute, will you please?"

"Sure, Vi. Be right there."

After stowing his book bag in A-1, taking a leak, and grabbing a quick drink, Shane trotted up the staircase and plopped down in the rocker next to Violet's wheelchair.

"What can I do you for?" he asked.

"Since she broke her arm, you know, I've been having Santos stay with me."

"Uh-huh."

"She can't do much cleaning or cooking ... But, of course, I felt I should at least look after her until she's back on her feet, so to speak."

"Sure."

"But we've just been eating from the freezer and I'm starving for some real food. Plus, I need to throw a dinner party."

"Uh-huh."

"Maxon told me you trained at the Cordon Bleu. Can I hire you to cook Sunday night?"

"Gee, Vi. I've got a performance on Sunday afternoon."

“What if we schedule the dinner for 7:00, say?”

“That could work, I guess. Shop on Saturday ... do the prep Sunday morning, then ... sure ... serve at 7:00. What do you want on the menu?”

“Surprise me.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“No, I’m not. Make up your shopping list and figure your costs. I’ll give you the cash before you go to the store.”

“Sounds like a plan. How many guests?”

“Well, let’s see. Maxon and Santos, Rosa, you, that nice young man downstairs ... what’s his name?”

“Ned, uh Edward Gold.”

“... Edward.”

“So the dinner’s for the *Sombras* gang. Is Lillie coming?”

“I don’t know, yet. I haven’t been able to get hold of her.”

“Damn, I forgot to go to the library ...” Shane realized a few minutes later as he took the staircase back down to A-1.

Back at the apartment, Shane worked up the menu for an elaborate, special meal and made his shopping list. On Thursday afternoon he rang the bell for B-1, then followed Santos—her arm in cast and sling—into the living room.

Violet was sitting in her wheelchair watching *Wheel of Fortune*. She hit the mute button when she saw him.

“Bring me my cash box, Santos. How much do you need, young man?”

“Well, six course dinner for six—food and wine. We’d be lucky to come in under \$150 to \$200. Maybe we should say \$225, just to be on the safe side.”

“Gracious, what are we having, veal battered in gold?”

“It’s a surprise. I’ll bring the stuff over here when I get back from the store later and come over to do some prep work tomorrow or Saturday.”

Violet held out three crisp bills. “Here’s \$300.”

“You shouldn’t give me that much, I might spend it.”

“You can keep what’s left over. Do you want to take my car?”

“Max already said I could borrow his. See you later, Vi.”

After bolting down some nuts and dried fruit, Shane headed to Austin to do his shopping. The massive Whole Foods Market at 6th and Lamar had been compared to Disneyland when it first opened. Though the novelty might have worn off, many customers still found they could spend the entire day in the huge multilevel grocery store, shopping, eating, and taking cooking and wine tasting classes.

Though he managed to spend fewer than 24 hours in the store, it was almost midnight when Shane got back to the *Sombras*.

Instead of bothering Violet at the late hour, Shane shoved as much as he could into his refrigerator at A-1. Due to their success panhandling at the interstate, power had been restored to A-3. Ned’s lights were on, so Shane carried some select bottles of wine and the remainder of the perishables across the courtyard.

Ned was bright-eyed and alert when he answered the door.

“Geeze, it’s dark out. What time is it?”

“Past midnight.”

“You’re kidding . . .”

“Can I put some stuff in your fridge?”

“Oh, sure. I’ve got lots of room.”

Shane stacked the indeed empty refrigerator shelves with the cream, butter, cava, Sauternes, and Beaujolais.

“Don’t drink it all. This is for dinner Sunday.”

“I think I’ve got enough Blue Bell to last ’til then.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Stage Door Janes and Johnnys

On Friday evening, Shane borrowed Violet's car to go to the amphitheatre for the sixth-to-last-show. He met Julian at the staircase down to the amphitheatre.

"Damn, a four-week run can really seem like forever," Shane said.

"Imagine performing on Broadway where it's eight shows a week and only Mondays off."

"Don't think I could do it."

"It'd be like a real job, then, not just a summer lark."

"Tell me about it."

A youth, who looked to be a high school junior or senior, stood up from a seat near the aisle as Shane and Julian worked their way around the orchestra pit to get to the stage door.

"Excuse me ... Do you know Melissa? Melissa Gipson?" the youth asked, looking straight at Shane. "Of course you do ... you're the Carnival Boy."

"Can I help you?" Shane replied.

"Would you give this to Melissa for me?" The boy handed Shane an envelope.

"Sure, who do I say it's from?"

"She doesn't know me. I'm Johnny from San Mateo High. I saw all her performances last week."

"I see," Shane said.

"I wanted to let her know I'm a big fan."

"Sure, I'll give it to her for you, kid." Shane took the envelope and moved to follow Julian.

"Thanks," Johnny said, then put a hand out to stop Shane. "You're just acting, right? It's just a play, right? I mean you and Melissa don't really ... you know ..."

"No, we don't really ... It's just a play."

Julian was holding the door for Shane when he got to the stairs. "I believe we've met ourselves a real Stage Door Johnny," Julian said, patting Shane on the back.

"So it would appear ..."

When they got to the top of steps, they found Brad calling cues over his headset to check out the light board.

"Hey, guys," Brad said. "Can I do anything for you?"

"Would you set this in the women's dressing room, please?" Shane asked. "Someone left it for Melissa."

"No problem."

Shane napped in the men's dressing room until Intermission, then went to the stage to start his warm up. Melissa was on the darkened stage when he got there, peeking out at the audience from the crack in the grand drape.

"Looking for someone?"

"I guess," Melissa said. "Someone gave me a card, but he didn't sign it. I just found it in the dressing room before the show."

"What did the card say?"

"Oh ... just that he loves my dancing ... he's been to every performance. That kind of thing. But I have no idea who sent it."

"Oh, well, then ..."

"Is it from you? You've been so sweet ... It would be just like you to ..."

"Not from me," Shane said and left the stage.

"I know it's you, you're lying ..." he heard Melissa say as he headed for the dressing room to put on his costume.

Since his affair with Lillie, Shane had become more careful in his interactions with the teenager on and off the stage. After dancing the duet with Lillie, there was, frankly, no comparison on stage. Off stage, Lillie was all woman, and without question, of legal age. Since Melissa's return to the role, Shane had consciously tried to stay within the bounds of politically correct behavior between an adult and a minor. But, for some crazy reason, after receiving the card from Stage Door Johnny, in spite of Shane's assurance that the card wasn't from him, Melissa was on fire in the pas de deux that night.

She kept inserting her tongue into the stage kisses and rubbing up against him in the lifts. The rolling and kissing on the floor was practically pornographic. *What's all this about? I told her it wasn't me*, he thought to himself as he tried to unglue her hands from his chest before he crossed the stage to join the Carnival People at the end of the ballet.

The duo received another standing ovation, and Melissa would not let go of Shane's arm after the bows.

"Where do you want to go tonight?" she asked after the curtain finally closed.

"Sorry, kid. I've got to work in the morning. Have to make an early night of it."

"But ..."

"You can be my date to the cast party next week. How 'bout that?"

"Really? The cast party? That would be so cool ..."

"If you haven't found your Stage Door Johnny by then," Shane replied before heading for the parking lot.

The little parking lot up the hill from the amphitheatre was nearly empty. Only a couple of cars remained in the lot ... one of them a familiar looking red Taurus parked right next to Violet's Oldsmobile. A woman near the Taurus stooped to grind out a cigarette. She straightened and leaned against the fender, then smiled broadly when she saw Shane's face. "Hi, soldier! Buy a girl a drink?"

Fuck! Shane thought to himself, at the same time returning the woman's face-lifted smile. *You took fifty dollars from her, you schmuck. Let's hope all you have to do is buy her a drink.*

"I know a nice little place on the outskirts of town," he said.

"You want to ride with me?"

"Sorry, I can't. I've got to start work early in the morning."

"Under the overpass ...?"

“Oh, no, sorry. This is something else ... I’m cooking for a dinner party ... for a friend.”

“Oooh, a dinner party for a friend. Need a date?”

“You want to meet me at the Tavern on the road to Gruene ...?”

“Do I!”

Her name was Lena. She was early-40s, divorced and expecting her first grandchild any minute now.

While Shane carefully nursed a beer, Lena downed three bourbon and waters and danced with every cowboy in the joint. The long-legged, sexy redhead wouldn’t take no for an answer. Shane watched her work the crowd and wondered how he’d get out of this pickle.

Lena sidled up close to him when the band stopped for a break.

“You’re great as the Carnival Boy. Just the perfect mix of sex and vulnerability. Is that how you really are?”

“I’m just an actor ... ”

“You’re not from here, are you? I’m sure I’d have seen you before, being a BISM myself.”

“BISM? What’s that?”

“Born in San Mateo.”

“I see.”

“Born in San Mateo. Went to high school in San Mateo. College in San Mateo. Married in San Mateo ... ”

“I get the idea ... ”

“Who’s the dinner party for?”

“Just a retired professor friend of mine ... ”

“Who?”

“I couldn’t say ... ”

“Wait a minute . . . you live at the Sombras, don’t you? The sonnet said the ‘Sombras del Pasad’ . . . Is it Dr. Cloutier? I grew up with her granddaughter. You danced with Lillie that first weekend. Is that who the dinner party’s for? Dr. Cloutier?”

“Maybe.”

“Oh, I love her! She’s like my favorite professor of all time. Now, you *have* to invite me. Please, please, please won’t you?”

Shane noticed that the clock above the bar was inching toward midnight. “Sorry, Lena. I’ve got to run. I’ve got a lot of work to do tomorrow before the show.”

“Here’s my card,” Lena said. “Ask Dr. Cloutier if you can bring a date. Call me tomorrow.”

Even if I had a phone, I wouldn’t . . . he thought to himself as he stood and pulled a few singles from his pocket. “I’ll leave the tip.”

“You owe me, Shane. Remember that. You owe me.” Two inches taller than her date, Lena rose to her full height and pulled Shane into her bosoms. Then she lowered her mouth to his, felt his teeth with her tongue, and explored past the palate as far as she could go. “Love those sleepy blue eyes,” she murmured.

“Gotta run . . .”

“Call me . . .”

“Right . . .”

If he could have run, Shane would have, as fast as his little legs could carry him. As it was, he sped back to San Mateo in the Oldsmobile, not slowing down until he hit the city limits.

True to his word—once he got her address—Shane had mailed a letter to Lillie every day since she'd gone back to San Antonio. In his letters, he told her most everything that had been happening ... stories about himself when he was a kid, Ned losing his power, Vi making him move furniture, Max having a headache. He left out only the stuff he might not have told her anyway, like panhandling for gold, Melissa going Lolita on him during the play, and Lena making an indecent proposal. He put a little note in the top right of each letter ... Day 1, Day 2, etc. Whatever else Shane might have forgotten to do, he always remembered to write his love letters to Lillie.

The week would have been full enough with the letter writing and carrying out his duties as master chef for Violet's dinner party. Add in his summer school classes, three three-hour performances, and the date with Lena, and Shane didn't have a lot of time to worry over not hearing a word back from his lady love since her recent departure.

Bright and early Saturday, Shane begin his prep work for the Sunday dinner. He shredded the Cabot Cheddar for the gougères that he would serve for the hors d'oeuvres. He cleaned and cut up the assortment of fresh fish he'd selected for the bouillabaisse. He boiled the water, sugar, and lemon juice for the sorbet. He prepared the marinade for the leg of lamb. He baked the custards for the crème brûlée.

Shane didn't want to chance running into Lena again. On Saturday he parked behind the stage where the theatre department usually unloaded their sets and then snuck away after curtain call, without waiting for his groupies to accost him. After returning to the *Sombras*, he added the leg of lamb to the marinade, set it back in the refrigerator, and went to bed.

Late Sunday morning, after finishing up his prep work, Shane carried the Dutch oven that held the leg of lamb up to B-1. Santos met him at the door.

While they waited for Violet's oven to pre-heat, he went over his instructions. "At 3:00, you should take the lid off and put the vegetables in around the sides." He handed her a plastic bag that held the onions, leeks, turnips, and carrots for the roasting vegetables.

"Sí, Señor Shane." Shane's sous-chef took the bag from him and set it in the refrigerator.

"Can I have a measuring cup, please?" he asked.

Santos handed him a Pyrex cup. He poured some water over the lamb and slid the casserole into the oven.

"After you take the lid off, you can baste the meat and vegetables occasionally until I get here. I'll do the rest while the bouillabaisse is cooking ... That's when we can heat up the gougères."

"What's goo-gares, Señor Shane?"

"Cheese puffs. And I've got the baguettes downstairs. I'll bring them up when I get back. ... Oh, and the salad and fruit. I think that's about everything."

"Sí, Señor Shane."

"Thanks for your help."

Shane parked behind the theatre again Sunday afternoon and raced straight home after the curtain call. He organized the remaining food and utensils he'd need, then began the task of hauling everything up to B-1.

Max appeared on the balcony when Shane was halfway up the stairs with the stew pot for the bouillabaisse. "Need a hand with that, son?" Max asked.

"I've about got it, thanks. Though an elevator or dumb waiter would sure be nice."

"With Vi in a wheelchair so much of the time, now, perhaps we can get her to give the go-ahead on that."

"The sooner the better!"

Max opened the door for Shane when he reached the top of the stairs and followed him into the kitchen. Shane set the bouillabaisse on the stove and turned the flame on low. "We'll just let that cook a bit."

Shane took the leg of lamb out of the oven and set it on the counter to rest. "Let me bring up a couple more loads and get the chilled wine from Ned."

"Chilled wine! What's first?"

Shane turned the oven to "Warm" and carefully placed the gougères on a baking sheet. "The cava with the appetizer." He slid the tray of appetizers onto the top shelf and closed the oven door.

"Very nice ... for the party guests, I mean. I'm still off the sauce."

"Good for you. Anyways, the meal should help make up for that aspect."

Even though the power had been on for almost a week, Ned still hadn't bothered to move his computer back into the study. His head was bent over the computer, his fingers flying, when Shane went into the kitchen to retrieve his final load.

"Hey, Ned!"

"Ummm."

"Just came to get the wine."

"Ummm."

"Dinner's at 7:00 upstairs. Don't forget."

"Ummm."

Shane packed the bottles into the separators and carried the cardboard box to the front door.

"See you at 7:00," he called, pulling the door shut with his leg.

His lifting and hauling done, Shane put on his chef's jacket and went to check the dining room.

The table couldn't have been more perfect if Santos had been setting it for the queen. He was puzzled when he saw that seven places had been set, but brightened with the thought *Lillie must be coming!* As the chef, he didn't usually eat with his guests. *I'll make an exception this time. Lillie's coming!*

His inspection of the dining arrangements complete, Shane followed the sound of the television to the living room where he found Max under the hypnotic influence of the Weather Channel.

In our seven-day forecast, we've got our eye on a stationary front situated in the northeastern Gulf of Mexico. The appearance of a weak upper-level circulation could organize this front into a tropical depression.

"I'm back. Everything should be ready in half an hour."

"Be right with you," Max said. "Storm clouds gathering over the Gulf . . ."

"I'll be in the kitchen."

Shane checked that the potatoes in the stockpot were cooked through and turned off the flame. He was layering the chunks of fish over the top of the vegetables for the bouillabaisse when Max returned.

"Smells divine."

"Thanks."

"How was the play?"

"Pretty small crowd today. Kind of hot sitting on stone benches in the afternoon sun."

"Yikes. I didn't think about that."

"We're canceling the matinée for next Sunday. Only two more shows to go. Hooray!"

"Well, guess I'd best go change into my formal wear. See you in a bit," Max said.

The fire was back on under the bouillabaisse and Shane had carved up the baguettes when Santos appeared in the doorway.

"Miss Violeta need your help. I can't zip her dress." In spite of having her right arm in a cast, it appeared that Santos had managed to dress herself nicely in a black beaded cocktail gown one might have seen her model in a Buenos Aires tango salon fifty years earlier.

"Yes, ma'am." Shane followed Santos into Violet's bedroom. Violet sat in the wheelchair leaning forward to look at her reflection in the vanity mirror while she screwed on her pearl dangle earrings. The back of her dress gaped open to reveal an old-lady nylon slip below.

“Santos, help me up,” Violet said scooting forward in the wheelchair.

Violet’s pink brocade dinner dress, though vintage, was in excellent condition. Shane pulled up the tab and smoothly closed the zipper.

Violet handed Shane a string of seed pearls. “And my beads, please, son. I can’t reach back there.”

She buckled her skinny brocade belt in front, while Shane fastened the clasp for the pearls at the back of her neck.

“By the way, I couldn’t help but notice the extra place at the table. Were you going to surprise us? Did you get hold of Lillie after all?”

“I’m sorry, I forgot to tell you. I never could find Lillie. But I’ve invited another guest for tonight. Will that cause a problem for you?”

“I’m disappointed it’s not Lillie, but no problem. It’s your party.”

“I’ve smelled the lamb cooking all afternoon,” Violet said, as she straightened her beads and once again took her seat. “What’s for dessert?”

“Crème brûlée. That all right?” Shane smacked his forehead with the palm of his hand. “Geeze, I forgot the torch! Let me run down and get it.”

On his way down the spiral staircase, Shane saw a red Taurus pull up to the curb in front of the *Sombras*. “Oh, shit!” he said loud enough to frighten the dove bathing in the fountain.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Dinner at Seven

Lena was standing at the front door with Max and Rosa when Shane made his way back up the stairs. She wore a red silk dinner dress with the fabric at the front ruched into a lovely pleat just below the sternum. Tonight's vixen wore diamond ear studs, but no other jewelry. Her cleavage was enough.

"Well, hello, Carnival Boy! Fancy meeting you here," Lena said. "I was talking to Dr. Cloutier yesterday, and she up and invited me to her soirée. Isn't that nice?"

Max looked like Sean Connery in his white dinner jacket and black trousers, but Shane thought Rosa took the prize in her midnight blue strapless of shimmering satin with its tightly smocked bodice and underskirt of black tulle.

"I guess everyone has been introduced?" Shane asked. "Shall we go in?" He led the three guests inside to the living room where Violet and Santos were now seated.

"The hors d'oeuvres will be ready in a flash," Shane told the dinner party as he scurried away. He made a detour through the dining room and removed the seventh place

setting. *I'd have happily sat next to Lillie, but no way do I want to give any ideas to Lena.*

Back in the kitchen, Shane uncorked the cava and placed the gougères in a cloth covered basket. He returned to the living room with bottle and appetizers and began to serve.

"You're too kind, Miss Cloutier," Rosa was saying to Violet. "You really should let Yaya come back home now."

"Nonsense! She'll stay as my guest until that fracture is completely healed."

"Professor Brother Miguel have a cure for broken arms, I know."

Shane poured the sparkling wine for the ladies.

"None for me, thanks," Max said. Then, in response to Santos's comment about the curandero, he spoke to the housekeeper, "Better leave well enough alone, Santos. We've had enough panicked trips to the ER lately to last a lifetime."

Shane spoke up after the topic of conversation had cycled back to the weather. "Have a seat at the table whenever you're ready and we'll start the soup."

Max wheeled Violet into the dining room and helped her move from her wheelchair to the upright chair at the head of the table. After the others had been seated, Violet began swinging her foot and thumping it against the table leg. "Where is that young man? Where is Edward? I thought you said he'd be here?"

"Let me serve the wine first. Then I'll run down and get him," Shane said.

"Hand me the bottle, Shane. I can take care of that while you round up Ned," Max said.

"It's a deal ..."

Ned was deep into the conclusion of his dissertation when Shane found him in his bathrobe still typing away at the kitchen table.

“Ned! Supper! Upstairs! Now!”

“I thought that wasn’t until 7:00.”

“It’s 7:15. Come on, put some clothes on. Everyone’s waiting.”

One course followed another with Shane serving as waiter, chef, and busboy, and occasionally standing in the doorway to take a sip of wine while the guests ooohed and aaahed over the food.

“I’ve never had fish soup before,” Lena said, chugging down her Beaujolais. “Not bad.”

Shane brought in crystal dishes of lemon sorbet and cleared the soup dishes.

“To cleanse the palate . . .”

Lena winked at him when he served the lamb and vegetables for the main course, simultaneously spiriting away the Burgundy glasses. “You’re smooth, honey.”

“Just a splash,” Max said, as Shane made his way around the table with the Cabernet. “Not to drink,” he added wafting the rim under his nose. “Lovely bouquet . . .”

Another palate cleanser, this time salad greens and sparkling water, came after the lamb.

Shane returned to the kitchen after the cheese course to start the coffee and caramelize the sugar topping for the crème brûlée. Violet was clinking her water glass with her spoon, just as he began to serve.

“I have an announcement to make!” she said. “Help me up, Shane.”

“I’d been wondering the purpose of this special occasion,” Max said.

Santos chuckled to herself.

"You know something," Rosa said, meeting the twinkle in her grandmother's eye. "What is it?"

"I have some exciting news, indeed!" Violet stood at the head of the table, Shane helping to steady her weight.

"Recent events have caused me to take a hard look at the *Sombras*. We've had too many accidents lately—my own fault, I admit. So I wanted to let you know that I've hired a contractor from Dover to install an elevator from the ground floor up to the balcony level. We'll also be adding some other improvements in A-2 for use by all of our tenants."

"That is good news," Rosa said.

"High time!" Max chimed in.

The five-star meal and Violet's announcement had made for a perfect evening. Shane hummed to himself as he began to clean the kitchen.

Ned appeared in the doorway. "I've got to head home."

"Okay. I'll walk you out," Shane said.

In spite of his bookish ways, Ned had caused a small stir at the dinner party. Violet crooned over him when he came to say goodbye and Santos gave him a big kiss on the cheek.

Lena opted for a good frenching instead. "Goodnight Mister Poet Laureate," she said, then whispered in his ear.

Ned reddened, mumbled something to her, then bowed to the group like a Nineteenth Century gentleman. "Good night, fellow travelers. I must get back to the diamond mine."

"How did you like it? The dinner?" Shane asked as he and Max walked Ned out.

Ned shrugged and grinned. "Better than cat food; not as good as Blue Bell."

"Spoken like a true epicurean," Max said.

Rosa called from the doorway. "Dr. Moore, Miss Violet is asking for you."

"Coming," Max replied. "'Night, Ned. See you back inside, Shane."

Shane and Ned had reached the spiral staircase. "Say, can you go out tomorrow? My fellowship doesn't kick in for another month."

"I can't. I've got Lillie's old aerobics class in the afternoon. Maybe later in the week. I'll let you know when I know."

"Sure, that's fine. See you around."

"See you."

Lena closed in on Shane when he turned to head back into B-1.

"Come out for a nightcap? Ned turned me down."

"Sorry. I've been on my feet all day, and I still have to do the cleaning up."

"Did you really receive a diploma from the Cordon Bleu?" Lena asked. "Tell me the truth, now."

"Did you enjoy the dinner?"

"Yes. Yes, I did."

"Then what difference does it make?" Shane asked.

"Can't argue with that," Lena replied and moved in for a kiss. Shane turned sideways when he saw her coming and she got only a mouthful of ear for her trouble.

"Two points for trying," he heard her mutter as she stumbled down the staircase.

When Shane got back inside, Max appeared to be fuming at something Violet had just said and, in spite of not drinking all through dinner, was now swigging from a tumbler full of scotch.

"What's going on?" Shane asked.

"Lillie just phoned. Said she had some *good news*," Max said through clinched teeth.

"What? What is it?" Shane turned to Violet.

"Maxon and I are going to be grandparents."

Rosa, who'd been sitting quietly with Santos, rose from the couch. "I'm going to help Yaya to bed," she said.

"I'll walk you down, when you're ready," Shane told her.

After Rosa and Santos were out of earshot, Max swore loudly and once again lifted the glass to his lips. Shane reached for the glass and gently pulled it out of Max's hand. "You don't really want to do that, Max." He turned to Violet. "Now, what did she say? Tell me exactly."

"Her comments were carefully worded," Max interrupted. "Vi thinks Rick was in the room with her, probably pressuring her ..."

"She said, 'What would you think about being a great-great-aunt?'"

"Did she explain how that was going to happen?"

"She said that she and Rick Pappas were talking about getting back together. That he had never wanted a family before, but he wanted one now. And they were both very happy with the idea of adoption."

"I'm sure he is. The bastard," Max fumed. "Did he say whether he still had that little girlfriend?"

"Girlfriend?" Shane asked.

"That's why she finally left him last spring and filed for divorce," Violet replied to Shane's question, then turned to Max. "No she didn't say."

"She said she'd been faithful to Rick through their whole marriage," Max said.

"She told me that, too," said Shane.

“His affair with the secretary from work was the final straw ...” Violet added. “But why would she go back with him, when someone who cares about her as much as you lives right downstairs?”

“We all care about her, Vi,” Max said as Rosa re-entered the room.

“Thanks for a lovely evening,” Rosa said, giving Violet a kiss on the cheek.

“Ready?” Shane asked Rosa, then took her arm and led her out of the tension-filled apartment.

When he returned to B-1, Violet and Max were right where he had left them, except that Max was again holding his now nearly-empty glass of scotch.

“Put that down, Max,” he ordered.

“Why should I?”

“Do you want to let all of your hard work go to waste? And what will that solve, anyway?”

“Hear, hear,” Violet said.

“How can she go back to that scoundrel? He’s just manipulating her. He doesn’t love her ... I love her,” Max said.

“So do I,” Violet said.

“Me, too,” said Shane.

“So what do you suggest we do?” Violet asked.

“I have the germ of a plan. Let me sleep on it. And in the *sober* light of day—Max, put down that bottle—we will begin a rescue effort.”

“But we don’t even know where she is right now ...” Violet said.

“A *search* and rescue effort,” Shane replied. “Are we agreed? ... Violet?”

“Absolutely.”

“... Max?”

“You’ve got a plan.”

“The germ of a plan.”

“Will it be foolproof?”

“Hardly, as more than one fool are involved.”

“And what am I supposed to do all night, while you’re working out the specifics of our non-foolproof plan?”

“You’ll be getting sober and rested for our trip to San Antonio.”

“I’m coming, too,” Violet said.

“We’d love to have you, of course, Vi. But to be honest, you’ll slow us down.”

“What good will I be here at home? I have to do something.”

“We’ll need you here to man the switchboard, in case Lillie calls.”

“That sounds boring ...”

“You can watch Court TV while you’re sitting by the phone ... Come on, Max. I’ve been on my feet all day. Time to call it a night.”

Shane walked Max into B-3 and, while Max was washing up in the bathroom, he poked around to be sure there was no booze available. Either Max was good about hiding it, or there was nothing—except for a lonely beer in the icebox. “Why would he have to hide booze in his own house, anyways?” Shane mused quietly.

“All set?” he asked when Max came out. “Can I do anything else for you?”

“I think you’ve done enough for one night,” Max said.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Memories of Tuscany

Lillie phoned Brittney late Sunday night after she had prevailed on Rick to leave her alone and go back to the company apartment where he'd been staying since the split.

"Where are you calling from?" Brittney asked.

"The house. I convinced Rick to let me stay here and turn the phone back on. But, it's going to cost me a fucking fortune ..."

"It's late, Lillie. I've got an early day tomorrow ... in-service for teachers. And I need to get organized for drill team practice."

"Brittney, I've just done something really stupid."

"What?"

"Can I come stay with you for a few days?"

"You just said you're staying at the house."

"I need somewhere Rick can't find me."

"Sure, come on."

"Do you have any wine?"

"Sorry, no."

"I'll stop and get some on the way. See you in twenty."

Lillie hung up the phone, threw a few things in her bag, and hurried down the stairs.

She had just locked the door when she heard the phone ring.

“Let him wonder,” she said, and headed for her car.

“Hello. Hello. Lillie are you there?”

After Max had left with Shane, Violet thought it might be worthwhile to try Lillie’s home number one more time. This was the first time since she’d come home after having her stomach pumped that the phone had actually rung through. Before tonight she’d only been getting a ‘number not in service’ message.

“I’ll try you again tomorrow,” she said, then hung up the receiver.

Max had a pot of *Puro Scuro* going when Shane knocked on the door Monday morning.

“Can I use your phone?”

“Sure, kid. Meanwhile, what will I need for our road trip?”

“I’m thinking clothes for two to three days, swim suit, medications, daytimer, something to read, all of Lillie’s contact info that we have. Shit. I never did get to the library ...”

“I had a thought last night. Before we go, we should listen to Rick’s messages on Vi’s answering machine—if they haven’t been erased.”

“Good idea ...”

While Max went to pack, Shane found George’s number on the cast list for the play and called Lillie’s star student.

“Yeah,” George said when he picked up.

“Hey, George, it’s me.”

“What’s up, kid?”

“I’ve got to go out of town for a few days. We’re leaving this morning.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Is there any way you could let the people in dance class know that classes will be canceled this week?”

“Sure, kid.”

“Sorry for the short notice.”

“No problem. I think Adeline’s back from vacation, anyway. She’s probably ready to take back the reins.”

“Appreciate it. Thanks, George.”

As soon as he hung up the call to George, Shane dialed a second number. This time he got an answering machine.

“Hi, it’s Shane. I’ll be taking Max to San Antonio for some tests. We may be there a few days. Would it be possible to borrow your mobile phone for our trip? We’ll stop by on our way out of town.”

Max walked back into the sitting room. “My bag’s in the hall. Should we go check in with Vi?”

“Yes and listen to Rick’s calls.”

All but two of the phone messages from Rick had been erased. In the first of the saved messages, Rick had been matter-of-fact, but persistent, “I’m heading out to the job site. Call my beeper. I need to tell you something.” In the second message, Rick was whiny and sorrowful and he left the number for the construction office.

They stopped at Greg’s law office on the way out of town. Max waited in the car while Shane ran inside to pick

up the mobile phone, charging base, and a quick lesson from Greg in how to use them. Greg and Gail came out to the curb with Shane to see the men on their way.

"Say, do you have a San Antonio phone book?" Shane asked just before stepping into the car. They did indeed. When Gail came back with the phone book she also brought two chilled bottles of Perrier.

"Be sure to stay hydrated. Sitting all day in the doctor's office can really wear you out."

"Take it easy, Max," Greg said. "You're in good hands."

"What was that all about?" Max asked Shane when they pulled onto the road.

"I figured we should have a cover story. It just seemed so pathetic to say that we were going to find Lillie and bring her back."

"Where to, first?" Max asked.

"The house in Alamo Heights? It's the only place we have an address for."

"Let's go, then."

With Max reading the road maps and acting as navigator, an hour after leaving the *Sombras* they pulled up in front of the two-story Mediterranean home in Alamo Heights.

"A *For Sale* sign," Shane said. "I thought she got the house in the divorce . . . You wait in the car. I'll take a quick walk around, see if we can get inside."

He got through the gate to the pool in the backyard, but none of the doors or windows on the ground level yielded to entrance.

Max was leaning against the rear fender, talking on the mobile phone, when Shane returned.

"Ten o'clock sounds great," Max said into the phone. "We'll meet you there."

“What’s going on?” Shane asked.

“I found a Realtor in the phone book and asked him to show us the house. We’ve got an appointment in thirty minutes. If we can get in, we can get back in.”

“Brilliant!” Shane said.

After a few minutes, the detective team moved to a bench on the front porch where they waited for their tour guide.

At ten on the dot, a shiny white Toyota pulled into the driveway and a middle-aged man in an expensive suit, neatly trimmed salt-and-pepper hair and beard, and a pasted-on smile came to greet them at the door.

“This’ll be fun,” Max whispered to Shane, and put his arm around Shane’s waist.

“Hi, fellas, I’m Harry Bascomb. You folks new to San Antone?”

Max spoke up first. “I’m George Stevens. I write science fiction. My *nephew*, Julian, is looking at transferring to Trinity. We just thought we’d see what’s out there.”

“I haven’t shown this property before. I took a quick look at the MLS and called the Realtor who has the listing before I came over. She’ll meet us here in a few minutes. I can go ahead and let you in.”

When they walked into the front hallway, Shane put his hands in his pockets and moved for a close inspection of the wall. “Is this house alarmed? I don’t see a keypad.”

Harry looked down at his clipboard. “No alarm. Are you looking for a place with an alarm?”

“Not necessarily.”

“Nice Windberg,” Max said, moving into the sitting room to inspect a print from the Texas artist’s collection.

"That's a limited edition from his Mediterranean series," a woman's voice spoke behind him.

"Well, hello," Max said. "I'm George."

"I'm Ann Morrow. I've got the listing on this house. The owner has temporarily moved back in. We've been instructed to call first to be sure we're not interrupting anything. No one answered this morning after Harry let me know he'd be showing the house. I thought I'd drop over in case you had any questions."

"I'm just gaga over the art work. Those muted colors, that idyllic scene ... I feel like we've dropped right into Italy."

While Max kept the Realtors occupied, Shane took a quick run upstairs.

There were a few items of Lillie's in the dresser in the master bedroom. The bed was made up, but had recently been slept in. There were a toothbrush and toothpaste in a drawer in the master bath. When he lifted the telephone receiver on the bedside table, he heard a distinct dial tone.

He opened the French doors near the reading nook on the other side of the bedroom and stepped out onto the balcony.

My, god. It's like another world.

The view of the tiled swimming pool and the terraced yard gave the impression one really was in a Mediterranean vineyard.

Shane was going down the stairs as Max and the Realtors were going up.

"Gotta check out the pool," he mumbled as he passed them.

While Max kept the sales people busy, Shane inspected the large kitchen and the party room that led out to the swimming pool.

There was a window in the far corner of the party room on the other side of the refrigerator. Shane unlocked the window and raised the sash to its lock-off position. He pushed out a corner of the screen, then lowered the sash, neglecting to close the lock.

Shane was outside admiring the pool when his partner in crime appeared at his side. "Lovely place," Max said.

"Where are Harry and Ann?" Shane asked.

"They wanted to give us a chance to explore a bit."

"She's here . . . or has been here. The phone's connected again."

"Excellent."

"I've got a window unlocked over there, so . . ."

"... we can get back in," Max completed the thought. "Excellent."

"I'm going to run in real quick, check out the facilities."

"I may do so myself before we get back to our fishing trip. But, for another minute, I think I'll pretend we've landed in Tuscany."

Harry and Ann had gone back to the sitting room and were talking quietly. Shane tiptoed down the hall, listening in case one or the other might reveal something about Lillie.

Ann had started to laugh, then Harry joined in. "*An aging queen and his boy toy, that's rich*," Harry said through his chortles.

"*George and his nephew, Julian. They couldn't be more obvious*," Ann said.

"*I grew up in Pearsall, the redneck capital of the world*."

“George,” Shane called in a voice loud enough to be heard by the Realtors, “we’ve got to get to that appointment.”

“Coming,” he heard Max say. “Just have to make a stop at the powder room, first.”

Harry and Ann had composed themselves by the time Max and Shane reappeared, arm-in-arm.

“Can I show you gents anything else this morning?” Harry asked.

“Sorry, not today. We’ve got to head to an appointment. But I love this place and I love that picture,” Max said. “Thanks for meeting us over here. We’ll know where to find you if we want to make an offer.”

After an early lunch and a quick in-and-out at the Save-A-Stop, Shane and Max drove back to the neighborhood, discreetly unloaded their luggage and supplies at the top of the driveway, then parked a block down the street and let themselves in through the unlocked window in the party room.

Shane found Max in the sitting room after he put the groceries away. Max was standing in front of the Windberg again, his eyes drifting up and down its thirty inches of magic—the church dome, the tall firs, the winding brook—all in muted greens, pinks, and blues.

“Jeffrey and I took Lillie to Tuscany with us the summer after she graduated from high school.”

“That’s a *gorgeous* painting.”

“Actually it’s a print . . . on canvas.”

“It looks real.”

“I gave it to Lillie for her apartment after she moved back to Texas,” Max said.

“I guess it’s time we checked out the next piece of the puzzle,” Shane said.

“Right.”

They found *Miss Lillie’s* in the phone book. While Max took a siesta, Shane headed over to the studio to see what he could find out. An older woman—on the chubby side—was sitting at the desk in the front office/waiting room when Shane walked through the door.

“Miss Lillie?”

“No. I’m Frances Mahaffey, the new owner. Can I help you?”

“Yeah, that’d be great. My kid sister wants to take ballet. She’s twelve. Can I pick up a schedule?”

“Sure.” She handed him a pink sheet of paper and pointed to a block in the second column. “Classes start August 28th. The Beginner Ballet for that age group is on Tuesday after school.”

“Sounds good. Can I look around?”

“I’ll show you ...” The phone rang as soon as Frances stood up. “Feel free to explore, I’d better get this ... Mahaffey School of Dance ...”

Shane wandered into the dance room. It was much like Miss Adeline’s in San Mateo, except for one striking aspect. Centered on the back wall, hanging just above the barre, was a very large abstract painting of Nureyev. The dancer’s face and wild hair had been painted in large strokes of blue, orange, and black, and a small train chugged across the bottom of the canvas. When she had once described the painting to him, Shane remembered Lillie telling him that Nureyev had been born on a train, a matter of meaningful significance to the icon of the ballet world.

Shane checked out the dressing room and was nosing around in the sound cabinet when Frances came in.

"Sorry, long call. Do you have any questions?"

"Where can Melissa buy her dance shoes and tights?"

"She's sold the studio," Shane told Max when he got back to the house.

"Or Rick has."

"I didn't see her name on the schedule, and Mahaffey didn't mention her, so I don't think she's even helping out. The only sign out front says *School of Dance*."

"Damn."

"Did she ever tell you about that painting her friend from New York gave her of Nureyev?" Shane asked.

"I've seen it," Max said.

"It was there."

"Damn, again."

"Anything happen here while I was gone?"

"A Realtor called ... may call back when he's scheduled a time with his client. And I do have a spot of good news."

"What?"

"There's a numerical cross reference in the phone book. I've got an address for Rick's shop. Let's go over there around quitting time ... follow Rick home."

"Great idea," Shane said.

"Aren't you glad you brought me?" Max asked, a little smile lighting his face. "*You* don't know what Rick looks like."

Once they had the route to Rick's shop mapped out, Shane went upstairs to change into his swim trunks.

Max was standing on the balcony admiring the view when Shane came out of the bathroom.

"Want to take a swim?"

"I've got a little headache. Think I'll rest upstairs, read for a bit, see if I can shake it."

"What you reading?"

"Heinlein's *Time Enough for Love*. It's my favorite."

"That is a great one. I like it, too," Shane said.

Shane swam two dozen laps, then dozed by the pool in Lillie's lounge. He woke when he heard the phone ring and hurried into the house.

Max had picked up the call on the third ring. "Hello? Yes, this is Rick Pappas. That'll be fine." Max hung up the phone and turned to Shane. "They're showing the house at three-thirty. We've got to clear out."

"Time we left, anyways."

They made their way over to the industrial district on the north side of the Loop, then drove up and down through the rows of warehouse offices looking for Rick's shop.

"There," Max said. "Pappas Construction."

"Any idea what he drives?"

"How about the most expensive car in the lot?" Max said, pointing to a gold Lexus SC parked in the only bit of shade.

"Good as anything. I'll watch the car, you watch the door."

They rolled the windows down, sipped on Perrier, and talked about the cosmos.

It was just after five when a compact, ruggedly handsome, cowboy-type walked out of the office.

"There he is," Max whispered.

They followed Rick's car to an apartment complex not far from the shop, where he parked under a numbered awning.

"Three-thirty-three," Max said. "Half the Number of the Beast."

Shane pulled into a visitor's spot. "Keep an eye out, Max. I'll follow him up."

Keeping Rick in range, Shane shadowed his quarry to an interior block facing the swimming pool. He heard the door click shut just as he came to the top of the stairs. Rick had indeed entered Apartment 333.

Shane listened with his ear against the door. He heard the sound of the evening news. He heard water running and the ding of a timer. He was just about to leave, when he heard a low voice that soon became strident. "Lillie? Lillie. Pick up the phone, dammit!"

Max looked up apprehensively when Shane returned to the car.

"She's not there."

"Thank, god. Still, we should drive around ... be sure we don't see her car."

After fifteen minutes creeping up and down through the maze of apartment units, Shane said, "I wish we knew where she was."

"At least she doesn't seem to be staying here with Rick."

"Let's go back to the house, maybe she'll show up."

They picked up some burgers for supper and ate in the quiet kitchen, then Shane turned on the TV and flipped through the dial.

"Cable's off."

"What's that then?"

"Looks like something's coming through on the antenna. Hey, super!"

"What?"

"The Rangers are playing. I haven't seen a game all year."

"Guess I'll go upstairs and read."

"All-righty then."

"You want the master or the guest room?"

"Hmmm, Lillie's been staying in the master ... want to arm wrestle for it?"

Shane brushed the newspaper away and planted his elbow on the kitchen table.

"What a novel idea. Think I'd rather flip for it. The odds are better." Max pulled a quarter out of his pocket. "Call it." He threw the coin in the air and slapped it down on the back of his hand.

"Heads."

Max looked down at the eagle. "Sorry, kid, you lose. I'll take the master."

The phone rang just as the Rangers were moving dejectedly off the field.

"Don't answer that!" Shane heard Max holler down the stairs. "It's probably Rick checking up on Lillie."

Shane hollered back, "You gonna call Vi? Let her know how our day went?"

"I'll call her when Leno starts," came the reply.

Max was on the mobile phone when Shane came out of the bathroom later.

"... We think that, too. ... No. No other leads, no other ideas. ... Not, sure. Probably tomorrow night or Wednesday."

Shane stepped in closer after Max hung up the receiver.

“She hasn’t heard anything today. I told her we’d probably hang out here and sight-see some tomorrow. Go home afterwards, if we don’t discover anything. You okay with that?”

“Sure.”

“... missing class?”

“Fuck class.”

“That’s my boy!”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Hottest Day

Lillie had done some serious thinking over the last twenty-four hours while she hid out at Brittney's place.

She brainstormed with her friend after she got to the apartment Sunday night until Brittney just had to call it quits, then watched Tracy and Hepburn in *Desk Set* on the late show.

While Brittney was at her in-service at the high school Monday, Lillie read the want ads and circled a few employment prospects and apartment rental possibilities. After lunch, she put on her bathing suit, picked up the sunscreen and a magazine, and headed down to the tenants' pool.

She woke to Brittney's voice later that afternoon. "Come on, Lillie. Get changed and we'll go to happy hour at the club house."

Over wine coolers and pistachios, Lillie laid out her plan.

"I'm going to interview tomorrow at a couple of places. If I get a job, I think I'll look for a singles' apartment on this side of town . . . closer to you, closer to work."

"Closer to San Mateo."

“Well, maybe ...”

“Wouldn’t it be better if you consulted with Shane or Max about your plans?”

“I’m my own woman. Trying to be, anyway. If I ask either of them, they’ll just want to take care of everything for me.”

“And what about Rick? You can’t hide from him forever. You’re going to have to go back to your house sometime.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Like tomorrow, maybe?”

“Are you throwing me out?”

“Not exactly, but ...”

“You need your space.”

“I didn’t want to be impolite.”

On Tuesday, Lillie got a job waiting tables at the cowboy bar.

She celebrated her good fortune by taking Brittney to lunch.

“They want me to start tomorrow night ...” she said. “They also said I can sub the swing lessons when the regular dance teacher is on vacation next month. My boot’s in the door ...”

“Way to go, girl!”

“Tomorrow, I’ll get the key for the storage unit from Rick.”

“Do you think that’s a good idea?”

“When have I ever had a good idea?”

“I take your point.”

“I’m going back to the house this afternoon. Might as well take advantage of Rick’s largess while I’ve got it.”

“Hear, hear! Screw him for all he’s worth.”

On Tuesday morning, Shane was sitting by the pool reading the newspaper when Max came out with his glass of *Instant Breakfast*.

“I could get used to this,” he said. “Sugar instead of green sludge. Where’d you get the paper?”

“I jogged down to the Save-A-Stop.”

“We’re going to have to clear out soon. Someone’s already called to show the house.”

“Okay.”

“What shall we do today? Any more ideas of how to find her without showing our hand?”

“I should experience the Alamo, don’t you think? Then we can hang around a while, see if she comes back here, check out Rick’s again on our way out of town.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

On the way back to the house after sightseeing, they stopped at a florist and together picked out a vase of colorful, summer flowers.

Toward midafternoon, Shane made a final sweep of the place and had just come down the stairs with their luggage when he found Max once again in the thrall of the Windberg.

“Ready?” Shane asked.

“Yeah, after you help me get this down.”

“What?”

“I’ve decided we’re taking it with us.”

“We can’t. It doesn’t belong to us.”

“If she gave it to Rick ...”

“Then it’s Rick’s. It was hers to give ...”

“Well, I want it back.”

"It doesn't work that way, Max."

"We'll see, won't we?"

"Look, we may not know whose it is, but we certainly know whose it isn't."

"I guess."

"*You* know. Come on, Max, we've got one more spot of surveillance before we can kick this joint."

Just as on the previous day, they headed north for the industrial district and parked near Rick's warehouse. They followed him to his apartment and listened through the door for any sound from Lillie. Then they drove up and down through the complex to verify that Lillie's car wasn't around, before heading back to San Mateo.

The house had a friendlier feel to it when Lillie let herself in after her two-day absence. She was surprised to see a vase of flowers on the kitchen table.

The Realtors are upping their game.

When she climbed into bed later that night, something about the room made her feel as safe and comfortable as when she stayed over at Max's for the few days before she had returned to San Antonio.

She nestled into the pillow. *It smells like Max.*

Her heart racing, Lillie sat up and turned on the lamp. "Max! Who's here?"

A second sense cued her to begin opening drawers. Inside the nightstand next to the bed, she found a book. The title was *Time Enough for Love*, the author Robert A. Heinlein.

A bookmark encouraged her to flip open to a page in the last quarter of the book where a short passage had been underlined.

Till the stars grow old and our sun grows cold? Will you fight for us, lie for us, love us - and let us love you?

There was also some writing on the back of the bookmark.

We love you. Come home. No questions asked. — Max and Shane

Lillie picked up the phone and dialed Max's number.

"It's me."

"Lillie."

"You and Shane have been here?"

"For a couple of days. We left this afternoon."

"What time?"

"Oh, around four, I guess."

"I came in at four-fifteen."

"A cosmic joke if ever there was one. Where were you?"

"I was staying with a girlfriend. Rick kind of spooked me Sunday night insisting I call Vi."

"You can't let him run you around."

"I know."

"And don't think that you need to take care of him."

"Right. Guess I'd better go."

"If you must."

"Tell Shane I miss him. He said he'd write ..."

"The mail isn't being delivered there, didn't you know that? Apparently it has been forwarded ..."

"Shit, you mean to Rick?"

"He'd been writing you every day before our field trip. When we checked the mail at your house, there was nothing in the box."

"No wonder Rick's been acting so possessive. He's reading all my mail."

"Apparently."

"Well, I should let you get back to bed. Tell Vi I'll call her."

"'Night, Lillie Belle."

Lillie wandered through the upstairs guestrooms after she hung up the phone. In the room closest to the master, the bed looked like it had been slept in and Shane's scent wafted up when she turned down the spread. She pulled out his pillow and carried it to bed with her.

Rick was at the shop when Lillie went to pick up the key for the storage unit the next day.

"How are you going to carry it all? Have you thought about that?"

"It's just my clothes and dishes, and stuff. It'll fit in my car, but I won't have to get it all right now, anyway. I just need to see what's there."

"Well, the offer stands if you want any help."

"Do you have my mail?" she asked. "I just realized nothing's coming to the house."

"I'll have to get it from the apartment. I could drop it by tonight."

"I won't be home. I've gotta get to work."

Lillie left Rick's office with the key and a sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach. "Damn. I shouldn't have told him I was on the way to work."

Shane kept his promise to write Lillie every day. Since the discovery that his letters from the first week had been

forwarded to Rick, however, he quit mailing them. Instead, he filed the letters in a shoebox in the study.

Friday was the hottest day of the year and the second-to-last performance of their way-too-long run. Shane put on his costume, then stood backstage to watch the Ruffian Boys cavort with Louise on the beach while he waited for his cue.

He had really been missing Lillie since Max told him about her call. Although he had warmed up for the pas de deux and seemed to be securely in character, he felt a lone tear slide down his cheek.

"Can I get you anything?" It was Brad, the stage manager.

"Got a tissue?" Brad had handed him a tissue, then stepped further into the wings to talk to one of the Carnival Ladies.

Shane ducked his head to wipe away the tear. When he straightened to view the action again, Melissa was in the middle of her leap frog over Julian's back.

Instead of the neatly choreographed landing to move into her "Peter Pan" pose with hands on hips and head tilted up, ready to watch the Ruffian Boys do their cartwheels and Cossack rolls, Melissa forgot her turnout—again—and took the leap frog with her right leg rotated in.

She grounded hard into her heels when she landed, forcing the right knee to buckle. Her leg twisted under her like a marionette and she crumpled onto the stage.

"It hurts! It hurts!"

Shane was the first to Melissa's side. "Don't move! It'll be okay."

Before the accident, the music had been blaring. Almost instantly after Melissa's fall, the sound of the orchestra faded

into discordant harmonies that only an aficionado of *The Music Man* might appreciate.

With his arm around the still wailing Melissa, Shane heard Brad holler from backstage “**Black out!**” and the stage went dark.

As the curtains closed, Brad brought up the work lights and Barry came onto the stage. He squatted beside Shane.

“What happened?”

“Looks like she’s dislocated her knee or torn her ACL.”

“Can you stand up, honey? Put some weight on it?”

Melissa only wailed.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Barry,” Shane said. “We need to call EMS.”

“Brad!” Barry yelled. “Call 911, and get Lillie on the phone. If we can get her down here quick, we can finish the show.”

“Lillie’s gone back to San Antonio, Barry.”

“Fuck!”

“Let’s have a spotlight at the Stage Right curtain, Brad. I’m coming out.”

Barry fumbled behind the curtain and then disappeared. Shane heard his voice over the speaker system.

Ladies and gentlemen, there’s been an accident. I’m afraid the ballet cannot continue. After a brief intermission, we will pick up at Scene Five.

Brad ran across the stage. "Sandra! Where's Sandra? We need you to read Louise's part for the rest of Act Two!"

Melissa snuffled and began to wail. "It's over . . . My career is over . . ."

The backstage lights came up and a siren beeped as the ambulance pulled up to the grassy area behind the stage.

The attendants were gentle with the devastated Melissa. They gave her a shot for pain and carefully wrapped an air brace around her knee, then lifted her onto the stretcher. Shane held her hand as Brad opened the large exterior stage doors and led the group to the elevator for the loading dock.

"Can I come, too—so someone's with her?" Shane asked the driver. "Her parents aren't here. They'll have to get hold of them, let them know what happened."

"Sure, kid. You can ride up front with me."

Rick had followed Lillie from his shop to the cowboy bar her first night of work. He was there again on Thursday. And again on Friday.

"This is getting old," Lillie said when she blitzed by his table on Friday.

"I need to talk to you," he said. "About the house."

If he wanted to talk about the house, it probably meant that she'd either have to start paying rent or move out soon. Lillie decided it might be in her interest to invite him over for pizza when she got off work so they could discuss a few things.

"The Realtor thinks we might get a contract next week."

"Hunky dory."

"You're welcome to stay with me at the company apartment, if you need a place."

"That's so sweet," she said. *Never in a million years*, she thought.

The late night news was on and the weatherman was mapping out an approaching tropical storm, when they were startled by the ringing of the phone.

Out of habit, Rick picked it up. "Rick Pappas." With a frown on his face, he handed the receiver to Lillie. "It's Barry from the play."

"Oh, hi, Barry. How's it going?" Rick stood across from her in a pose reminiscent of his possessive, alpha male persona from when they were married.

Though the news of Melissa's accident was alarming, Lillie suddenly didn't want Rick to be alerted to anything about which he might feel entitled to have an opinion. She focused on the vase of flowers sitting on the table and lowered her voice.

"Um-hum. Um-hum ... Yes, of course ... Okay, see you tomorrow, then."

"What was that all about?" Rick asked when she replaced the receiver.

"The dancer who plays Louise got hurt. They need me to sub in for her tomorrow."

"Call him back. Tell him 'No'."

"I can't. It's the last performance. Shit, I'll have to take off work ..."

"Maybe I'll come, too, then. I've never seen you dance in a show before."

"Oh, you'd hate it. Musical theatre, bleah."

"No. I *want* to come. Really. I'll drive you tomorrow and you can rest while you get psyched up. It'll be fun ..."

Fuck me, Lillie said to herself. “Sure, that’s very thoughtful.”

Shane always could sleep anywhere, so a night in a straight-back chair at the hospital was a piece of cake. He took shifts through the night with her parents—sitting by Melissa’s bedside, patting her, and holding her hand.

The doctor had reset the knee and put in a drip with some pain meds to get the patient through the night. Sometime after the swelling went down, there would be x-rays and a determination as to whether surgery would be advised.

“Shane, honey . . .” Shane stirred when Melissa’s mother, Susan, patted him gently on the shoulder. “Melissa wants to talk to you.”

Shane straightened from the chair and rubbed his face. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Come on, Drew,” Susan said to her husband. “Let’s go get some breakfast.”

Melissa’s knee had a cold pack wrapped around it and was elevated to rest on a shelf set up on the right side of the bed. In her polka-dot hospital gown, the high school senior looked more like a pale waif than a budding beauty. Shane moved in beside her.

“You’ve been here the whole night?”

“I thought I should stay. Your parents didn’t seem to mind.”

“My parents like you a lot.”

“They’re nice folks . . .”

“I have to tell you something . . .”

“Sure, anything.”

"Did you see the flowers I got last night? They were in the dressing room when I got to the theatre."

"The roses? Yeah."

"And I got a card last week."

"It appears you have a fan."

"Johnny's been to every one of my performances. He's at my school, but I didn't even know him before."

"Uh-huh."

"He called me yesterday afternoon and we talked for an hour. And then he sent the flowers last night. We were supposed to have a date after the show, but ..."

"I see."

"You're so much older than me. I mean, I really respect you and all ..."

"But ..."

"I should be dating boys my own age. Besides which, I could get you in trouble ... Anyway, I know I hold you back ... and Johnny's the captain of the football team."

They hadn't really been a couple since he hooked up with Lillie when the choreographer subbed-in for Melissa the first week of the show. Except for her frenching him last Friday, he'd been careful to only give Melissa stage kisses for the last two weeks, and he'd otherwise avoided taking her out after the performances. Even so, a morose sense of aloneness hung over Shane as he walked out to the parking lot.

When he got back to the *Sombras*, Shane slept like he'd been drugged. He woke late that afternoon, just in time to get ready for the final performance—if there was to be a final

performance. He hadn't heard one way or the other because he still didn't have a phone.

When he got to the amphitheatre, the hillside was bustling. Barry and the producers had decided to let the Saturday show go on. Lillie was coming in from San Antonio to perform the part of Louise.

He almost had a panic attack when he saw her drive up with Rick in the gold Lexus.

"Got a quarter?" he asked Julian. He took the coin Julian had amiably offered and trudged to the phone booth near the staircase for the parking lot.

Max answered on the first ring. "It's me. She's dancing tonight ... Lillie ... She came with Rick. I don't know what I'm going to do."

"It's a play. Just pretend."

"Would you come?"

"I can't. I've got a headache worse than the other day. A lightning bolt shot through my head and now I'm seeing stars."

"God, I don't want to do this."

"I'm sorry, kid ..."

Shane hid out backstage as long as possible alternating between the men's dressing room and a vantage point in a dark corner where he'd sometimes see Lillie pass by. "Have you seen Shane?" he heard her ask Julian just before the clambake.

Twenty minutes later, he watched as Lillie began her warm up on the opposite side of the stage. She held onto the ladder to the catwalk and did pliés and tendus. She'd started her grands battements when he forced himself to travel along the hallway behind the stage to go over to her.

As a sort of soundtrack to their reunion, Julie was singing her melancholy song that ended the scene, *What's the Use of Wond'rin'*.

"Hi," he said.

"Oh, hi. I've been looking for you," she said.

"Well, here I am ... It's not true is it?"

"What?" she asked.

"That you're getting back together with Rick ... adopting a baby?"

"No, no ... He just made me call that night. I had to be careful. I was afraid he'd do something scary if I didn't play along ..."

"You mean, he threatened you? Jesus, Lillie, can't you see he's dangerous?"

"Not me, baby ... I thought he might go out and hurt himself."

"I'm not a baby," Shane said.

"Sorry, poor choice of words," she replied.

"Why did you let him bring you, anyways?"

"It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"Not a great reason."

"I sent him over to get Vi. They should be out in the audience."

"Vi hates him."

"I know, but she'll keep him occupied. Otherwise, I could just see Rick insisting he watch from backstage."

"I can't believe you thought this was a good idea," Shane said.

Lillie's justification was lame. "He's never seen me dance ..."

"And why, now, does he have to? Shit, Lillie. He read all the letters I wrote you."

“I know. So, please keep it PG tonight. I’m afraid he’ll kill you if he sees you kiss me.”

“I’ll kill him back.”

As the chorus came to the end of their song, Lillie chewed on her lip and stared silently at Shane, her eyes pooling with tears.

As if he could hear everything that was happening on stage from his vantage point a mile away, Max took another pull from the bottle of scotch he had liberated from Violet’s liquor cabinet and held onto the balcony rail for dear life.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Pas de Trois

When Shane left after talking with Lillie before the second act ballet, she worried that he might think she didn't care about him anymore. But she'd had to be careful with Rick watching the show tonight. In this sort of pas de trois, no telling what he'd do, if he got upset.

Lillie steeled herself to give a competent, but professional performance. She was even a bit stiff during the section with the Ruffian Boys, but that couldn't be helped, could it?

The A minor strings announced the start of the *Carousel Waltz*. As the Carnival Boy made his entrance, the Carnival Ladies followed him out onto the stage, and Lillie and the Ruffian Boys ran to hide behind the rock.

The Carnival Ladies danced in a large circle around the Carnival Boy as if they were the horses on the carousel. They seemed steamier and sexier than they had been earlier in the run. Perhaps they had just come into their own over the last three weeks when Lillie was in San Antonio. Perhaps it was because tonight was their final performance.

Shane, completely in character as the Carnival Boy, spied Louise and her friends and beckoned for them to come out of their hiding place. He smiled at them and handed them tickets to the carnival.

Lillie mimed that she didn't want a ticket. She pointed instead to the blue satin cape that one of the Carnival Ladies had handed to the Ruffian Boys.

When the Ruffian Boys started to return the capes to the Carnival Ladies, Shane tore the blue cape from Sandra's hands and pointed at her sternly to go back to the carnival with the others.

After the others had left the stage, Shane wrapped the cape around Lillie's shoulders with a reassuring squeeze.

The pas de deux began with the poetic series of lifts. When she arched into the backbend after Shane had spun her to face him, he bent toward her, his eyes searching her face, and planted a big, hungry, open-mouthed kiss on her. He continued to kiss her while the music swelled.

Stunned, Lillie tried to get herself back into character, but another hot and heavy kiss preceded her movement into the head-down standing split. She felt light as a feather when he twisted her up onto his back in the vee. He spun and swirled her like a piece of silk as he brought her down in front of him.

"I love you, you know," he whispered.

Lillie/Louise now stood in front of the Carnival Boy. She wanted to hold him and never let him go. "Take me with you, Carnival Boy," she whispered.

"What would Rick say?" he whispered. Then he raced after the Carnival People, leaving Lillie alone to fend for herself.

Lillie's character Louise was in the next two scenes, but Shane had been feeling strangely odd and heavy since leaving the stage. His breathing had become labored, as if a large object were crushing his chest. His eyelids were so heavy, he could barely keep them open.

After the ballet, Shane lay down on the couch in the green room and within seconds had gone into a trance. For all intents and purposes, he was asleep. But this time his brain waves had moved deep into Theta.

Shane, it's me, Tala, a voice spoke inside his head. *Go to Max. Max needs you.*

The gauze cloud was lowering for the Starkeeper's scene with Billy Bigelow when Shane woke, his head full of cement.

He moaned.

"Are you okay, man?" It was Julian.

"Uhhh . . ."

"Here, let me help you."

Shane felt himself being lifted to a sitting position.

"How 'bout a drink? Sergio, bring me a glass of water."

A moment later, a glass was being pressed to his lips. Shane took a swallow.

"I have to go find Max," he mumbled.

Shane didn't even take off his costume. From the backstage speaker he could hear Louise—Lillie—and Billy Bigelow. Billy was trying to give her a star that he had filched from heaven.

Shane stumbled to the Stage Door, then stepped out into the dark summer night.

In his head, he heard Billy now singing to Julie before begging his Heavenly Friend to give him one more chance on earth. The song was a reprise of the beautiful Act I ballad, *If I Loved You*.

Shane was getting his sea legs back as he staggered to the bottom of the hill. Scene Six would be starting. George, the Starkeeper—now in the guise of the town Doctor—was to deliver the commencement address to Louise and her graduating class. Shane had learned the Starkeeper’s final speech by rote and could hear it playing in his head as he made the turn two blocks from the *Sombras*.

While the Starkeeper exhorted Louise and her fellow students to live their own lives and not be held back by the failures of their parents, Shane prayed. *Don’t give up, Max. I’m coming. Tala, tell him to hold on.*

Max’s shadowy form was leaning against the balcony rail as Shane reached the gate. He thought he caught the flash of Max’s eyes.

Shane climbed the steps. “Max, are you okay?”

“What are you here doing?”

“... someone said you needed help.”

“I thought I was going downstairs, but I’m up here.”

“Do you want me to help you down?” Shane asked.

“Don’t you?” Max had looked well enough to Shane, but his sentences seemed more like gobbledygook than coherent speech.

Shane put an arm around his friend and helped him down the stairs.

The Starkeeper and the chorus would all be singing now. *You’ll Never Walk Alone* ... the same song Nellie had sung toward the end of Scene Two to give solace to Julie after Billy’s untimely death. At the end of the play, the

powerful anthem usually brought everyone on stage and in the audience to tears.

“Careful . . . careful . . . watch that last step.”

Max stumbled when he reached the bottom, but Shane kept a steady grip on him and guided him to a lounge chair near the fountain.

“Where’s Lillie?” Max asked as Shane helped him sit.

“She’s in the last scene. The Heavenly Friend will take Billy back to heaven. Then they’ll have the curtain calls.”

“Is she coming home?” Max asked.

“You rest here a minute, Max. I’m going to run over to Ned’s and call someone.”

“Lillie. Call Lillie,” Max whispered.

“Hang on, Max. I’ll be right back.”

Shane had only been gone for an instant when Max saw the butterfly—the blue *Morpho* who had been hanging around the *Sombras* all summer. The butterfly seemed suspended in the air just above the fountain.

“I’m imagining you, surely,” Max said to the iridescent insect.

Max reached for the apparition. The beautiful creature must have traveled to see him, far from its home in the jungles of Central America. Max stretched both arms out toward the glowing mirage and toppled from the chair onto the tile courtyard.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Across the Universe

Max was barely conscious when Shane got back. He lifted his heavy eyelids and stared at his young friend, willing himself not to blink.

“Take care of Lillie ... love her for me,” he moved his mouth to speak, but wondered if Shane could hear the sound of the words.

Shane was kneeling at his side when Violet, Lillie, and Rick came through the gate just as the siren screamed to announce the arrival of the ambulance. Lillie rode with him in the back, holding his hand and murmuring what sounded to Max like prayers.

The attendants made Lillie stay outside when they rolled him into the emergency room. He was all alone, except for the blue morpho that seemed to have followed him unnoticed by the hospital staff.

Feeling a sudden freedom from the forces of gravity, Max sensed he was flying alongside the magnificent blue butterfly. To Mexico. To Brazil. To Heaven. It didn't matter where he went now.

Shane found a sofa in the waiting room and tried to make Violet comfortable. Lillie sat silently, Rick close by her side.

Within the hour, Ned, Gail, and Greg hurried in to join them.

"Oh, children!" Violet said. "It's Max. He's had some kind of stroke."

"He's in surgery right now," Shane said. "It could be a while before we know anything."

In the early hours of the morning, Paul came through the swinging doors that separated the waiting room from the neurotrauma unit.

"Lillie ..." he said. "Dr. Schultz needs to ask you something ..."

Rick stood with Lillie and began to lead her through the doors.

"No! You stay here," she told him.

"But ..."

"I'm a big girl. I don't need you right now."

"Sure, but ..."

Her arms held tightly across her chest, Lillie followed Paul inside.

"What did I do?" Violet wailed. "All this trouble. Is it some kind of curse?"

"You mustn't think like that," Shane said, putting his arm around the matron.

"But why Max?" she asked.

"It's out of our hands."

Lillie knew it would be bad, but still wasn't prepared for the sight when she followed Paul and Dr. Schultz into the recovery room.

Max was wearing a blue hospital gown and his lower legs placed into compression boots. The side of his head was shaved and it looked like a piece of the skull had been removed and then screwed back on. A probe was inserted into his skull and secured with a bolt. EEG electrodes were attached to his scalp, he was hooked up to a ventilator, and a central line catheter inserted just below his right collarbone. Max was unconscious.

"It appears Mr. Moore had a hemorrhagic stroke. A blood vessel in the brain ruptured," the neurologist said.

"Oh, god ..."

"There continues to be hemorrhage and the hemotoma is still pressing on the brain," he continued. "Through it all, Mr. Moore has remained unresponsive. It'll be touch and go for the next six hours. After that ... well ..."

"Well? Well, what?" Lillie asked.

"We may have to pull the plug."

"No! I forbid it!"

"Lillie, you don't make that decision," Paul said.

"Miss Cloutier holds the advanced health care directive for Mr. Moore," Dr. Schultz said.

"We need you to help Violet prepare for the worst," said Paul.

With the pragmatism of the professor of history that she was, Violet consented to the DNR. Afterward, through the remainder of the night, each one of the present and former

tenants of the *Sombras del Pasado* had taken a turn holding vigil with Max.

Shane sat beside his friend for the last two hours and spent the entire shift relaying to Max the story of his life—from the first time Rachel had sent him to his room without any supper, to Scotty's death, to the incident with the college girls in the dormitory, to his early infatuation, growing attachment, and deep undying love for Lillie.

Although Max may have heard pieces of Shane's narrative, he never again showed signs of consciousness.

At 7:00 in the morning, Paul came into the room.

"Shane, it's time."

"Lillie expressly asked if she could be with him when ... at the end."

"Of course. Whenever she's ready ..." said Paul.

Maxon Moore heard voices.

"He doesn't feel any pain," a ratchedy female voice said.

"Thank you nurse," a deep male voice replied.

Max thought someone took his hand, but he couldn't feel his fingers being clasped in the tightening grip.

"I never did know what you were thinking." A soft, sweet voice spoke. It belonged to a young woman or girl. Lillie. "Why did you stay so locked up?" she continued. "And I never told you ... afraid you'd laugh at me. I love you. Really, truly ... Oh, Max, what am I gonna do now?"

Max opened his eyes. "Lillie," he whispered.

"Max ..."

He seemed to have been sleeping in a high bed with raised rails on either side. There was an IV stuck in his right

arm and an assortment of monitors plastered to his chest and skull.

“Get up, son,” a voice said. Max felt the left side rail of the bed slide down and looked up to see an arm reaching across him.

“What happened?” The monitor leads fell away magically as the man helped Max sit. Max leaned forward, his head swimming. A steady hand grasped his elbow and assisted him to his feet.

Once standing, Max peered into the face of an elderly gent, wearing a chambray shirt and faded blue jeans. “Time we headed on, Max.”

“How do you know my name? Who are you, anyway?”

“Just helping out, son.”

“I know you! You’re the handyman at the *Sombras*. You fixed up A-1 late last spring.”

“If you say so.”

“I have to go, Lillie,” Max said.

“Please, please, don’t go . . .” she begged.

“Come on now, son. Daylight’s wasting.”

“I love you, Max. Don’t go!”

“I love you, too, Lillie Belle.” The handyman put a hand on Max’s shoulder. “Sorry, gotta . . .”

Max followed the handyman out of the room and down the hall to the elevator, its door standing open.

There were two buttons on the elevator panel. The handyman pressed “Up.”

On the way home from the hospital, Lillie had Rick drop her off at Miss Adeline’s studio.

“I’ve got to help Vi with the arrangements, and you have to keep things running at the shop. It’d be best if you’d just go back to San Antonio.”

“Yeah, I was thinking the same thing. I’ll come for the funeral and drive you back after.”

“You don’t have to, I can . . .”

“I’m coming back,” he said.

On Monday, it rained all day, the result of a tropical storm that had hit Freeport. In spite of the parking lot being a lake and having to put towels under the back door to keep the dressing room from flooding, Lillie spent the entire day at Miss Adeline’s choreographing a tribute to her absent friend.

On Tuesday—in keeping with Max’s wishes—after the 24 hour waiting period required by state law, Violet signed the forms requesting that Max’s body be cremated.

Wednesday began with another two inches of rain, then, late in the morning, the tenants of the *Sombras* and their extended family—including Rick, who had returned as promised—met in the courtyard to wait in the continuing drizzle for the cars from the funeral home to pick them up.

When they arrived at the funeral home, there were already many colleagues from Max’s university days sitting in the pews. The funeral director seated the *Sombras* group in the family section, and the service began.

A piper marched down the aisle playing a pibroch. When he got to the front of the chapel, he stopped beside the table

that held Max's small wooden casket and played *Amazing Grace*.

As the bagpipes droned their final note, Ned stepped up to the lectern.

"Max and I used to sometimes recite poetry. He was especially fond of Wordsworth. To a Butterfly."

In a mellow voice, deep with inflection, Ned began to read.

*I've watched you now a full half-hour,
Self-poised upon that yellow flower;
And, little Butterfly! indeed
I know not if you sleep or feed.*

Stifling a sob, Lillie clutched Violet's hand.

*How motionless!—not frozen seas
More motionless! and then
What joy awaits you, when the breeze
Hath found you out among the trees.
And calls you forth again!*

Lillie felt a blast of energy hit. She looked up to see Shane staring at her from the end of the pew. The minute she caught Shane's eye, he looked away.

Ned closed the book and stepped to one side.

The funeral director escorted a friend of Max's to the other side of the lectern where a microphone and portable sound system were set up.

"This was Max's favorite song," Max's colleague said into the mike, then lifted his 12-string guitar into position and began to sing Lennon/McCartney's *Across the Universe*.

By the end of the last chorus, everyone at the gathering—even Violet—was singing with him.

After the short service, the mourners were invited back to Violet's place for the wake. Violet had ordered some sandwich and vegetable trays from the market and Dr. Paul Brenner acted as bartender.

Lillie had been standing in a fug listening to Mozart's *Requiem* which was playing on the stereo, when she absent-mindedly looked about the room. Rick was over by Paul at the drinks table. Barry was in the corner commiserating with Shane.

"One, two, three, four," she said to herself. She stepped over to Violet's trunk table where they had set the casket. "It's five, Max," she whispered, putting her hand gently on the casket. "My all time high."

It was mid-afternoon and most of the mourners had departed when Lillie called the *Sombras* family together.

"I made a dance for Max. Let's drive over to the studio and I'll show it to you."

While Lillie changed, Shane and Ned set up the folding chairs from the lobby in a single row along the mirrors.

Lillie came out of the dressing room wearing a powder blue camisole and dance skirt, looking every bit the Balanchine dancer.

"Max loved this piece. I thought I'd do something to it for him. It's Shostakovitch's *Romance*." She put a CD in the stereo changer. "Shane, could you ...?"

"Of course," he moved to the sound cabinet.

"It's track number five."

"Okay."

“Wait ’til I get Up Stage Left.”

“Sure.” Shane had a lump in his throat even before the music started.

The solo violin whispered like the wind, then warmed like a blanket, soulful and deep. The melody grew from the first clear notes with a sense of yearning elegance. Lillie began to dance.

She bourréed forward, bringing her arms slowly to Fifth. Still on demi-toe, she held her legs in soussus and opened her chest and arms into a backbend that seemed deeper, somehow, than Louise’s assisted backbend in her *pas de deux* with the Carnival Boy.

As the first theme continued, Lillie took her right leg from *passé* to *développé* behind her and into a long lunge in Fourth, her left arm reaching forward to obscure her face.

Lillie did a perfect double *pirouette dehors* followed by a *pirouette dedans*, then the music rose a half octave and the meltingly lovely melody repeated while she repeated the choreography to the opposite side.

Shane held his breath, frozen in place while he watched. The music and the dance were so beautifully intertwined, he had to swallow hard to keep from sobbing aloud.

A serene expression on her face, Lillie continued the adage with grace and poise through the *denouement*, in which she took thoughtful steps—as if searching for a soul lost in the woods. On the final notes, she looked up toward the heavens, then lowered her face into her hands.

The room was silent when the music stopped.

Shane was the first to reach her after the paralysis left.

“I love you, Lillie. I always will.”

“I love you, too,” she said in a whisper. Later he wondered if he really had heard her utter those words.

Once the funeral party returned to the *Sombras*, Lillie went to gather her things. Shane followed her into the bedroom.

"I don't understand why you're leaving."

"I have to go back. I've got to work."

"Why?"

"Look, Shane ... I have to be a grownup."

"I'll come with you, we can be grownups together."

"No. I have to prove to myself I can manage on my own."

"But I'm here and he's there. Why can't you stay here with me and prove it here?"

"I'm not sure I understand exactly why, myself. But, this is something I have to do."

"Let me drive you home, at least."

"Don't be silly, Rick's already here. He came for the funeral. It makes sense for us to ride back together. Please try to understand ..."

"It's insane. Besides, there's a hurricane."

"When I realized you had both been at the house ... the flowers, the book ... I wanted to jump in the car and race right back. But I've got responsibilities and so do you."

"The only responsibility that matters to me is you. I will be there for you, Lillie ... no matter what ... until we're old and grey."

"I may be grey. You'll always be twenty-something years younger."

"Why should that matter, when two people love each other?"

"We really have to go," Lillie said. "It's starting to rain again."

After Lillie had made her goodbyes to the *Sombras* family, Shane helped Rick carry her luggage down to the street and load up the car in the pelting rain.

Rick had started the engine, and the wipers were going at top speed. Shane was about to close Lillie's door, then opened it wide, instead, leaned in and kissed her. "I'm not giving up."

"We've gotta get going," Rick said. "The highway's flooding."

"Wait 'til tomorrow," Shane said.

"Sorry, kid. The lady wants to get back." Rick revved the motor and Shane finally shut Lillie's door.

The sky opened up as he watched them drive away. Minutes later Greg came down with an umbrella and walked Shane to the shelter of A-1.

"What do I do, now?" Shane stood dripping in the doorway.

"Dry off, change your clothes, and come back upstairs."

Instead of following Greg's advice, Shane took a hot shower, then climbed into bed and lay there missing Lillie.

The rain continued to pour after they got on the road, and the sky remained drizzly, gloomy, and dark even after the worst of the storm had passed. Close to breaking with every grief-stricken thought, Lillie quietly wiped away tears of sorrow and regret while swallowing back her sobs for the interminable ride home.

When Rick pulled into the driveway at the house in Alamo Heights, Lillie grabbed her bags from the backseat. "Don't come in. I need to be alone. I'll give you a call later in

the week, okay?" Then she shut her door and bolted away before Rick could answer.

She hurried up the stairs to her bedroom, tore off all her clothes, and turned on the shower in the bathroom as hot as she could stand it. While the water streamed over her, she wept as if the love of her life had abandoned her. Plummeted by the heavy droplets, she slid down the shower wall, collapsing to the tile in a heap of despair.

She slept fitfully that night, hugging Max's pillow close and mourning the loss of the one person who had, without judgment, loved and comforted her through every previous storm of her teenage through adult life.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Fern Bar

The morning after the funeral, Violet took her cane and made her way down the staircase to the courtyard. When she reached A-1 she tapped on the door with the carved head of her stick.

Shane opened the door in his usual state of undress.

“I need your help with something.”

“What can I do?”

Violet handed Shane a leather bound folder.

“It’s Maxon’s will. Take this to his professor friend at the college. Arnold Henrikson in the science department. He’s named as Maxon’s Executor.”

“Sure, I’ve got class up there in half an hour.”

“Good! And when you get home, you can help me start clearing out A-2. The contractor’s coming tomorrow.”

“Contractor?”

“We’re putting in the elevator.”

“I forgot about that. I’ll come right up when I get back.”

After Marketing Research in the BAM building, Shane made his way over to the science department at its new home on the west side of campus—a stone's throw from the amphitheatre. While Dr. Henrikson was in conference with a student, Shane walked up and down the hall checking out the display cases.

"Is that Shane?" he heard a woman's voice. Shane looked up to see the face of a plump, friendly soul. "I haven't seen you since you were a child . . ." the woman continued. "Don't you look just like your Mom? I'd recognize you anywhere! I'm Ethel Rosenbaum."

A cloud of comfort seemed to encase his mother's colleague and long-time friend. Ethel reached out a hand and patted Shane's shoulder.

"I'm so sorry to hear about Max. He was a fixture on campus before he retired. He will be missed."

"Yep."

"I saw you in the play."

"You're kidding . . ."

"You were marvelous. Such raw talent. Quite impressive. Is that your major?"

"Rachel . . . Mom didn't tell you? I'm in Business Administration."

"Oh, yes. That's right."

A student crossed between Shane and Ethel as he left the adviser's office. Dr. Arnold Henrikson stepped into the doorway.

"May I help you?"

"Violet Cloutier wanted me to bring you this." Shane held the folder out to the physics professor.

"Come on in," Henrikson said, reaching his hand out to shake Shane's. "I'm Arnie. I saw you at the wake."

"Yes, sir."

"Shane," Ethel interrupted. "Could you come by my office when you're through here? I'll take you to happy hour at the fern bar . . ."

"I'm supposed to help Miss Cloutier with something. But I could stop by for a minute on my way home."

"I'm in Room 215 in the Psyche Building."

"Which one's that?"

"It's just past the statue. The second building on your left when you're looking east toward Old Main."

"Sure, okay. I'll be over there in twenty minutes or so."

Shane followed Dr. Henrikson into the office. "Have a seat. This Max's will?" The professor lifted his glasses to his forehead and opened the folder.

"Yes, sir."

"Call me Arnie. So have you known Max a long time?"

"Just since the beginning of the summer term. I moved in over Memorial Day."

"Did you know you're in his will?"

"I am?"

"To Shane Eckland, the automobile I own at the time of my death and my antique mahogany armoire."

"Jesus."

"And who's Edward Gold?"

"Another guy who lives at the *Sombras*. He read the poem at the funeral."

"He gets something, too."

"But . . . why would Max do that?"

"He didn't have any family. Wanted to leave his things to the people who meant the most to him."

"I see."

"You knew he was terminal, right?"

“Yes, but that was cancer. We weren’t prepared for a stroke.”

“The will is quite recent. It looks like he was attempting to tie up loose ends.”

“I did help him re-balance his investments a week or so ago.”

They heard a knock on the office door.

“Office hours, sorry . . . Thanks for bringing this. We’ll get the probate started. The attorney says we can have the hearing in a couple of weeks, then we’ll make distribution of the personal property.”

“Okay. Vi says to let her know if you need anything else.”

“I will, thanks.”

Shane hadn’t recalled meeting Ethel Rosenbaum as a child. However, during the few minutes they talked when he stopped by her office, she revealed herself to be as cuddly and compassionate a woman as his own mother was clinical and cold.

They made a date to meet for happy hour at the fern bar the following afternoon.

When Shane got back to the *Sombras*, Violet seated herself like Cleopatra on her barge and directed while Shane shoved furniture around in the apartment that had once been A-2.

“Bonfire,” Violet would say about items for the junk man. Shane made a pile in the end of the courtyard near A-3. For the furniture that Violet wanted to keep, he attempted to organize it along the walls of the original bedroom and living room, far from the previously framed-out site for the elevator shaft.

When they had finished in A-2, Violet let out a big sigh. “Now we have to make room for the shaft opening between Max’s and my apartments.”

Shane blew out a long breath of air. “Lead on McDuff. Guess I’m all yours.”

“You’re all I’ve got, anyway.”

After classes on Friday, Shane walked down the hill from the Business and Mathematics Building and turned right one block before the downtown street that was home to the *Sombras*. He continued past a vacant building that had formerly housed the city library, then passed the large parking lot of the Baptist church with its impressive stained-glass windows. After the church, he turned left into the back entrance to San Mateo’s favorite fern bar.

The humidity was low in spite of a touch of rain that had coated the grass that morning. The blue sky shone through puffy white clouds, and the wrought iron tables and chairs in the courtyard looked inviting. Shane took a seat on a bench in the reception area to wait.

Ethel Rosenbaum pulled into the parking lot not three minutes after Shane arrived. He saw her walking up the steps and met her at the door. They went out to the courtyard and picked a table near the gurgling fountain.

The two drank Margaritas and ate crispy tortilla chips and creamy queso served with a dollop of guacamole while they talked about nothing and skirted everything.

Shane walked Ethel to her car after he had, surprisingly, spent a pleasant afternoon.

“Give you a lift home?” Ethel asked.

“Naw, I can walk. It’s just a couple blocks over.”

"Let's do this again."

"Okay."

"How 'bout next Tuesday. Meet me at my office after your class lets out?"

"I guess that would be okay. It's the last class before finals, though. I may have to get home to start studying."

"We'll keep it short, then. I just need to ask you a couple things. We can go out for celebratory drinks after finals."

"Sure. See you Tuesday, then."

As he hiked back to the *Sombras*, Shane thought he heard Max's mellifluous voice chatting in his head.

That wasn't so bad.

"What?"

A counseling session with your mom's friend.

"Is that what that was?"

Wasn't it? Max asked.

Santos was leaving as Shane walked in through the gate.

"How's it going?" he asked.

"Okay, Señor Shane, but I still mad at Professor Brother Miguel for making Miss Violeta sick. Now, she won't go back to see him, she won't go to the real doctor, and she still feel bad all the time."

"Max used to be able to talk her into anything ... drink green slime in the morning ..."

"But Señor Max es muerto."

"True."

"Y Miss Lillie está ausente."

"Sí, Santos. Está ausente."

"Maybe *you* talk to Miss Violeta, now."

"I'll see what I can do."

Shane dropped his pack off at A-1, inspected the status of the construction in A-2, and climbed the spiral staircase.

Violet was seated in her usual spot watching the news. She sipped Perrier from a heavy crystal glass.

“What’s that, fizzy water? No cocktails tonight?”

“Max keeps fussing at me in my head. Telling me I need to get the alcohol out of my system before the operation.”

“Operation? Are you having an operation?”

“I don’t know. I’m supposed to go to the doctor on Tuesday ... try to discuss my condition calmly and make a rational decision about the future.”

“Does Santos not know this? Just now, down there, she told me she was worried about you. And asked me would I talk to you.”

“I haven’t told her, yet. I ... Max and I ... just decided I should probably have the colectomy.”

“Wow.”

“If you’re going to have cancer, it’s the best kind.”

“That’s an upbeat way of looking at it. What kind did Max have?”

“The worst kind, poor soul, even though that’s not what got him in the end.”

“Yeah. Hey, Vi, I took a look at the elevator before I came up. They’ve about got the downstairs vestibule and shaft done.”

“That’s good to know. I may need it to get back up here, if I survive the operation.”

“Don’t talk that way,” Shane said. “You’ve got to stay positive ...”

“Easier said than done,” Vi said.

“You want me to fix you some supper, or something, before I go back down?” Shane asked.

“Santos made tortilla soup. Why don’t you stay and join me?”

“Sure, that would be nice. I’ll heat it up and come get you.”

A few minutes later, Shane had set their places, served the soup, and then stood to Violet’s left with a small pitcher of lime juice.

“Say when,” he said and began to pour.

“When.”

He moved around the table and took his seat. “I saw my mother’s friend today.”

“The psychologist?”

“Uh-huh. She seems pretty nice. I might actually be able to talk to her.”

Violet chuckled.

“What’s funny?”

“Max just said, ‘Wouldn’t that be wild?’ ... Shane, I have an idea.”

“What?”

“Let’s make a pact to both work at getting better. We’ll improve ourselves and move on. What do you say? Yes or no?”

“Well ...”

“Here, give me your pinkie ...” Violet held up her pinkie finger and reached her arm across the table.

“Okay. I guess ...” Shane reached toward Violet and linked fingers with her.

“I, Violet Cloutier, vow to no longer be content with living in the past and watching the same boring parade pass by in a never-ending loop.”

“I, Shane Eckland, vow to ... what?”

“... no longer be content ...”

“I vow to no longer be content with living in the past and watching the same boring parade pass by in a never-ending loop. Except . . .”

“Except, what?”

“Why did Lillie go back with Rick? Why did he even come here with her, anyways?”

“He brought her for the play, idiot. Then came back for the funeral.”

“I still don’t understand what she’s doing there.”

“You have to forget about her. I’ve told you this before.”

“I don’t care. I love her anyway. There’s nothing she can do that’ll make me stop.”

“She knows I’m there for her, Shane, if she needs me. But Lillie is always going to be Lillie.”

“Why does anybody have to change?”

“You sound like a ten-year old. If she’d behave one time, I might feel differently.”

“Vi, you can’t just love the Lillie you want her to be. You have to love the Lillie that is.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Honky-Tonk Men

Lillie had been sleeping late in the mornings, then would usually take a dip in the pool. She'd had to work a variety of shifts at the cowboy bar all through the weekend to make up the days she'd taken off for the play and the funeral so soon after getting her new job.

Rick phoned on Tuesday when she was fixing lunch.

"Well, Lil, it had to happen sometime."

"What?"

"There's a contract on the house."

"Oh."

"Closing is the day after Labor Day."

"Gee, that doesn't give me much time."

"Take your time, don't worry about it. You can stay here with me."

"Not a good idea," she replied.

"Don't be silly ..." he said.

"If you'd just stop hanging out at the bar every night, it might be different," Lillie said. "It makes me feel like you're stalk ... like you don't have enough to do."

"I'm lonesome, can I help it?"

"You want a list?" Lillie asked.

"No, no. I know."

She phoned Violet as soon as she hung up from Rick.

"Can I borrow some money, Auntie? Rick really is selling the house. I'm going to have to find a place to stay."

"I didn't want to say anything ..."

"About what?"

"After the executor is appointed, you'll be getting something from Max's estate. Except for a few other gifts, basically you're his sole beneficiary. Can't you wait a couple of weeks?"

"I think they'll want me to move out pretty soon. They've got to do inspections and stuff. Rick said I could stay with him."

"Gracious, girl, isn't there someone else you can impose on? Me, for instance. Come back to San Mateo. You can stay at Max's, if you don't want to stay with me."

"Look, Auntie. I know I'm asking for a loan, here, but I'm working on learning to be independent. I want to get to where I can pay my own way. If I go back, now, I might just become a parasite again. Can you understand?"

"Of course I can, child."

"My girlfriend Brittney all but kicked me out the other day. But, if you gave me a loan, I'm sure if I handed her a wad of cash, she'd reconsider and let me stay with her."

"I'll see what I can do." Violet looked up to see Santos escorting Shane into the room. "I've got to cut this short, Lillie Belle, I have an appointment with Paul."

"What for?"

"They want to put me under the knife next week."

“Oh, Vi . . . can’t you wait until I can come down to help you out?”

“I’ve got to run,” Vi said, and hung up the phone.

Shane met briefly with Ethel on Tuesday, then picked up Violet and took her to her appointment at Paul’s office. He should have studied for his Marketing Research final while he sat in the waiting room. Instead, he concocted the germ of another plan to find Lillie and bring her back.

As soon as he got out of his final Thursday, Shane packed Max’s car and headed for San Antonio.

He had a little more contact information for Lillie this time. The phone number for her girlfriend’s place where she periodically stayed, the address of the kicker bar where she now worked as a waitress, and the number for Rick’s company apartment, though he prayed she hadn’t been staying with her ex.

On the north side of town, Shane drove through the apartment complex to verify neither Rick nor Lillie’s cars were there.

When he arrived at the warehouse district, he located the gold Lexus, and settled in to wait. When it was quittin’ time, he followed Rick out to the loop and down to Alamo Heights.

Rick pulled up in the driveway at the house and let himself in. Shane idled the engine while he listened to news radio a discreet distance down the street. Today there was an *under contract* tag displayed on the corner of the *For Sale* sign.

“Guess it won’t be the aging queen and his boy toy buying the place,” he said to himself. “Oh, well . . .”

Rick returned from the house and started up his car again.

They drove down to the 'Y' at the Austin Highway and Shane waited while Rick ran into the studio. "Her car's not here, asshole."

They headed south toward downtown and then turned left where IH-35 headed back up to the north.

"You're stalking Lillie, and I'm stalking you," Shane sang to himself.

Shane followed Rick to the triangle near the intersection where IH-35 North and Loop 410 joined up. There they turned into the huge parking lot for the Cowboy Dancehall where there was music and dancing every night, occasional arm wrestling tournaments and bull riding events, and where Lillie had a job waiting tables in the bar.

Shane watched Rick as he selected a table furthest from the door, then went to find the men's room. There was a line of payphones in the hallway. He chose the one that looked least gunky from use and slid a quarter into the slot.

"Hello?"

"Brittney?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I'm a friend of Lillie's. Her great aunt said that Lillie had called her from your place and left your number. Anyway, Violet asked me if I'd look in on Lillie for her when I was in town. I'm here tonight ... might I talk to her, please?"

"She's at work tonight."

"At that bar on the east side, the Cowboy Dancehall, right?"

"You're Shane, aren't you?"

“Uh, yeah . . .”

“I’m not sure Lillie wants to see you, Shane.”

“Why would that be, I wonder?”

“Who knows? Anyways, she’ll be on shift for another hour.”

“An hour you say? That’s not too long. Would you like to meet me over there? We could all visit a while, maybe dance . . .”

“Hell, yes! I’ve heard so much about you, I’m damned if I’m going to miss an opportunity like that.”

“That’s super! How will I know you?”

“I’m the sexy one in the ZZ Top tee-shirt and blue cowboy boots. See you in twenty.”

Shane got a beer and stood in the doorway between the bar and the dance hall to look for Lillie in the cavernous establishment. Sure enough, a short waitress in tight blue jeans, cowboy boots, and a crop top seersucker shirt was making the rounds to the customers in the bar.

Wonder what’ll happen when she gets to Rick’s table?

He watched long enough to see that she had noticed Rick in time to enlist another waitress to take care of his table. But she still hadn’t spotted Shane. *All hell might break loose when she does, son*, he heard Max say in his head.

“I know, I know,” Shane mumbled.

The music was great in the dancehall, and Shane had been leaning against the door jamb tapping his foot when he felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned to see the eyes of a gorgeous brunette in a ZZ Top tee-shirt gazing back.

“Buy a lady a drink?” she said.

Shane looked down at her feet. *Yep, blue boots, all right.*

“You must be Brittney. I’m Shane.”

“I’ve heard a lot about you.”

"All good, I hope."

"Better than most."

"Rick's in the bar."

"Shit."

"She knows he's here. She's got someone else taking care of him. She hasn't seen me yet, though."

"That's wild. Cute guy like you ..."

"Maybe she's obliterated me from her memory."

"She's nuts if she has ..."

"Let me get you that drink ..."

"Let's dance first," Brittney said. "I have a feeling you'll be in demand pretty soon."

The band had just started *The Orange Blossom Special*, the quintessential fast song that usually closed down a set. Brittney pulled Shane out to the floor and, in seconds, the couple were swinging like a circus act.

Shane had Brittney in a spin, when out of the corner of his eye, he saw Rick dragging Lillie out to the dance floor.

Unlike most of the world's cowboys, Rick had never been a smooth dancer. And he had some nerve thinking she could take a turn around the floor when she was supposed to be waiting tables in the bar.

"I'm a waitress, not a hostess," Lillie mumbled to her ex.

"Can't a guy dance with a pretty girl, if he wants to?"

Rick held her tight around the waist with both hands and was stepping all over her feet while he tried to find a place in the music to jump in.

"Remember how we used to do it?" she coached. "Put your hands in the dancer's hold first ... and then the feet."

Start with your left and one-two-three, one-two-three, one-two-three, rock-rock. One-two-three, one-two-three, one-two-three, rock-rock.” It wasn’t long before Lillie was leading the bumbling cowboy in a way-too-fast polka around the floor.

After they’d made it once around the huge dance floor—in an attempt to get Rick to stop the foolishness—Lillie whispered, “I’ve got to get back to work.” That’s when she saw Shane and Brittney in a pivot spin.

“He ain’t dancing with you, as long as I’ve got ya’,” Rick said.

Damn! Lillie spoke low, “I see. Well, let’s try to slow it down a little, okay? One, two, three, one-two-three,” and did her best to keep the bastard on his feet so she wouldn’t embarrass herself further.

Thankfully, all eyes in the hall were firmly glued on Shane and Brittney.

Keeping the couple in her peripheral vision while she and Rick continued around the dance floor, Lillie watched Shane twirl her friend one way and then the other. He spun Brittney under his arm and triple-stepped around her. He swung her up in the air in a candle and then sat her in his lap with her legs around his waist.

By the time the song came to an end, Lillie and Rick had stopped dancing and, like most of the others in the crowd, had moved out of the way to give the star couple the floor.

While Brittney held onto his shoulders, Shane swung her to one hip, then around to the other. Then he brought her down to slide on the floor between his legs. As the last bar played, he deftly stepped over her, yanked her up into the air one last time, and caught her in a basket sit.

While the crowd roared, Lillie turned to see Rick stomping into the bar.

"We'll be taking a break until eleven when the next set starts," the band leader said. "In the meantime y'all enjoy the arm wrestling tournament. Anyone can sign up. They'll start the competition in just a few minutes."

When she was sure that her ex was out of sight and earshot, Lillie stepped over to Shane and Brittney.

"What exactly is going on here?" Lillie asked.

"You talk about him all the time," Brittney said to her friend. "When he called tonight looking for you, I just had to meet him. He's a heart throb, all right."

"You shouldn't have come," Lillie said.

"Just wanted to see how you're doing ... " Shane said.

"Well, I'm fine. You can go, now," Lillie replied.

"Vi said you told her you weren't seeing Rick."

"This is a free country. I can't keep him from coming here for a drink."

"But letting him dance with you?"

"I don't want to cause a scene ... "

"You can't protect him from himself. Sooner or later, Rick's going to have to face the truth and move on."

"Hear, hear," Brittney said.

"I can take care of myself," Lillie said.

"My mistake," Shane replied.

"I'm still on the clock. See you back home later, Brittney."

As Lillie returned to the bar, she heard Shane say, "Let me buy you that drink. We can watch the arm wrestling."

"I'll have a Shiner Boch, please."

"Sure thing. Find us a table near the action."

When Shane came back with their beer, the regulation table had been set up at the front of the stage and the first

heat in the tournament was about to start. "You like arm wrestling?" Brittney asked.

"Love it!" Shane said.

Shane and Brittney witnessed a quick succession of losses, as the first winner lost his second match and that winner lost the third.

Rick showed up as a contestant in the fourth matchup.

Shane could see Lillie watching as she stood with her tray in the doorway to the bar.

"Ooh. Ow!" Brittney grimaced as Rick yanked his opponent's arm down to the table. "He's good!"

"Well ... Rick's more brute and less finesse. Arm wrestling is really a game of skill and strategy."

Another cowboy came up to try his luck against Rick.

"Like how?"

"Well ... how high you slide your grip up his hand. What angle you're taking his arm down. The balance of your weight. How you're standing or sitting."

Rick beat his next opponent.

"Wow," Brittney said. "Three down."

"Excuse me just a minute, will you?" Shane said quietly.

He passed by Lillie on his way to the stage. "You off your shift?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm done."

"Come sit with us. We'll see how the match turns out for Rick."

"Maybe I will."

"You want a beer, or something?"

"Better not. It's not like the *Sombras* where you don't have to worry about driving home."

"Ice tea, coke ... anything else?"

"Okay, a coke."

“Sit down with Brittney, I’ll be right back.”

Lillie watched for a moment as Shane made his way for the stage, then she sat by her friend at the table near the front edge of the dance floor.

Almost as soon as Lillie took her seat, a waitress appeared beside her.

“Hey, Lillie. That cutie pie your girlfriend was dancing with sent you a coke.”

“Thanks, Cindie.”

Brittney ducked her head close to Lillie, “Everybody likes Shane.”

“Yeah, except Rick and Shane’s own mother. Oh, my,” Lillie shuddered, as Rick brought down another opponent.

“I’d be proud to call him my son. Or my boyfriend, for that matter.”

“You would be . . .”

“Why are you mad at him, anyway?”

“I’m not mad. I just worry that he’s wasting his time on me.”

“Wasting . . . ?”

“I don’t have a uterus . . .”

“That is the stupidest excuse I’ve ever heard. He loves you, Lillie . . .”

A cry came from the stage that sounded like Rick’s latest opponent had torn a rotator cuff.

The announcer for the arm wrestling tournament stepped up to the mike.

“Rick has five wins. We’ve got a wheelbarrow full of prizes for anyone who can win eight matchups in a row. Come sign up for the next round, we’ll see if Rick takes

the prize or if one of you can beat him and keep that pot growing.”

After a short break, Rick had put two more arms on ice.

“Have we got anyone else who wants to try his arm tonight? We do! What’s your name, son?”

“It’s Shane. Look,” Brittney said, turning Lillie’s gaze toward the stage.

“Not Shane! No!” Lillie turned to her friend. “Rick saw him dance with me in the show. He met him at the funeral. They do *not* get along.”

“Think you can bring down tonight’s champ?” the announcer was asking Shane.

“I know I can,” Shane responded.

“Let’s get the ref back and have quiet in the audience ...”

“I can’t watch,” Lillie groaned. She stood and hurried for the exit.

Brittney soon appeared by Lillie’s side. “Get your butt in there,” she said. She took Lillie by the arm and dragged her back to her seat.

The match hadn’t started yet. Shane appeared to be having a little chat with his opponent. He leaned in close and spoke in Rick’s ear. Rick glared at him and shook him away. Shane crossed his arms and looked Rick in the eye. Rick frowned, then nodded. Shane stuck his hand out.

“Rick’s going to kill him!” Lillie cried.

“They’re only shaking hands,” Brittney said. “They’ve made some kind of agreement.”

Shane had spotted Lillie and Brittney out of the corner of his eye. He hoped Lillie wouldn’t hate him after tonight.

But, I've gotta do something, he assured himself. And I'm not giving up without a fight.

After the handshake, Rick put his right elbow on the red pad and raised his forearm. Shane placed his elbow on the blue pad and inched his arm closer, giving himself a slight height advantage for added leverage.

With his weight somewhat forward, Shane angled his right hip toward the table, and, keeping his wrist level, he grabbed hold of Rick high on the hand.

The referee moved to the side of the table.

"Straight up, straight up," the ref said, and clasped both his hands around the men's joined fists. "Three, two, one, go!"

Shane knew he'd have to make a quick attack, but Rick was quicker, and he suddenly found his right arm being pressed sideways. Though Shane groaned with effort, his trick elbow held, just like it always did.

For seconds after Rick's initial pull—as if the two competitors had been frozen in time—there was no movement from either man.

In slow motion, Shane brought his arm to vertical. Then he hooked his wrist over Rick's hand and pushed down, his clawed hand applying pressure to Rick's wrist while simultaneously twisting Rick's palm toward the sky. Shane continued to roll his grip over the top of Rick's hand, at the same time shifting the bulk of his weight onto his left foot. Now it was Rick's turn to groan.

Shane grabbed the peg with his off hand and pulled his right elbow back along the pad, dragging Rick's arm with him at an angle toward his left. This opened up Rick's arm and put such a force on his elbow and biceps that Shane

could feel the asshole's muscles stretch and the tendons strain.

With one more grunt of effort, Shane smashed Rick's hand to the table with a thwack, rotating Rick's elbow away from the joint capsule and forcing the forearm to extend past its limit.

While Rick screamed in pain, the crowd erupted in cheers.

They were clearing the stage for the band's next set when Shane came out of the kitchen.

He waved at Lillie and Brittney when he caught their eyes.

"What's he got?" Lillie asked, turning her gaze away.

"A zip-lock bag full of ice, wrapped in a tea towel."

"What's he doing with it?"

"He gave it to a waiter, who's taking it over to Rick."

"Now what's he doing?" Lillie asked.

"He's right here," Shane said, moving into the women's circle of space. "EMS is on the way to take Rick to the hospital."

"You bastard," Lillie said.

"Well, I'm sure Rick and I have both been called worse," Shane said.

"What did you do to him?" Brittney asked.

"Just gave him a little taste of his own medicine."

"What do you mean?" It was Lillie again.

"He's been bullying you and stalking you. I told him it had to stop."

"And how do you propose to manage that?"

"I already did. I arm wrestled him for you. I won," Shane said.

"What?" Lillie said.

"You won Lillie in an arm wrestling match?" Brittney asked.

"I did. And now you have a quasi-legal restraining order against him. Rick's not to call you or dance with you or come within ten feet of you uninvited. And if I see him bothering you, I'll break his other arm."

"You broke his arm?" Brittney asked.

"You won me, did you?" Lillie asked.

"I did."

"I'm not a piece of meat, Shane."

"No, of course you're not."

"I don't belong to you, or anybody."

"That's right. No one—not Rick, not me—is going to bother you any more. You're free."

Shane had started to leave, but turned around and walked back over to Lillie.

"Vi's scheduled for surgery next week."

"I know that, asshole. You think she doesn't call me?" Lillie replied.

"Sorry, I just wanted to be sure," Shane said.

Shane didn't feel like taking any more guff from his lady love, so he didn't hang around to hear what the two women, or anyone else, had to say about his victory over oppression. He strolled through the parking lot under the glow of the full moon and hopped into Max's car. There was one more job to do before he left town.

Shane re-traced his earlier route back to the house in Alamo Heights. He pulled deep into the driveway and slipped through the gate into the backyard. On the other side of the swimming pool, he stepped carefully through the flower bed to the window at the corner of the party room, slid open the sash, and climbed into the house.

Inside the party room, Shane pulled the screen into its groove and closed the window, this time fastening the lock. He grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge, took a pit stop in the entry bathroom, and walked down the hall to the front sitting room where he flicked on the light switch.

“I didn’t exactly win *you* in the arm wrestling match,” he said. “But, I’ve decided to take you with me.”

He wrapped his hands around the frame and lifted the Windberg off the wall.

Shane carried his booty out the front and locked the door behind him.

Chapter Thirty

Yin and Yang

On a Tuesday afternoon, two weeks after his trip to San Antonio, Shane was finishing up his third session with Ethel Rosenbaum.

"I know she's your friend, but she's a bully," he said.

"Uh-huh," was Ethel's non-committal reply.

"I can't stand the constant harassment. Neither could Scotty ... obviously."

"Uh-huh."

"And strings attached to every nickle from Grandpa. Who does she think she's helping, anyways?"

"That's tough."

Shane's gaze fell on the wall clock and he jumped to his feet. "Oh, sorry, I've got to run. I have to pick up Vi from her followup."

"She seems to have sailed through the surgery ..."

"It's amazing. They say she may not even have to have radiation or chemo. Well, I've got to go."

"Good work today," Ethel said when she showed him to the door.

"Thanks."

"There's really nothing wrong with you. You just need that exterior viewpoint to help sort out some of the confusions."

"Max and Scotty talking to me in my head is some exterior viewpoint."

"Whatever works ..."

"Sure. So ... next Tuesday?"

"I'll be here," Ethel said.

Shane fetched Violet's car from the handicapped parking lot on campus and drove to the Cancer Center across from the hospital.

Once Violet was comfortably strapped into the back seat, Shane chauffeured her home by way of the scenic route along the river.

"The water's beautiful today, Vi. Can you see that blue heron?"

"Let's stop and sit on the riverbank ..."

"Yes, ma'am ..."

Fifteen minutes later they were lounging on a blanket watching the heron fishing for his dinner while a couple of late-August tubers floated by.

Shane sighed and lay back on the blanket. "Huuuuuuuhh-hhhh!"

"What? Something wrong?"

"I'm just not sure how much more self improvement I can take. It has done me some good, I'll grant you that, but ..."

"Now, that's not what I want to hear ..."

"Aw, gee, Vi. Give a guy a break ..."

"Come on, now. We made a pact. Besides, I've got bigger plans for us."

“Like what.”

“I talked to Max’s friend today. The probate’s been entered. We’ve got some personal property to distribute.”

“Good timing, that. Ned leaves on Thursday ...”

The mist from the river mixed with a low fog the morning Gail and Greg came to say goodbye to Ned. The comrades stood in a little cluster just outside the *Sombras*.

Ned leaned against the gate and breathed in a lungful of heavy air. “I don’t know if I want to go to Missouri after all.” He sighed, thunking his head back against the rail.

“Sounds like a pretty good offer, though,” Greg said.

“You always said you wanted to teach English lit at a prep school,” Gail said.

“But in Ladue—where the hell is that—Missouri?”

“You applied there, didn’t you?”

“Well, yeah, but ...”

“He’s going to miss us, Gail ...”

“We’ll miss you, too, silly,” Gail said, giving her ex a bear hug.

“Thanks for everything. For putting up with me ...” Ned said. “I was a crummy boyfriend, I know ...”

“Things happen for a reason, Ned.” Gail reached her hand out to Greg.

“Best of luck, fella. We’ve got to run, Gail. I need to get my file and be back at the courthouse by 9:00.”

“Let us know when you get there. We can email now.” Gail said.

“Do they have email in Missouri?” Ned asked.

“Silly, of course.”

“You can get one of your sixth grade students to set you up,” Greg said.

Shane, who had been helping Violet organize Max’s things, came out of B-3 and hung his torso over the balcony rail.

“Ned, now!”

“Just a sec,” Ned called back to him.

“We’d better go,” Greg said. He held up his hand and yelled into the courtyard, “Later, Shane!”

“We’ll see you,” Shane called.

“Anytime you need legal counsel!”

“You bet!”

Ned re-entered the courtyard and closed the gate.

“Time is money, Ned,” Shane called down.

“Be right up!” Ned said, as he headed for the stairs.

“Use the elevator, you moron.”

“Oh, yeah. I forgot,” Ned said and moved to the new entrance that had been constructed for the old apartment A-2. An alcove at the front of the apartment housed the elevator shaft, with a doorway on either side.

One entrance to the remodeled A-2 led to what used to be the kitchen and bedroom—now a laundry room housing two commercial washers and dryers, a long, low table, ironing board, and hanging racks, and a storage room for furniture and other miscellaneous items. The former bathroom had been enlarged to include changing rooms and a walk-in shower.

On the other side of the elevator was a workout room with a rowing machine, an inversion table, a weight bench, a stepper/trainer, and a television with VHS player mounted on the wall.

"I picked the wrong time to move . . ." Ned mumbled. He pushed the button and waited for the elevator to descend.

Shane met Ned where the elevator opened onto the balcony.

"Nice, huh?" Shane said.

"Very cool," Ned replied.

"So, how much time before you have to meet the bus?"

"I'm yours for the morning."

"Let's get to work then."

The two spent the rest of the morning hauling boxes of clothing, dishes, linens, and cookware down in the elevator, and stacking them in the courtyard.

"Santos said someone from St. Vincent de Paul will pick these up later."

After one trip back up in the elevator, Shane consulted a copy of Max's will. "We've got to go through the books and find Max's *Wordsworth* he wanted to go to you. And it says here, 'and my first edition of *Tale of Two Cities*.'"

"I think I know where the *Wordsworth* is," Ned wandered into Max's office. "It's what I read from at the funeral. I put it on the desk when we got back."

"But, it's supposed to be the *Poems, In Two Volumes*. Let me help you find the other one," Shane said, "... and the Dickens."

While they searched for the additional books to go to Ned, the two stacked and boxed Max's other books for their new home at the Kyle Correctional Center.

Shane's attention fell on an old-fashioned looking book with the illustration of a boy sitting on a rock playing a flute, while a crocodile and mermaids swam below. "Peter and

Wendy,” Shane murmured. He picked up the volume and flipped it open.

“To Hook from Pan. Arrgh,” was inscribed in an adolescent hand on the title page. A photograph fell out of the book—a young Lillie dressed in a Peter Pan costume for Halloween or a school play.

“Whoa!” Ned exclaimed. “I found it. *A Tale of Two Cities*, ‘London, 1859’. It really is a first edition.”

“Let’s see,” said Shane, holding the J.M. Barrie classic behind his back as he sidled up to look over Ned’s shoulder.

“It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known,” Ned quoted.

“Quite a treasure,” Shane said. *Not like the treasure I’ve found, though*, he thought.

“Suddenly, I feel important. Like I’m going to be somebody,” Ned said.

Shane had moved through the hall to the doorway of Max’s bedroom. “There’s supposed to be an estate sale in a couple of weeks. Lillie gets all the proceeds ... all the residue,” Shane said. “Except this,” he continued. “Max gave this to me.” He gazed at a mahogany armoire that rested against the wall on the far side of the bedroom.

“Good thing we’ve got the elevator,” Ned said when he saw the armoire. He turned and hustled back to the staging area where Shane had parked the hand truck.

While he waited for Ned, Shane hid *Peter and Wendy* in the bottom drawer.

Even with the elevator and the hand truck, it was a major effort to move the massive armoire down to the ground level and across the courtyard to the threshold of A-1.

“Where do you want it?”

“In the bedroom . . .”

“How ’bout the dining room, instead?”

“The bedroom, Ned . . .”

“Okay, okay. But it’s a heavy sucker.”

With Shane guiding the trolley, Ned followed him down the hall. When they reached the bedroom, Shane crossed the room and tapped the wall that ran parallel to the street. “It’s wood, so it would probably be best placed here along this wall.”

After they had dragged the armoire into the room and set it down where Shane had indicated, Ned asked, “Why here particularly?”

“For the feng shui. Wood, plants, paper have their qi in the east.”

“That’s not east,” Ned said. “East is there.” He walked to the side of the room that fronted along the courtyard. “On this side of the outdoor storage closet and the kitchen,” he said, patting the wall.

“It can’t be. I checked all this with a compass weeks ago.”

“I’m telling you . . . I don’t know a lot about science, but I know where the sun comes up.”

“Fuck me,” Shane said. “No wonder the dragons were unhappy. I screwed up all my calculations. I’ll have to do it all over again.”

“I’d help you, but I’ve got to get to the bus station pronto.”

“Right, of course.”

The armoire wasn’t going anywhere, but it was time to load Max’s car, head upstairs for a quick goodbye to Violet, and drive Ned across town to the bus depot.

The two waited in uncharacteristic silence until Ned’s turn to board. Before stepping up onto the coach, Ned took

in one last sweeping view of San Mateo. “Guess I’m off, then.”

“Stay in touch, man.”

“Be seeing you.”

Shane was all alone. Except for the old lady who lived upstairs and the dragons waiting in A-1.

The feng shui had been off since he’d set the place up after Lillie moved in. No wonder his life had crumbled around him. He spent the evening realigning the Wu Xing of the living room from Wood to Fire.

But when he went into the bedroom to call it a night, instead of tending to the armoire—still firmly lodged along the wrong wall—Shane pulled Peter Pan out of his hiding place and began to read the story of the Darling children, their nursemaid Nana, and the strange boy who sprinkled fairy dust on them and flew with them to Neverland.

After Shane woke Friday morning, he started refiguring the feng shui calculations for the rest of the apartment. The kitchen and the former dining room—reincarnated as a study—were a piece of cake. But when he took his compass to the bedroom, he found chaos incarnate.

“I don’t know why I thought the apartment was facing north, when that’s clearly east over there . . .” he said. He yanked on the bedframe briefly, then thought better of it. “We’re not under a beam. We’re not looking into the bathroom. The bed’s finally off the floor. We’re leaving it there.”

In spite of allowing the bed to remain where he and Lillie had originally set it up, Shane somehow couldn’t justify leaving the armoire on the south wall. He would just have

to figure some way to move it to the real east wall. If not today, then one day soon. “Maybe George can help me,” he said to himself, immediately cheered.

Between last night—when he had taken *Peter Pan* out—and this morning, the bottom drawer of the armoire had somehow got stuck. Shane yanked on it, rubbed the edges with graphite, and banged on the floor of the armoire with a rubber hammer.

He’d worked up a sweat and his temples were pounding from the effort when he hollered, “Fuck it, just fuck it,” and flopped back onto the floor.

Time for some right brain expansion, son. Shane leaned against the bed frame, inhaled a deep breath, exhaled, and then performed the exercise just as he had coached Lillie so many weeks ago.

He closed his eyes. Then he brought his phantom hands up to his head and used them to pull apart the two sides of his brain. He asked the right brain to expand until it pressed against the inside of the skull. Then he allowed the right brain to lift out of the skull where it floated quietly above his head.

The magic of the exercise had always worked for Shane. Within seconds, the agitation calmed and he could once more return to the task of opening the drawer that had unnecessarily frustrated him.

Shane took hold of the brass handles, exhaled quietly, and the drawer slid out without a fight. He lifted it out of the cabinet. “Things are looking up,” he said aloud.

When he bent down to determine what had caused the drawer to stick, he thought he saw the outline of a rectangle

cut into the base of the chest, just under the spot where the drawer sat.

“What is that?”

Shane felt around the rectangle. There was a definite groove, as if the rectangle had been sawed out and then replaced. He traced the edge again, this time pressing each corner. When he came back to the front of the cut edge, he used both thumbs to push down along the front. The rectangle popped open revealing itself to be the lid to a box that had been built into the armoire—perhaps at the time of its original construction 200 years ago—to provide a hiding place for cash and valuable documents.

Shane peered into the hidey-hole. “There’s something in there, all right.” He put his hand in and pulled out an envelope.

For Shane Eckland, his eyes only said the writing on the envelope.

Shane’s pulse began to race. His hands were shaking when he pried open the flap of the envelope and slid out the thin sheet of parchment.

*We are all made of stardust. What more do we
need to know to understand the meaning or the
why? We’re all a part of this vast ocean of gas.
It’s time I took my stardust on a spin around the
universe. I’m no psychic, and I’m sure not a god,
but just like a kid on a carousel, I think I’ll enjoy
the ride!*

*Movin’ on,
— Max*

Shane refolded the parchment, then pulled out his wallet, removed Scotty's note, and slid both into the envelope. He put the envelope back into its hiding place and snapped the box lid shut.

Too exhausted to climb into bed, Shane curled up on the floor and closed his eyes.

He woke to the ringing of a phone. His phone. The new phone he'd had installed the week Violet was in the hospital for her surgery. Shane skated into the hall and picked up the receiver.

"Yes, hello?"

"Meet me for happy hour at the fern bar?" Ethel Rosenbaum asked.

"Oh, gee, I don't know ..."

"Feeling a little ennui today?"

"I guess. I screwed up the feng shui here. It's depressing. I've been recalculating and rearranging stuff all day."

Shane sat on the floor next to the telephone table and leaned against the wall. "Kind of been missing Lillie, too, I guess."

Shane gazed into the living room ruminating over the mess he'd created.

"You don't have to love her, you know. You don't have to forgive her," Ethel said. "Who you have to love is yourself. Who you have to forgive is yourself."

"She's bound to come back, isn't she? I mean Max left her his estate. She's set. She won't need anybody to take care of her, now."

"What goes up must come down, right?"

"Except in the absence of sufficient gravity ..."

"You are a celestial body, a star. You have a way of pulling people into your orbit."

"That's a nice thing to say . . ."

"It's true. Well, the Margaritas are calling. I'm going to the fern bar, even if no one will come with me."

"I'll join you next time, Ethel. Thanks for calling."

"Bye, now."

A shadow fell across the spot on the floor where Shane's gaze had been fixed during the phone call. When he looked up, Lillie was standing in the doorway.

"Shane . . ." said Lillie.

"What are you doing here?" Shane asked, but didn't wait for a reply. "I got a phone. I was going to call you today."

"I guess you won't need to, now."

"I've got a box of letters for you." He went into the study and came back with a shoebox.

"Oh, my," Lillie said. She carried the box back into the study, where she sat at the desk and began to thumb through the two dozen envelopes inside.

"What are you doing here?" Shane asked again.

"It appears that besides being a free woman—thanks to you—I'm also a woman of means—thanks to Max."

"I see."

"I wondered if you would be my . . . if you'd let me take care of you and love you forever. If it's not too late for us to . . . to . . ."

A smile lit Shane's face, bigger than Christmas. "It's never too late." Shane picked her up and carried her into the living room.

He sat down on the sofa with Lillie in his lap and ran his fingers through the shaggy curls that had been growing since she left town. He nuzzled his face into her neck. She

snuggled into him as he placed his lips over hers. He pressed himself close enough to feel her heartbeat through the fabric of her tee-shirt, and kissed his lady love until all memory of the past six weeks had vanished.

"That's better," Shane said when they eventually came up for air. Lillie sat back against the couch and he curled an arm around her shoulders.

"It's different," Lillie said looking about the living room. There were dozens of prop stars from the play suspended like constellations just above their heads. "I like what you've done in here."

Her gaze fixed upon an object on the wall directly across from the couch. "And I like that painting," she said.

"Actually, it's a print on canvas."

Epilogue

It was evening when Shane and Lillie climbed the steps to B-1 and rang the bell. Santos squealed when she opened the door and ran into the hall. “Miss Violeta! Miss Violeta! Miss Lillie is home. She come home to us!”

Violet was standing when they entered the living room, a smile on her face, her eyes bright.

“Lillie Belle,” she said. “I knew you’d come back to us.”

The reunion had hardly got off its feet before Violet said, “There’s something I need to do. Let’s go to the river.”

Neither Shane nor Lillie knew what Violet had in mind, but, at this stage in the game, both would do anything in their power to grant Violet’s request. They took the matron of the *Sombras* down in the elevator and drove her to the river.

Although the sun had begun to dip below the horizon, it would be another hour until darkness fell. Violet took Lillie’s hand and then reached for Shane’s. “There’s an ulterior motive for this gathering,” she said. “I got the idea when we came here the other day, when Shane and I saw the blue heron.”

“Tell us, then,” Lillie said. “What’s your idea?”

"Shane, would you bring me the box out of the trunk, please?"

"Sure," Shane said. "Be right back."

In a few minutes Shane returned carrying Max's casket.

"I assume you meant this," he said.

"I did."

"We can't put Max in the river, Vi. The protect-the-river people will be all over us," Shane said.

"I know that," Violet said. "But we could put him in a quiet place somewhere along the river bank, where he can be one with the universe."

Shane walked upriver a short distance to scout out an overgrown area between the college park and their blanket on the grass. "I think I found a spot," he said when he got back to the women. "It's thick as a jungle . . . but . . ."

"But, what?" Violet asked.

"I still don't think we should put him here."

"I agree," Lillie said.

"Where, then?" Violet asked. "I don't think he'll be happy sitting on the mantle in B-1. He always said we're made from stardust from the beginning of the universe. We need to let him back out."

"You have a point," Shane said. "What do you think, Lillie?"

"I know a better place," Lillie said.

"Where?" Violet and Shane said at the same time.

"The *Sombras*, where else?"

"But it's so cloistered in the courtyard. Do you think Max could make it out of there?" Violet said. "We're not expecting another Big Bang anytime soon to give him a push."

“Actually,” Shane said, “I think he’d be very happy starting off from the *Sombras*. For one thing, we’ll all get to spend a little more time with him before he leaves.”

Back at the *Sombras*, Violet sat beside the fountain while Shane and Lillie scattered Max’s ashes in the flowerbeds and around the trees that encircled the courtyard.

After they had completed their task, the three held hands in the fading light. “We should each say something,” Vi said. “I guess I’ll go first. Farewell, dear friend. Until we meet another time, across the universe . . . Shane?”

“Well, Max,” Shane said, “what’s next? Please send periodic reports . . . Lillie?”

“I read *Romeo and Juliet* in high school, remember, Max?” Lillie said.

*Give me my Romeo: and when he shall die,
Take him and cut him out in little stars,
And he will make the face of heaven so fine,
That all the world will be in love with night,
And pay no worship to the garish sun.*

The blue butterfly chose that moment to flutter around the three, its iridescence lighting the courtyard.

“He can’t be the same butterfly we saw around here earlier in the summer,” Lillie said.

“*She* is the same butterfly,” Shane replied, “and it seems she has adopted us.”

“She? How could you possibly know it’s a she?” Violet asked.

“Come look,” Shane said. He led the women to the back corner of the garden opposite the spiral staircase and pulled some branches apart.

"I put her supper here, sometimes. See that bit of kiwi? Now, can you see that trashy plant in the back ... that locoweed? When we were spreading Max's ashes just now, I found some eggs stuck under the leaves. She knows a good place to raise a family when she sees one."

"Well, I'll be," Vi said.

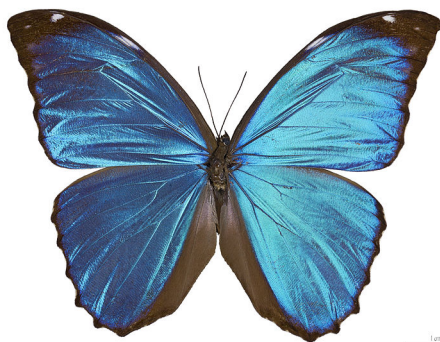
"She couldn't get back to Mexico. But she likes it here at the *Sombras*. And she likes us. You've seen how she follows us around, rides the bus to pick up Santos ... We're her family now," Shane said. "We'll feed and protect her and help raise her babies."

"If she's in the family, shouldn't she have a name?" Lillie asked.

"She's already got a name, Peter Pan," Shane said. "It's Tinker Bell."

"If I'm Pan and she's Tink," Lillie asked, "who are you ...? Tootles? Nibs?"

"My full name is Slightly Soiled," Shane said. "It was written on the tag pinned to my shirt when I came to Neverland. But you can call me Slightly."



— 140



the author in a former life

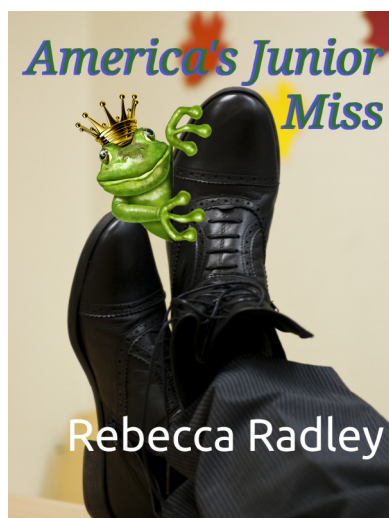
Rebecca Radley has been writing since she began publishing a family newspaper in the third grade. She currently lives in central Texas, writing books and investigating the nature of the universe, while occasionally dancing with her shadow.

Other books by Rebecca Radley:

- *America's Junior Miss*
<http://rebeccaradley.com/blog/post/miss>
- *Tree People*
<http://rebeccaradley.com/blog/post/tree>

- *Vienna Bonbons*
<http://rebeccaradley.com/blog/post/bon>
- *Randie's Guide to Sex, Love, and Holidays*
<http://rebeccaradley.com/blog/post/holidays>

About America's Junior Miss



Magic and myth, gods and heroes, are the substance of Georgette's practice in clinical psychology. When she can't escape her cave of depression following the suicide of a

patient, who better to come to the rescue than her teenage son, Emile? After all, the high school junior has acquired a few superpowers of his own from his exposure via Wolfmom to Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell's world of dreams. But his mother's in such a bad place, how can he help her without meddling in her business, invading her space, or getting his head bit off?

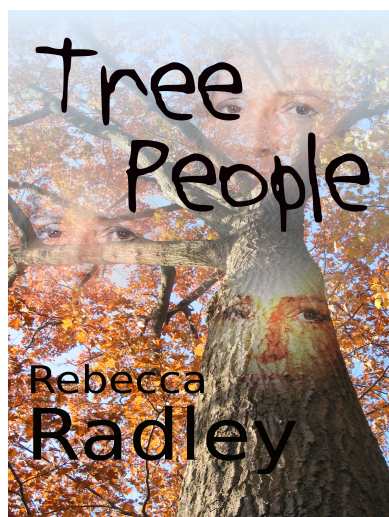
Emile's crazy scheme starts innocently enough but he still hasn't seen any results. If playing women's athletics and dressing up like Cindy Brady hasn't managed to get Georgette's attention, what more can the boy do to help her out of her cave? Perhaps compete for the Young Miss title?

Angela's been wondering "What would Katniss do?" Of course, Angela would do just about anything to get her classmate Anthony's attention. Even though she'd rather eat Twinkies and play the piano, maybe if she works out, sheds a few pounds, and enters the local Young Miss Pageant, Anthony will drop his hippie girlfriend and finally ask her out.

Follow our young hero and heroine in this modern fairy tale as they journey from their comfort zones to the land of the Young Miss pageant.

<http://rebeccaradley.com/blog/post/miss>

About Tree People



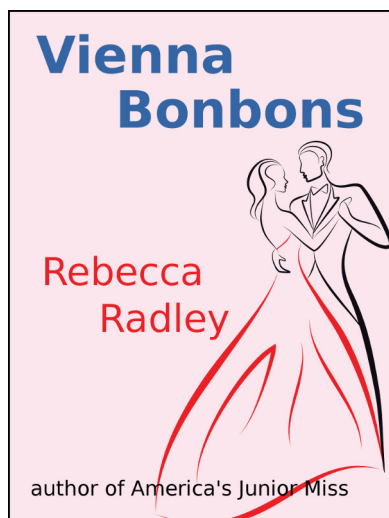
Eugenia is happily complacent in her structured life until the day she discovers 5-year old Spooner playing in her childhood tree house. She chases the boy away with dire warnings, but that's not enough to keep Spooner from bringing his homeless family back to the tree house to spend the night.

Although Eugenia's wishful suitor, Stan, chides her for her cold heart after she sends the Tree People packing, Stan's own rigid beliefs are tested when his son comes home for spring break with a pregnant girlfriend.

As the Blizzard of the Century threatens the region, Eugenia and Stan grapple with their right wing attitudes when they collide at a very personal level with the problems of real people.

<http://rebeccaradley.com/blog/post/tree>

About Vienna Bonbons



Chocolate may not cure this broken heart.

Apprentice chocolatier, Josef Müller, falls in love at first sight with the enchanting Sofie Hansen. He determines to win her love by crafting the most delightful, delectable bonbons the world has ever seen. The youth is certain that his bonbons are so full of magic, if Sofie bites into one, she'll

be his forever. But when the young woman receives the magical bonbons—delivered by her unidentified admirer—she finds them too beautiful to eat.

This bittersweet story of enduring friendship, hardships suffered, and love lost and found plays out against the backdrop of Vienna during the reign of the Emperor Franz Josef I, the Empress Sisi, and the Waltz King Johann Strauss, Jr.

<http://rebeccaradley.com/blog/post/bon>

Glossary of French Ballet Terms

Adage

A series of slow and graceful movements.

Arabesque

A “big pose” with the leg in a 90-degree or higher extension to the back.

Bourrée

An abbreviation for pas de bourrée couru en cinquième. Running in fifth position on the pointes or demi-pointes with the front foot crossed well over so that it hides the back foot.

Demi-toe, demi-pointes, sur les

On the half pointes (standing high on the balls of the feet).

Denouement

The final part of a book, play, movie, or dance.

Développé

A movement in which the working leg is drawn up and slowly extended to an open position in the air.

Développé arabesque in penché

A high extension to the back in which the body leans forward with the head low and the foot of the raised leg at the highest point.

Fondu

The lowering of the body made by bending the knee of the supporting leg.

Fouetté

A whipping movement of the raised foot or leg as it passes in front of or behind the supporting leg.

Glissade

A traveling step executed by gliding the working foot along the floor in one direction, the other foot closing to it.

Grand battement

An exercise in which the working leg is raised from the hip into the air and brought down again, while keeping both knees straight. The function of grands battements is to loosen the hip joints and work the turn out of the legs from the hips.

Grand jeté

A large leap preceded by running steps which give the necessary push-off to throw the dancer into the air.

Pas de deux

Dance for two.

Pas de trois

Dance for three.

Passé

An auxiliary movement in which the foot of the working leg passes the knee of the supporting leg from one position to another.

Penché

Leaning, inclining.

Piqué

Pricked, pricking. Stepping directly onto the pointe or demi-pointe of the working foot.

Piqué arabesque

Stepping onto the pointe or demi-pointe in arabesque.

Pirouette dedans

A complete turn of the body on one foot turning inward.

Pirouette dehors

A complete turn of the body on one foot turning outward.

Plié, plié exercise

To bend. The first exercise at the Barre that bends the knees to render the joints and muscles soft and pliable and the tendons flexible and elastic, while developing a sense of balance.

Rond de jambe

A circular movement of the leg from front to back or back to front.

Sauté

Jumped, jumping.

Sissone

A jump into the air taking off on two feet and finishing on one foot.

Sissone ouverte

A jump from demi-plie on both feet and finishing on one foot while holding the other leg raised in the air on landing.

Soussus

A relevé in fifth position with the legs held tightly together.

Soutenu turn

A swivel turn where the back leg switches to the front as the dancer makes a complete turn on the toes.

Tendu

An exercise at the Barre that stretches the leg and foot as the foot slides along the floor to an extended position front, side, or back.

Tour jeté

A large jump in which the legs pass each other as the body turns to face the direction from which the jump originated.