

Red in Wonderland

A Red McKenna Novel

C.G. Masi

WARNING:

This novel contains explicit descriptions of sexual encounters.

Certain moral authorities have determined that reading such material may prompt some susceptible individuals to behaviors that are entirely too much fun for their own good. If reading such material disturbs you, the author recommends you look for alternative reading material in the Children's Books section of this store. He suggests particularly the Winnie the Pooh stories by A. A. Milne. After all, Dr. Seuss can get a little rough!

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For Bonnie, and gorgeous redheads, everywhere

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“AAAAUUUUGGGH!” she screamed, beating her fists on top of the car’s fender, but not too hard. As frustrated as she felt, this was still her beloved pink 1965 Shelby Mustang convertible she was beating on. Not only did she not want to take a chance on denting the fender, but she didn’t want to take a chance on breaking her wrist, either. One hard crack with her even-more-beloved wrist on that little signature knife-shaped ridge the Ford designers had molded into the fender’s outside edge, and she wouldn’t be playing tennis for a long, long time.

Yet, this had been a bad day, on top of a bad week, capping off what seemed an impossibly bad life since her father disappeared ten years ago. Having her pony-car’s engine burst into clouds of white smoke to the staccato accompaniment of loud rapping noises had just been the cherry on top of that evil cake.

“Life shouldn’t be this hard,” she thought. All she really wanted was what every woman wanted, at least what she knew her mother had always wanted: a home, a family, kids to bring up, and a husband she loved and respected to grow old with. Was that too much to ask?

What was wrong with her? She was smart. She had the grades in a top university to prove that, at least. People said she was pretty. She *was* awfully tall – taller than any woman she’d ever met, including her mother, who wasn’t exactly short – but there were plenty of guys taller than she, and a lot who didn’t seem to mind tall girls. She was athletic, but what was wrong with that?

She liked guys. She liked guys a lot! Especially, she liked the big, competent ones who, like her father, always seemed to know what to do, and met every situation with humor because they knew everything would turn out alright. Ever since she could remember, she’d felt a little something in the pit of her stomach whenever she was around them.

Because she liked guys, she tried to make herself attractive to them, not like a lot of the girls she knew, who purposely tried to look plain in an effort to make people respect them for their minds. “Judith,” her mother had

said, “if you were a really great guy, and you had to choose between a smart, homely girl, or a smart, beautiful girl, who would you choose? You can be the smart, beautiful girl, so don’t be stupid!”

So, why couldn’t she find one of those great guys for herself? Her mother had. Why couldn’t she? True, her father been taken away from her mother when he was needed the most, but at least she’d found him, and had him for a while.

Judith had been devoted to her father. When he was home, which wasn’t often, they’d spent days together hiking the Appalachian Mountains near their home in Maryland. He was her guide to the wonders of the natural world, and science in general. He was her favorite playmate, most inspiring teacher, and her idol.

Even when he was away, she never felt separated from her father. She still explored the same hillsides. She read the same books. She dreamed the same dreams. Whenever she discovered a new glade, or saw a brook she’d never seen before, she would think, “I can show this to Daddy when he gets back.”

Judith couldn’t believe he’d abandoned them. Why’d he disappear? There was nothing in her memory that could explain it. She just *had* to find him to find out why. Maybe then she could figure out what was wrong with her.

James McKenna had always been a maverick. As a geologist, he was known for leading his employers to fabulously rich deposits of oil, gas, and minerals. He was also known for ideas that more conventional geologists found just a little crack-brained. The fact that he was right more often than not just made the arguments more heated. His fine Irish temper didn’t exactly smooth things over, either.

Consequently, when he wasn’t off pointing drilling rigs at sand dunes in Saudi Arabia, or mapping Tarzan’s escarpment in sub-Saharan Africa, he was wandering the hills alone trying to prove that some odd rock pinnacle stood sentinel over amazing mineral wealth, despite what his rivals said. As time went on, these expeditions grew more frequent, and stretched from weeks-long into months, and even years. Finally, when trying to find an undiscovered mother lode in Nevada, he simply never came back.

Things then became more difficult for Judith and her mother. After her father's disappearance, money was harder to come by. There was no insurance because he wasn't legally dead, just not around. When their savings began to run out, her mother worked menial jobs full time during the day, and took classes at night to build a career. That left Judith on her own more than ever. The little girl doing chores, playing outdoors, and reading books grew into a young woman running a household, excelling in sports, and earning top grades.

Growing into a six-foot-three-inch redhead with a crack athlete's body, an aptitude for mathematics, and an independent streak a mile wide, she didn't have much luck with boys. Those who weren't intimidated by her size, strength, and no-nonsense attitude were scared off by her mind. Of course, she compensated by spending more time with sports and books, which just made everything worse.

Then, in her second year of college (full scholarship at an Ivy League school, of course), her mother suddenly had her beloved father declared legally dead so she could marry some oil tycoon. She never understood that. She blamed her mother for weakness, and her step father for trying to replace her father.

Here it was, Spring Break of her senior year, and she'd come to spend another dreary week on her evil stepfather's yacht at his Miami Beach yacht club while he pretended to be nice to her. When she found he was trying to fix her up with some pencil neck he knew from work, she'd had enough. She just got into her car, and drove off.

That cloud of white smoke was the final betrayal. After getting out, stomping, screaming, and pounding her anger out on the car's fender, she dropped back into the driver's seat to have a good cry.

That's how he found her, sitting with her long, freckled legs sticking out of white shorts through the open car door, sneakered feet in the dust by the side of the road, head buried in folded arms cradled on her knees, with long flame-colored hair cascading over everything, and sobs wracking her shoulders.

"Looks like you've had a tough day," was all he said.

Startled, she looked up to see a tall figure standing over her with a motorcycle helmet dangling from one

hand. He'd ridden up on what seemed to be the biggest, yellowest motorcycle she'd ever seen, gotten off, and walked over while she'd been busy bawling her eyes out.

Instantly, she felt that old, involuntary jolt of excitement in the pit of her stomach. Yet, he was nothing like the picture she had in mind for her ideal mate. Sure, he looked like something out of an old Errol Flynn movie, but she knew that was just fantasy. Real guys with whom she could build a home and a family, and who'd stay around long enough to grow old with, didn't look like something out of a pirate movie. The ones that did just weren't husband material.

Starting from worn, stained black boots laced up to his knees into which were tucked equally grime-covered black leather pants whose tightness exposed tree-trunk-like thighs, her gaze rose to a black tee shirt, which enhanced rather than hid his weight-lifter's upper torso, and muscular arms. Finally, she came to a tanned weather-beaten face with shaggy dark-brown hair, and beard.

Definitely out of a pirate movie. She suppressed her physical attraction by thinking to herself: "another macho would-be tough guy."

Yet, there were those eyes that seemed to peer right inside her as if reading her thoughts, but in a kindly way. Not what she'd expect from the testosterone-addled egomaniac biker image she was force fitting him into.

Confused, she simply gave in to her very real need for immediate help.

"Yeah," she said, simply.

"My engine broke down," she continued, as if the still billowing cloud of white smoke wasn't a dead giveaway.

"I don't know what to do," she added with equal transparency.

Thinking she must look like an idiot, frustration and embarrassment once again overflowed through her tear ducts. She turned her face away so he wouldn't see.

What he really thought, when he saw her lifted face, was that she was the most gorgeous woman he'd ever seen, despite the tears streaming over freckled cheeks, and the puffy red-rimmed eyes. "This one has good bones," he thought, and, while her expression was a mixture of frustration, anger, confusion, and even a little fear, she displayed not a hint of panic. She wasn't giving up, she was looking for a way out. It showed an unusually tough character for a woman who looked as good as she did. Usually, beautiful women didn't have to work that hard.

"You're not the first one to blow an engine," he laughed. "Everyone who's ever given love to a classic car ends up by the side of the road more than once. Pop the hood, and let's see the damage."

Somehow, his comment made her feel instantly better. Instead of a moron who couldn't do anything right, she suddenly felt like an adventurer faced with a sudden challenge. Maybe she'd be okay, after all.

While she pulled the handle that unlatched the hood, he put on the driving gloves he'd stuffed into his helmet with his sunglasses when he gotten off his bike. It took him a while to feel around in the narrow space between the hood and grill to find the safety catch. She noticed he didn't seem embarrassed by the difficulty. He just made funny faces as he felt around for the lever, then tried pushing it in different directions, each time changing to a different wry expression, until a bright smile appeared as the catch finally released.

His little performance actually made it seem like they were having fun!

He involuntarily backed his face away from the white cloud released as he raised the car's hood. It was hot, wet steam that smelled of anti-freeze, and felt like it was melting his eyeballs. He put his sunglasses back on to protect his eyes, and tried to peer through the cloud to find the source of the loud hissing still emanating from the engine compartment.

"Hopefully, you've just blown a radiator hose. When was the last time you had this thing serviced?"

"I dunno. I don't drive it very much. I go to school up in Cambridge, and just drove it down here on vacation."

“Hmmm. Next time, change all the fluids, check all the seals, and do a tune up before taking it on a long trip. Cuts down on the roadside adventures. The first thing that goes when you let a car sit a lot, then take it on a long trip is the hoses. ... Nope, I don’t see a problem with the hoses.”

He pulled the sunglasses off again to peer more deeply into the shadowed engine bay. Ducking his head under the steam cloud, he stuck his face close to the engine.

“That’s what it is! You’ve blown both head gaskets. They’ve probably been leaking a little bit for a long time. Water was being sucked into the cylinders on the down stroke, and blown out through the exhaust. You didn’t see anything because it came out as invisible superheated steam. When you ran too low on water, the engine overheated, and pffsht!”

He delivered this report in an almost clinical tone. No emotion, it was just data. He could have been giving a weather report, or explaining the migratory patterns of monarch butterflies. He didn’t blame her for hurting her car. He didn’t commiserate over her trouble. He made an engineering assessment.

“Is that bad?” she asked, not knowing from his tone what it could mean.

“Well, it’s a whole lot better than, say, having melted a piston, which I’ve done more than once.”

“He says that as if it’s just nothing!” she thought. Again, what he said, and the way he said it, made her feel better about having screwed up.

“But, it’s a whole lot worse than splitting a hose,” he said, “which I’d hoped for. You’re going to be stuck for about a week.”

It took a few seconds for that to register. She had no place to go. She couldn’t go back to Miami. She wouldn’t!

She started to feel the first signs of panic crawling up from her belly. Her eyes started to fill up again. Fighting, she pushed down the panic, and flicked away the tears.

“What do I do?” she asked, thinking aloud.

Thinking she was asking him for advice, he said, “Luckily, there’s a mechanic about a mile ahead, who owes me a favor. He’s a good guy, and won’t screw you over. He can tow it in, then we’ll find out for sure what the situation is.”

“Uh, I don’t know,” she replied, suddenly wary. “Maybe someplace else?”

“You gotta choice? It’s that, or start leafing through the phone book, and you’ve got no phone book. I understand that all you have to go on is a recommendation from me, and you don’t know me.”

“But, you’ve never steered me wrong, either,” she laughed, realizing she was looking a gift horse in the mouth. “Okay, we’ll do it your way. I really do appreciate your stopping to help. Nobody else seemed to care.”

“Well, I couldn’t leave you to the tender mercies of some half-drunk college sophomore looking for a Spring Break thrill, now could I? Lock up everything you can’t carry, leave the hood up, and I’ll ride you over to Bill’s. He can come back to get the car while you get in out of the sun. I hope you’re wearing sun block. You look like you’ve had enough, already.”

“Yes, I am. I’ve spent enough time outdoors to know that much. As you can see from the freckles,” she said, suddenly shy about her spotted complexion.

Figuring it was simplest, she grabbed her shoulder bag, put up the convertible top, and locked the doors. By that time, he had the motorcycle up off its kickstand, and running. As she walked over, slinging the shoulder bag strap over her neck to leave her hands free, he started to explain about first putting her weight on the left-hand floorboard to reach her right foot over the seat. Instead of listening, she stood with her left foot flat on the ground next to the bike, and simply raised her right foot over the seat, planted it flat on the ground on the other side, then sat down on the elevated passenger’s seat.

“Damn! Those legs reach all the way to the ground!” he said, impressed.

“This is like an easy chair,” she commented as she lifted her feet to the floorboards as the bike took off.

“I designed this bike specifically for long distance touring,” he shouted as the bike picked up speed. “Ten hours a day, seven days a week can get pretty rough, so I wanted all the comfort I could get.”

“It’s quiet. Just a low rumble.”

“The loud rapping most choppers make, and the angry buzz of a lot of sport bikes, can tire you out fast on a long trip.”

“Wait, you said you *designed* it?”

“I like to design all my bikes. For a touring bike, I usually start with a stock frame and engine because the factory does a lot of testing to make their touring bikes reliable. I could never get that reliability in a one-off design. Then, I put everything else together the way I want it.”

Putting two, and two together, she came to the conclusion he was an itinerant motorcycle mechanic, or a bike builder, like on TV. “Where did you say you were from?” she asked.

“I live in Arizona. I come out here every year for Daytona Bike week.”

“What’s that?”

“Every year they have a week-long motorcycle racing event at Daytona Speedway. Racing fans come from all over the world to see it. Years ago, more people started coming in just for the parties and fun than for the races. Now, it’s one of the four biggest motorcycle rallies in the U.S. There’s one in Laconia, New Hampshire, one in Laughlin, Nevada, and the biggest one’s in Sturgis, South Dakota. Hundreds of thousands of people show up just as an excuse to get together.”

“Sounds like fun. How come I never heard of it?”

“Probably because you’re not a biker. My company sells equipment to a lot of the racing teams, so I come

out every year. The races finished up today, and I'm taking my time riding back to Arizona."

So much for her theory about his being a itinerant bike mechanic. He worked for a company. Maybe in sales? He didn't look like a salesman, but who knows?

"What is it you do?" she asked.

"Ahhh, well. The company makes a lot of special equipment for different industries. Motorcycle racer stuff is just part of it."

"What do *you* do?"

"Ummm. I do a lot of things. The company mainly develops stuff for the aerospace industry. Test equipment, and so forth."

Why was he being so evasive? She asked about him, but he answered with vague tidbits about this fabulous company. He was probably just a low-level flunky trying to impress her with the stuff his company makes.

"Where were you going, by the way?" he asked.

"Oh, I was headed west," she said, being evasive herself.

"Vacation?"

"Not exactly," she said, trying to avoid explaining that she'd run away with no clear plan in mind.

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Uncomfortable silence was broken by their arrival at what looked to be a gas station from the mid-20th Century. The building, and the single gas-pump island were painted with the corporate colors of a major chain, but the logos had been painted out and replaced with "Bill's Auto Repair" in large, neat lettering. The gas pumps were gone, and the roof over the island protected what appeared to be customers' cars awaiting their turns behind one of

the two large roll-up doors. Despite its obvious age and repurposing from a gas-station franchise to an independent repair shop, the place was neat and well kept up. Apparently, the proprietor was working hard to build a new business in a building that had essentially been abandoned.

The repair-shop lot was separated from the parking lot of a diner of similar vintage by a gravel strip, with concrete parking stops protecting it from encroachment by cars parked in both lots. Three large, but empty, picnic tables sat on the gravel next to an open-faced tent set up on the diner's side parking lot. Several large folding tables within the tent, along with a commercial barbecue setup, implied a temporary open-air food court in the process of being taken down. A large "Welcome Bikers" banner hanging over the gravel strip's street end made the intentions of both establishments known to anyone cruising down the road. At the front of the diner's parking lot was a second, somewhat larger, tent offering leather goods and jewelry to riders of a dozen motorcycles clustered in front of the diner, which sported a smaller "Welcome Bikers" sign over its door.

As Judith and her rescuer pulled into the repair shop parking lot, she spied a pair of coverall-clad legs sticking out from under a pickup truck with its rear end suspended from a tow truck's crane. Bursts of blue-white light signaled that arc welding was in progress under the pickup.

"Blown up any good gas tanks recently?" Judith's biker called out.

The legs quickly pulled a wiry body supported on a rolling creeper out from under the truck. Heavily gloved hands flipped up the welding mask to reveal a broadly smiling face framed by disheveled sandy-colored hair and beard.

"Aw, Doc, you know I'm real careful weldin' around gas tanks," the beard replied. "I always stuff wool blankets between the tank and where I'm weldin'."

"This guy got drunk," the beard continued saying, "and banged over one too many curbs. Broke a rear spring. I'm patchin' it up enough to get 'em home to Arkansas. They can replace it there. Hey, I thought you were pullin' out early."

“I ran across this stray about a mile down the road,” Doc replied, indicating Judith. “She managed to blow not one, but *two* head gaskets on her ‘65 Mustang. Let the radiator go dry. I told her you were the man who could help her out. She’ll need a tow.”

“I’m almost done with this job, but I can send Pete out with the hauler to pick it up. Don’t want to leave it there all lonesome with only hubcap thieves for company,” the beard, which Judith assumed belonged to Bill, said while trying to hide the fact that he was eyeing her appraisingly.

“Pete!” Bill yelled over his shoulder. “Can you drop that tune up, and go rescue this lady’s Mustang?”

“Be right there!” came a reply from behind the raised hood of a sedan in one of the inside bays, followed by the snapping sound of a distributor cap being clipped in place.

“Pete’s my li’l brother,” Bill told Judith.

“He’a turned out to be a real good mechanic,” he explained to Doc, for no apparent reason. “Picks things up fast, and he’s real reliable. Good for business, as you can see.”

“Uh, let’s not talk business right now,” Doc said with a nod toward Judith.

“Ooh-kay,” Bill said, getting Doc’s point, but not knowing why he shouldn’t talk business. Judith caught the exchange, but was even more in the dark than Bill.

A gangly, sandy-haired teenager, who looked like a younger, slightly taller, beardless version of Bill, emerged from behind the sedan’s hood.

“All done,” he said to Bill, “and ready for you to check.”

When he caught sight of Judith, he turned red, and tried to simultaneously stare, and drop his eyes. The impulse to stare won.

Turning to Judith, Bill asked, “Where’s yer car, and what’s it look like?”

“It’s a pink 1965 Mustang convertible with a white top. We left it up on the northbound side of Route 95 about a half mile south of the exit with the hood up. Will you need the keys?”

“We’ll need to get inside to put it in neutral, and take off the brake, so if it’s locked, yeah.”

“Here they are,” she said, handing him the keys.

Bill tossed the keys to Pete, who grabbed them out of the air, then sprinted off to the hauler parked behind the garage.

“I think I’ll take Red, here, over to the diner for lunch while we’re waitin’,” Doc told Bill. “She’s had a busy mornin’.”

Judith suddenly realized she’d never told Doc her name, and he’d never asked. Somehow, she didn’t mind being called “Red.” When he said it, he made it sound special.

“Judith,” she said when they’d seated themselves opposite each other in one of the diner’s booths.

“What?”

“My name is Judith McKenna. I thought you should know, but I don’t mind ‘Red,’ either.” It made her feel adventurous, and just a little like an outlaw. It was exciting to feel like an outlaw. She liked that, and wanted the name to stick.

She’d spent most of her life trying to fit in, which she found nearly impossible. This adventure reminded her of how much fun she’d had hanging around with her freshman roommate, Cheryl, who’d been probably her best friend ever.

Cheryl made no bones about liking to take risks. She was brash, outspoken and demonstrative to the point of being lewd, and was always up for anything that looked like fun. She’d led Red into all kinds of escapades that Red would never have considered on her own.

Cheryl was tall, too, although not nearly as tall as Red, and smart as well. While Red's intellectual passion was mathematics, Cheryl's was archeology. After they'd completed their core course requirements in their sophomore years, they no longer had classes in common. And, when Red moved into her own apartment, they'd drifted apart. Red suddenly realized how much she missed hanging around with Cheryl. It had been lonely being on her own. And, boring – none of the zest Cheryl brought to everything she did.

“Folks just call me ‘Doc,’” the biker said, bringing Red back to the present.

Here was that same evasiveness. She'd told him her full name, but he wasn't saying anything about himself. Why?

“Why ‘Doc?’” Red asked.

“I guess I'm sort of a know-it-all. Whenever somebody has a question, they seem to ask me. And, most of the time I seem to know the answer.”

“That sounds like a good thing.”

“Well, I suppose. Sometimes it gets embarrassing, though, and some people get their noses out of joint. I try to keep my mouth shut, but now and then I forget.”

“Ahh, will you excuse me for a minute,” Red said, suddenly feeling an urgent need. “I really need to find a ladies' room.”

“Oh, sure, it's right back there,” he said pointing.

She walked back to the restrooms. Turning as she opened the ladies room door, she saw the waitress arrive at their table with menus, sit down, and start a conversation with Doc. It seemed like they were old friends.

Later, as Red returned from the ladies' room, she noted that the waitress was gone, and Doc was talking on a cellphone. Looking up and seeing Red, he quickly ended the conversation and put the cellphone away.

“When people expect you to be someplace, and you don’t show up,” Doc explained, “it’s just polite to call them, and let them know why.”

Suddenly uncomfortable with the thought of her movements being known, Red blurted out: “You told them about me?”

“Why, what’s the problem?”

“Well,” Red began, thinking it was time to uncover some of the truth to prevent future information slips, “there are people I don’t want to have find me.”

“That sounds sinister. I hope it’s nothing illegal.”

“No. I just don’t want my step father to find me,” she said, feeling it sounded a little lame.

Doc just sat there, regarding her with patient expectation, awaiting further explanation.

“I don’t like him,” she said, explaining very little.

Doc still waited.

“He keeps trying to be nice to me,” she said even more lamely.

“Are you trying to tell me he’s hitting on you?” Doc asked.

“No, no! He pretends to be nice so my mother will like him.”

“Aha! You’re jealous. You think he’ll come between you, and your mother. Kind of an odd take on an Oedipus complex?”

“No. Well, I guess. He wants to be my father, but I already have one.” Red was telling him a lot more than she wanted to.

“Where’s your father?”

“He disappeared, but I know he’ll come back when he can.”

“But, your mother’s remarried. How long has he been gone?”

“Ten years.”

“That’s a long time to be missing. Maybe he’s not coming back?” said Doc, doubtfully.

“He’s not dead. He’s *not*!” Suddenly, she was a little girl again, frustrated, and frightened that maybe she really couldn’t have what she desperately wanted.

“I know where he is,” she continued. “They just don’t want to believe me. I was on my way to find him when my car broke down,” she said, as she felt tears starting to well up in the corners of her eyes.

She wiped them away, and drew up to her full seated height. “That’s all you need to know,” she said, suddenly imperious.

“Hmm,” he said, noncommittally.

Changing the subject, he said “I took the liberty of ordering lemonade for you. Coffee’s no good for someone who’s been out in the sun riding on a motorcycle – or in a convertible. It makes you pee too much. You need to retain water.”

“I see what you mean about being a know-it-all,” she commented, trying to get back on a friendly footing. “But, I already knew that. I’ve spent a lot of time outdoors and with sports since I was a kid. Lemonade will be perfect, thanks.”

“Speaking of peeing too much, it’s my turn to use the facilities.”

After he left for the men’s room, the waitress brought two large glasses of lemonade, and asked: “Will that

be all for you?”

“I think that’s it for now. We’re just waiting for the young man next door to tow my car in from the highway. It broke down.”

“Ah, that’d be Pete. He’s my brother in law. Bill’s my man. He runs the garage, and I run the restaurant. Between us we make a tidy living.”

“You seem to know Doc,” Red said, prying for information. “Have you known him long?”

“We’ve known him for years – long before we bought this place. I’m Harriet, by the way. You know, like on the old *Ozzie and Harriet* TV show. My parents loved that show.”

“What do you know about Doc?” Red asked, ignoring the reference to a television series she was two generations too young to know anything about.

“He won’t tell me a thing, and I’m curious,” she said with an avid look in her eye.

“Uh, oh. Looks like you’re getting stuck on him,” Harriet opined. “Look, not many people will tell you much about Doc. He’ll tell you what he wants you to know when he wants you to know it. I can tell you this: If you need anything, and I mean *anything*, just ask him. And, you can trust him with your life. I mean that! But there, I’ve said enough. Too much, in fact.”

With that, she turned around, and walked back to the counter.

“Nobody knows where you are from me,” Doc said when he returned, picking up the conversation from an earlier point. “I was just telling the people I was to meet why I stood them up.”

“Bikers don’t have a reputation for being so polite.”

“Actually, they’re some of the politest people on Earth,” he said in a professorial tone. “If you find yourself among large, muscular people who tend to do what they like, and don’t take any nonsense from anyone, it pays to

be polite.”

She liked hearing him tell her things that way. It reminded her of how her father had talked to her. Her father had always explained things to her, too. It was as if he wanted to fill her mind with everything he knew – as if it was somehow important to him that she understood the reasons behind what he thought and did. Other men acted like they thought she should take what they said at face value, without explanation.

“What if you’re particularly large, muscular, and independent, yourself,” she asked pointedly eyeing the solidly muscled arms sticking out of Doc’s black tee shirt.

“There’s always somebody bigger, more muscled, and more independent,” he replied. “Some of them also have pretty short fuses, and you never know who. Besides, bigger guys don’t get hassled much growing up. It’s the little guys who have something to prove.”

Just then, Harriet returned to take their lunch orders.

“So, when do you have to meet them?” Red asked after they’d ordered lunch.

“Whom?”

“The people you were supposed to meet. I assume you’re still going to meet them.”

“There’s no point, now. I’ll get back to them another time. I figure on hanging around until we know what’s what with your car.”

“That’s awfully kind of you.”

“Just being polite,” he said with a wan smile. “I’m on vacation, now, so there’s no place I have to be. And, it’s kinda nice to spend time with a pretty lady. I hope you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind,” she smiled. Having him around made her feel oddly safer. While she had been running her own life for years, in the back of her mind she always had a hollow feeling that something might come up she

couldn't handle, or she might do the wrong thing, and that there'd be consequences. With Doc there backing her up, she felt there was nothing she couldn't handle. She didn't know why she should trust him to back her up. She just did.

He wasn't like the boys she knew, and she now thought of them as "boys" rather than men. They were always trying to take charge. They wanted to show how macho they were. Doc didn't do that. He stepped back, and let her handle things, while just being around in case there was need. Like with Bill at the garage, Doc had made introductions, then let her take it from there. She liked that.

"What do you think will happen with my car?" she asked.

"That depends on what Bill finds when he takes it apart."

"He has to take it apart?"

"We know that you need new head gaskets because I could see steam shooting from underneath the heads. We also know the engine overheated. That's what the knocking sound was before it stopped. What we don't know is how bad the damage is. Hopefully, it's just those head gaskets."

"How long will it take to fix?"

"That depends on a lot of different things. He might have the gaskets on hand for that engine, since Ford still makes it, or a modified version of it. There might be some seals that have changed since it was made in the '60s, but he should be able to get all that stuff locally. If so, he could have the parts in under an hour. You're probably looking at two hours for each head, then another hour to put it all back together, then an hour or so to test it, and get it ready for the road."

"Why so long to test it? Once he fixes it, it should work, right?"

"Well, the reason you ran out of coolant is because it's been leaking for a long time. Maybe months, or even years. It wasn't noticeable because it was a small leak. You probably have had to keep adding coolant, right?"

“Yes, I’ve had to add a little every few weeks since I’ve had it.”

“How long has that been?”

“Two years. I’ve gotten pretty good at mixing anti-freeze, and filling the little plastic tank.”

“All that time, the system has never gotten up to normal pressure, and the hoses have just gotten older, and rottener. I’ll bet the temperature gauge has been low, too.”

“It’s always been like that, too. That’s why I never worried.”

“The coolant is supposed to be pressurized to keep it from boiling, but instead the pressure leaked out. That let it boil early, and the temperature and pressure stayed low.

“After Bill fixes the head gasket and all the seals in the engine, that will close the leaks. The pressure will go up, and all the hoses and joints in the rest of the system will have to work hard for the first time in years. There’s a good chance something else will blow. After he fixes that, the next weakest thing will blow, and so forth until he gets them all. If you’re lucky, it’ll take about an hour. Maybe two.”

“So, we’re talking about five or six hours work. Could he finish it today?”

“Well, if you’re lucky, and there aren’t any more emergencies (remember that truck with a broken spring that he’s working on now), he could finish it before he closes up tonight. I’d figure on spending the night here, though, and maybe getting away tomorrow.”

“So, I can leave tomorrow,” she said, visibly disappointed.

“Well, maybe. Remember that knocking was caused by overheating. The heat might have warped one or both heads. I don’t think either of them cracked, but that’s also a possibility”

“How will we know?”

“When he gets the heads off, he’ll check them for flatness. It’s standard procedure because you never know. It takes only a few seconds, and can save having to do the whole job over again.”

“What happens if they’re warped?”

“If they’re only slightly warped, he can send them out to a machine shop where they’ll shave a little off to flatten them. That would take a week or two, depending on how busy the machine shop is. If they’re too bad, you’ll have to throw the heads away, and get new ones. That’ll probably take as long, and will be a lot more expensive.”

“How much is ‘a lot?’”

“You’re looking at several hundred dollars anyway. If you’ve damaged the heads, it’ll cost thousands.”

“What’ll I do?”

“I’m telling you this now, so you can start thinking about that. Look, if you get really lucky, Bill can just torque the heads to tighten up the head gasket, which’ll take about an hour, and you can be on your way. But, I’d be totally amazed to see that. It’s almost impossible. We can try, but it’s probably a waste of time.

“When Pete gets back with your car,” Doc continued, “we’ll see about retorquing the heads. Likely, Bill won’t even want to try because there’s so little chance of success, and they could just let go again an hour down the road.

“If that doesn’t work, I’ll stick around for the night. We’ll scout up a couple of motel rooms and have a leisurely dinner. By then, we’ll know how long it’ll take to fix your car, and you can figure out what you want to do.”

“You’d do that for me?”

“I told you, I’m on vacation. You’re stuck here until the middle of the afternoon, anyway. There’s no point in my starting out then on a bike just to hunt up a motel in the dark. I’ve been down that road before, and there’s no

reason to do it today. I figure I'm already staying here the night. I'll find a room while there's plenty of daylight left."

"Then, I'll stay, too. Okay?"

"Okay. Here comes lunch," he said, seeing Harriet walking toward them carrying full plates.

3

Over dinner that night at a Mexican restaurant that Doc said was "better than your average Mexican fare in Florida, but not as good as what you can get in, say, New Mexico," Red was very quiet, as if she had something on her mind, which, of course, she did. Both of her car's cylinder heads had turned out to be warped, but repairable. The machine shop had said the job would take a week and a half. Leaving a day or so for Bill to put the car together again, she was looking at a couple of weeks with no car.

She could sit on her hands for two weeks, or continue her quest. But how?

By the time the mariachi band wandered off to blare in somebody else's face, Red had made a decision.

"Doc, there's no place you have to be for a couple of weeks, right?"

"Well, I should go back to Arizona next week, but I suppose the company could get by without me for a while. What have you been cooking up under that wavy red mane?"

"Well," she said, leaning over the table, and speaking in a low, conspiratorial voice (or as low as was possible with the mariachi band starting up again on the other side of the outdoor patio), "I was going to find my father in Nevada, but my car's out of commission for a couple of weeks. By that time, you could drive us there on your motorcycle. I could pay you \$100 a day."

"Do you have any idea what the expenses would be for a trip like that?"

“It wouldn’t cost you any more than you had planned for your motorcycle vacation, and I’d actually be saving money by not driving my car. My paying you would cut your vacation expenses by \$100 a day.”

Doc seemed amused by this. Smiling, he asked: “How were you planning to pay for this little jaunt, anyway? I never asked because I didn’t need to know. Now that you’re inviting me along, it would be better if I did.”

“I have an American Express Gold Card,” she responded proudly. “It’s how I get my allowance.”

“Your allowance?”

“Yes,” she said with her face clouding over. Now that she’d said it out loud, it didn’t sound as worldly and independent as it had in her head. “It’s one of the ways my step father has of trying to make us like him. I wish I didn’t need to take it, but I’d have to live in a dorm, otherwise.”

“Let me get this straight. You’re running away from home because you hate your step father, who has enough money to live in Miami Beach ...”

“On a yacht,” she interrupted sheepishly.

“... in Miami Beach on a yacht ...”

“Only during boating season,” she interrupted again, even more sheepishly. “He has a condo in D.C., and a ranch in Texas...”

“... in Miami Beach on a yacht, when not at his condo in Washington, or on his ranch in Texas, and cares enough about you, and your mother to pay your way through college in Cambridge, Massachusetts ...”

“Harvard, actually, but I have a scholarship that pays the tuition.”

“Yeah, but I know how much it costs to live off campus in Cambridge.”

“My apartment’s across the river in Boston.”

“Oh, where in Boston?”

“Beacon Hill,” she said, almost hiding behind her napkin.

“Oh-kay, ... pays for you to have an apartment in absolutely the most exclusive part of Boston so you won’t have to live in a Harvard dormitory, and gives you an American Express Gold Card to boot. Do you know how that sounds?”

“Pretty ungrateful, I guess,” she said with downcast eyes.

“Yes. There are tens of millions of people – no, hundreds of millions of people, and maybe billions – who would cheerfully give up important body parts to have your life.”

“But, I know my father is alive! I want to go to him! Please help me!”

“Since you put it that way, okay, but I want you to know what you’re doing. Don’t tell anyone else this story. Nobody would understand. They’ll think you’re nuts.”

“Do you think I’m nuts?”

“I’m reserving judgement,” he laughed. “But, I also have to work hard to keep my reserved seat in the Crazy-But-Not-Stupid section, so I have to be careful about throwing stones. By the way, where does American Express send the bill?”

“Oh, ... to my step father,” she said suddenly realizing how easy it would be for him to trace her movements. If she wanted to stay out of sight, she’d have to make alternative arrangements.

“If you want to keep what you’re doing under wraps, maybe I should pay the bills, and you should reimburse me later,” Doc suggested, being one step ahead of her. Others being one step ahead of her was something Red wasn’t used to. It was usually the other way around.

“You know, you don’t sound like what I expect a biker to sound like.”

“What do you mean?”

“Most people think bikers are loud, swear a lot, and don’t have much of a vocabulary. Sometimes you sound like a college professor.”

“Contrary to what most people think, there are all kinds of bikers. I know bikers who *are* college professors. If you want, I can swear like a sailor for you.”

“You didn’t talk like a college professor with Bill.”

“I generally talk to people the way they talk to me. Bill has a trade-school education. He has above average smarts, and a lot of other good qualities, but superior language skills aren’t among them. I talk to him in a way he’s comfortable with. You, on the other hand, have what turns out to be an Ivy League education, so I change the way I speak accordingly.”

“So, you have a college education?”

“I read a lot.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s the best way to build a vocabulary.”

“That depends on what you read.”

“Point taken. I read everything from candy wrappers to the classics. Now, do we have a deal or not?”

Once again, he’d deflected her question when it got too close. Who *is* this guy?

“Yes,” Red responded. “In the interest of secrecy, you’ll cover out-of-pocket expenses, and I’ll pay you back, plus \$100 a day, at the end of the trip.”

“Where are we going?”

“My father has a mining claim Northeast of Carson City, Nevada. I think that’s where he is. At least, that’s where I think we should start. All I have are latitude, and longitude.”

“You’re talking about the Comstock Lode. That was cleaned out a hundred fifty years ago.”

“That’s what everybody says, but my father’s a top geologist, and knows what he is talking about. He said his research showed that there’s still a big mineral deposit up there that nobody’s ever found. He couldn’t get anyone to listen, so he didn’t have any backing. He made several trips up there in the 1990s on his own. The last time he came back, he told me he’d found just what he was looking for. He was really excited, and told me all about it. He made one more trip to collect samples that would prove his theory, but he never came back. I think he’s up there, still.”

“You know, it’s not like the early 1800s, when the West could just swallow people up. They’d disappear, and nobody would ever know what happened to them. Even by the 1850s, that area was pretty filled up. Virginia City had thirty thousand residents. It was almost impossible to hide out, even if you were trying. The locals would always know. Now, it’s a tourist trap. Carson City is the state capital with a population of over fifty thousand!”

“I know that. People have been telling me that for ten years. But, I know my father went there, and he never came back. My mother tried to get the police to look for him, but they found nothing. I don’t think they really tried. After seven years, she found a rich boyfriend, and had my father declared legally dead so she could marry him.”

“I begin to see why you don’t like your step father.”

“He’s a bastard!”

“That may be, but it’s not what I meant. No matter what he’s really like, you blame him for taking your father away. Maybe not consciously, but that’s how you feel inside. If you gave him a chance, maybe he’d turn out to be okay, but you’ll never be able to give him a chance until you find out what happened to your father.”

“He’s still a bastard.”

“Let’s settle your father first. You obviously need closure. It’s eating you up. Let’s go find what happened to your father so you can have a life.”

“He’s still there. I don’t know why he hasn’t contacted me, but I know he’s still there. Maybe he needs help. I’ve got to find him.”

“If we’re going to make a two-thousand-mile motorcycle trip in mid-March, you’re going to need more than a tank top, short shorts, and sneakers. I mean, it’s warm here in central Florida now, but cooler weather is coming in, and we’ve mountains to cross. And, they’re not the little Appalachian things you have in the East. No matter what route we take, we’ll run into parts of the actual Rocky Mountains. It gets really cold up there. Besides, nobody rides with me without at least good boots and protective pants. Too many things can happen. We want to keep your skin intact.”

“I’ve been riding around with you all day like this, what’s wrong?”

“We’ve gone a grand total of a mile and half in an emergency. You’re now talking about riding thousands of miles over several days, through all kinds of terrain, and in all kinds of weather. We can’t stop every time it gets cold, or hole up for every cloudburst. It’d take forever. You’ll also be riding through eight different states, three of which require you to wear a helmet. Do you have a helmet?”

“No.”

“Do you have a jacket?”

“I have a long, wool coat for when I go back to Boston.”

“That’ll go into storage! Sweatshirts? Sweaters? Long pants?”

“I didn’t think I’d need them.”

“You will now. Looks like we’ll have to go shopping. Luckily, the races at the speedway just ended today.

Tonight is for partying, but tomorrow everyone will pack up, and leave as soon as their hangovers allow. We've got tonight and tomorrow morning to outfit you."

4

On the way into downtown Daytona Beach, they stopped at the tent in front of Harriet's diner to get Red a sweatshirt and a pair of blue jeans because she was getting cold.

"How'd it get so cold so fast?" Red asked through chattering teeth. "It was just a little chilly when we left the restaurant."

"Didn't you take any physics?" Doc responded. "As a math major you must have learned something about heat transfer. When you're just standing around, the heat from your body warms up a thin layer of air next to your skin. That acts as insulation, so your skin can stay above ninety Fahrenheit while the air outside is in the seventies. When you get on a motorcycle and ride, even at a few miles an hour, the wind blows that insulating layer away. Your skin temperature drops to the air temperature, which tonight is in the low seventies. That's almost twenty degrees cooler than your body is designed for."

"Is that why you guys always wear those heavy clothes? I thought it was just to look tough."

"Veteran bikers learn to wear what they'd need to keep warm when the temperature's twenty degrees cooler than the weatherman says."

"Why so much leather? You look like a whole herd of cows gave up their lives to get you dressed!"

Laughing, Doc replied: "A lot of it *is* just for show. It used to be that leather was the only material that would do the job. Whatever material you use needs toughness, durability, and the ability to keep out the wind while breathing, so you don't sweat into your shorts. It used to be that narrowed it down to leather, period. Now, there are synthetics, and multilayer fabric systems that do as well, or even better, but leather still looks cool. Also, you'll find that most bikers are 'old school.' They tend to be nostalgic, wanting to dress like bikers of twenty five, or fifty

years ago. So, they wear leather if they can afford it. A lot of ‘em wear leather even if they can’t afford it.”

“Why always black?”

“It’s not always black. A lot of riders, especially the younger ones, like to wear bright colors that look like racers’ driving suits. But, black is the most popular because it doesn’t show road dirt. After a day’s riding, or even a few hours, you come back coated with black stuff that’s a mixture of asphalt, tire rubber, and exhaust smoke. The air along highways is full of it because cars kick it up all the time. You know how the tread on your tires wears down? All that rubber blows up into the face of the biker behind you. It comes off easily, but who wants to send your leathers to the cleaner every day? On a long trip, it would be impossible, anyway.”

“You learn something every day.”

“You do if you’re not dead. That’s the difference.”

“The difference between what, and what?”

“Between people who are alive, and those who aren’t”

In the end, they bought Red a bulky black sweatshirt with “Harley Davidson” in silvery script lettering across the front, a pair of black stonewashed jeans, and black cowboy boots with pointed toes.

“I don’t wear shoes that size,” Red protested when Doc pulled a pair out two sizes larger than the size noted on the labels in her sneakers.

“You do in boots. Always start with two sizes bigger, and adjust from there. You want ‘em loose, so your feet don’t swell, and you want to have room for a couple of pairs of heavy socks when you need ‘em. They should be just small enough so your heel doesn’t slip when you walk.”

“Jeesh! You have all these rules! Why can’t I just get something I like?”

“Look, on a motorcycle, clothes are safety equipment,” Doc said, falling into his lecture mode, again. “You

can't move right if your muscles get cold. You can't think straight if you're overtired because your feet have been hurting all day. If your legs cramp, you'll be twisting around in your seat while I'm threading through traffic, and every time you move, your weight shift-steers the bike. That's a bad thing. If your sleeves flap in the wind for three hours, your arms will be sore. You just won't be a happy camper. We want you to be a happy camper. So, we do what years of experience by tens of thousands of bikers has shown will make you a happy camper."

"If it's any consolation," he continued, "the rules for dressing a motorcycle driver are worse than those for the passenger."

After adding a leather belt that fit the wide loops in her new black jeans, along with a pair of leather gloves (Can't hang on if your fingers get numb!), they were done with shopping for immediate necessities. Red started to window shop through the rest of the tent.

"Don't go crazy in here," Doc told her quietly when they were out of earshot of the store owner. "Leave some 'til later. We're going to see a lot of shops in town. Get a feel for what's available before making any decisions."

In the end, Red only added a large, black leather shoulder bag with a strap long enough to go over her head, and hang at her hip. Red fell in love with the Western leaflike design tooled in red leather on the large flap that closed the bag. Then, she headed off to Harriet's ladies room to get into her new clothes.

"Waddayathink?" she asked on her return, doing a slow pirouette.

"Looks too good to be true," Doc replied.

"Thank you," she responded, obviously pleased.

Red suddenly realized that she was responding like a little girl showing off for her parents. While she enjoyed the attention Doc was paying her and found herself attracted to him, this was not the way she wanted the relationship to go. She had hired him to provide transportation for *her* expedition to find her father, not as an escort

to the Prom. She needed to take charge before he got any ideas.

“Okay,” she said, suddenly all business. “What else do we need? Let’s get on with it.”

Showing no surprise at Red’s sudden change of attitude, Doc simply nodded and walked over to the bike to open the right-hand-side saddlebag.

The motorcycle, now that she paid attention to it, had a large saddlebag-shaped fiberglass box mounted on each side, with a matching box mounted behind the passenger’s seat so that it stuck out over the rear fender. Doc explained that it was called a “tour pack.” All were painted the same schoolbus yellow color as the bulky fenders, tank, and fairing. It would have looked monstrous were it not broken up by a cascade of chrome, as well as intricate swooping pinstripes in red, black, white, and blue.

“This side will be yours for the duration,” he said. “There’s a fitted liner that slips in and out, so you can bring it to your hotel room like a suitcase. That’s back in my room with some of my stuff in it right now. I’ll empty it out when we get back, so you can use it. Tonight there’ll be plenty of room to cart around what we buy because I emptied the bags before we left the hotel.”

“You planned this?” Red asked, surprised, and suddenly suspicious. Was she being maneuvered?

“Not really. I always take out everything I’ll need for the night when I check into a room. This time, I knew we were going back out for dinner and thought maybe we might head downtown to play tourist for a while, so I took out everything I didn’t need. This bike is heavy enough by itself without hauling around all the gear I’ve got for a couple of weeks’ touring as well.”

Satisfied, Red put her shorts and sneakers into the saddlebag, then Doc showed her how to close, and open the lid. It wasn’t a simple hinge with a latch. It folded out completely away from the saddlebag top, while remaining securely fastened. The latch was complex, too. To close it required inserting a tang into a slot at the back of the saddlebag lip, and pulling it over to latch at the front.

“We’ll lock them up whenever we leave stuff in them,” Doc explained. “I didn’t bring a spare key with me, so you’ll have to get me to unlock it if you need to get in. I doubt if we could get a spare key made on short notice, but we’ll ask if we run across a locksmith.”

5

The sun setting behind them bathed Main Street, Daytona Beach in an orange glow as they cruised across a bridge over the Intracoastal Waterway onto the barrier island where lay the downtown part of Daytona Beach. Thousands of motorcycles lined both sides of the street, which was down from tens of thousands only twenty-four hours before. All the bikes were diagonally parked in spite of the painted lines set up for parallel parking cars.

A few cars were caught in the parade of motorcycles moving slowly in both directions, but they weren’t stopping. All the cars had been elbowed off Main Street by motorcycles.

With a quick flick of the handlebars, Doc turned the big touring bike away from the curb, and brought it to a halt in one motion, then backed it deftly into a small space between two other motorcycles, all done while barely disturbing the flow of traffic.

The storefronts on both sides of Main Street were a motley assortment of bars, fast-food joints, tattoo parlors, and leather goods stores.

Lots of leather goods stores!

After locking the saddlebags and tour pack, Doc headed toward a particularly large and well lit leather-goods store almost directly across the street from where he parked. Following, Red noticed that the signs, which made it clear that the store could provide leather jackets, pants, chaps, shirts, bandanas, and so on, and so forth, gave no hint of what the store was called or who the proprietor was.

“Is this a regular store?” Red asked.

“It’s temporary,” Doc explained. “Danny is a gypsy. He has a big van that he takes around the country from bike gathering to bike gathering. Mostly, he just sets up a tent behind the van, and sells stuff from there. At a few really big events, like this one, he rents a storefront, and sets up his entire stock. ... Dannieeee!”

A thin, olive-skinned man a little under medium height with wavy jet-black hair hanging loose down to the middle of his back turned around to reveal the kind of sunglasses ZZ Top described as having “lenses so dark, they won’t even know your name.” Those lenses were supported on a large hooked nose. The nose shadowed a black mustache curled at the ends, and a pointed goatee. The mustache and goatee framed an enormous smile consisting mainly of huge pearly white teeth bared to the gums.

“Doc! How you been? I haven’t seen you since Tijuana! How’d the winter treat you?”

“Not bad. I pretty much holed up in Scottsdale, where it’s warm. You didn’t stay in Quartzite this year. Where’d you go?”

“My ol’ lady wanted us to stay with her folks in Montana. God, that place is cold!”

“How is Dolores?”

“She’s great. She’s out looking around. We haven’t been able to get out of the store all week. It’s been that busy. She should be back any minute.”

“Danny, this is Red. She’s riding with me out West, but she’s never been touring before. She’ll need everything.”

Danny struck a pose with his left arm crooked to support his right elbow while his right hand stroked his goatee thoughtfully. He eyed her up and down studiously, as if memorizing her measurements. Suddenly, his eyes brightened with the light from a wonderful, glorious idea.

“I have just the suit for you! I found it hanging on a rack in Vanson’s up in Massachusetts. They’d made it for a supermodel who’d given them a big deposit, but never came back to pick it up. It’d been hanging there two

years when I found it. There's a one-piece jumpsuit in red leather with a jacket to match, and even matching chaps. Your gonna love this!"

"Vanson's?" Red asked Doc quizzically, as Danny ran off to retrieve his prize.

"Only THE ultimate motorcycle apparel maker. If you see a top rock star wearing leathers, the odds are Vanson made them. And, I don't mean some newbie rock star, I mean a multiple gold-album, Rolling Stones kinda rock star. World champion motorcycle racers wear Vansons. If he says they were made for a supermodel, you can bet you'd recognize her from a Vogue cover."

"I once saw a pair of leather slacks in the window of a San Francisco fashion shop for \$3,000. That's too much!"

"No. These'll be real motorcycle leathers, not paper-thin fashion junk. Danny wouldn't stock anything else because his customers wouldn't have a use for them. He'll also give you a good deal because he made sure he got a smokin' hot deal, himself."

Danny came back carrying a heavy wooden coathanger supporting a thick bundle swathed in a couple of layers of clear plastic.

"I think she was a little taller than you are," Danny told Red as he pulled off the plastic to reveal a mass of blood-red leather, "but we'll cut the legs down a little, and maybe take out some of the padding up top. There's lots of room in the jacket, so that'll be fine.

"Wanna try 'em on?" he concluded, holding up a red-leather jumpsuit with long sleeves and a zipper running up the middle from nearly crotch level to the top of a high-necked roll collar. Vertical seams ran up the outsides of the legs from the ankles to hip level, then curved across the front half way to ribcage level, then turned vertically upward to allow for a woman's full figure. Part of that fullness was supplied by pads. Additional padding squared the shoulders.

Red could see that the complete absence of pockets in the jumpsuit was compensated by an overabundance of pockets in the jacket, all closed by zippers or flaps fastened by snaps. The jacket was double breasted, and designed to hang below waist level. The waist was gathered by laced panels at the sides to adjust for a fitted look, and a wide belt with a silver buckle. A large zipper attached along the double-breast's edge allowed the jacket to be worn completely open, zipped up part way, or all the way to close the neckline at the top.

"Oh, yeah!" said Red, eyeing the ensemble greedily. She'd always thought it would be fun to dress like that, but had never allowed herself, even after her mother's second marriage made it financially possible. This, however, had become a day for hanging out on the edge, and she wasn't going to hold back now.

Suddenly, she no longer wanted her hair tied up in the bun she'd affected to keep the wind from knotting it up. She'd learned her lesson on the short trip from where her car broke down to Bill's garage. It had taken her half an hour to comb the knots out. But now she loosed it to hang free.

While Red was changing behind a curtain, the shop door opened, and a thin girl came in. She had long – to her fanny long – mouse-brown hair that was absolutely straight. She wore a red cotton blouse patterned with yellow paisleys, and a floor length blue skirt with multicolored vertical stripes. A brown knitted wrap reaching to her knees kept out the gathering chill outside. Enormous gold hoop earrings made her look like Alice in Wonderland dressed up as the Gypsy Queen. A second look at her face showed mature, intelligent eyes that made you realize that she was not a little girl, but a diminutive woman. When she saw Doc, she squealed, and jumped into his arms, wrapping her legs around his waist, and giving him a big kiss.

"Doc, you old goat. Why haven't you come to see us before this. We've been here all week, and you don't show up until now? Shame, shame!"

"I'm sorry Dolores. They kept me busy all week at the speedway, but I'm here now."

"Doc has brought us a new friend," Danny told her. "She's trying on that red Vanson suit you said no woman could fill out. I think she can."

Red heard all this as she was trying to zip up the jumpsuit.

“It’s a little tight on top,” she complained, stepping out from behind the curtain.

“It was made for a woman who was skinny as a rail,” Dolores said, meeting Red half way, “and she had no tits. To make her look right in it, they added all kinds of padding.”

Dolores reached up, and yanked the zipper down to Red’s navel, suddenly exposing her full cleavage as Red had taken off her bra in an effort to fit into the jumpsuit. With the zipper down, the leather no longer stretched and bound as Red moved, but fitted naturally from her midriff down.

Dolores took Red by the hand, now all business, and led her over to stand near a step stool near a full-length mirror, watching carefully how the garment moved as Red walked.

“We may have to let the hips out a little, but there’s plenty of material. I know that suit,” she said while stopping Red in the middle of a cleared area, and positioning the stool in front of her an arm’s length away.

“We’ve got to get this padding out!” Dolores said. Reaching over to a nearby work table, she retrieved a small knife and, to Red’s complete surprise, reached into the right side of her bosom, snicked at a few threads with the knife, and ripped out the padding. “That should help,” she said performing the same operation in Red’s left bosom, then pulling the zipper right up to the top of the high, rolled collar.

Stepping down off the stool, Dolores surveyed the result.

“That’s better,” she said. “Now, for the legs.”

She folded cuffs at the ankles to stop the leather bunching on Red’s lower legs. Red had just pulled the jumpsuit on, and pulled the legs up far enough so she could walk without treading on the leather, which was cut straight off at the ankles, but too long for even Red’s long legs.

Reaching over to the work table, Dolores exchanged the scissors for a piece of chalk, then marked two short

lines on the pant legs an inch above Red's ankle bones.

"You'll have to wear those legs tucked into your boots. They're too narrow to go outside. So, we'll cut 'em off high, so they can move without rubbing."

"Aren't these sleeves too long?" asked Red, showing how the cuffs covered the bottom part of her thumbs instead of stopping at her wrists.

"Stretch your arms out in front of you," Dolores ordered. When Red did that, the cuffs slid back to her wrists.

"When you reach out to hold something, like handlebars, or your man, they'll slide back. Any shorter, and your wrists would be exposed behind your gloves. Then they'd get awfully cold."

"Oh, you've got rules just like Doc."

"Leathers aren't just clothes, they're safety equipment."

"That's what he said."

"He was right. He does that a lot. Keep your arms up!"

Stepping back, Dolores walked around Red to see how the jumpsuit lay against her shoulders in back.

"Without that padding, there's plenty of room through the chest, but there's too much padding in the shoulders. You've got big shoulders."

"I play tennis a lot," Red said defensively.

"No, it looks good," Dolores said soothingly, "That's why so many women's garments carry padding up there. But you don't need it. You've already got what the pads are trying to fake."

Pulling the stool over, Dolores climbed up on it, pulled the zipper all the way down, and peeled the jumpsuit

back off Red's shoulders, and down to her elbows in order to get at the shoulder pads, incidentally exposing Red's breasts completely. Reflexively, Red raised her arms to cover them.

"Don't worry, girl, nobody can see you here but those two apes, and they've seen everything."

"They haven't seen *my* everything!"

"So, what makes yours so special? Different from everyone else's?"

"Look, you've got a real nice rack," she continued, soothingly, "but they've been everywhere, and seen everything, and nothing you can show is new to them."

Red was dumbfounded to hear this salty talk coming from this little lady who looked like a twelve-year-old. She couldn't think of anything to say. She just clenched her arms tighter, and looked scared.

"Let's go over here, and look at boots," Doc said to Danny, who was obviously enjoying the show despite Dolores' claim. This most definitely was not something Doc had intended getting Red into, and he felt embarrassed for her. He realized that Dolores had to do what she was doing to get a proper fit, but didn't like her doing it without warning, any more than Red did.

After the men went away out of eyeshot, Dolores pried Red's arms away long enough to get her arms out of her sleeves. The look on her face showed she realized she'd made a mistake, but couldn't think of anything to do, but brass it out. She let Red's arms go back to their defensive posture while she cut the padding out of the jumpsuit's shoulders.

When Red was back to fully dressed, with her zipper safely up to the top of the collar, Dolores said: "I'm sorry about that. I used to dress models for fashion shows, and they get so used to dressing and undressing all day with dozens of people around that they don't think anything about it. I guess I thought you'd feel the same." Dolores looked almost heartbroken.

Red just looked her straight in the eye, and said sternly: "Don't do it no more!"

She even wagged her finger threateningly, before letting a smile sneak past the stern expression. It actually had been kinda fun. She knew her body was attractive, and nudity had never bothered her. In fact, what Dolores did, and the men's reaction, had made her feel sexy. She'd been more surprised than embarrassed, and she found she had a taste for shocking people, even when she was the one she shocked.

Besides, she didn't want to be mad at Dolores, who seemed friendly, and nice. She decided that Dolores just didn't have a conventional attitude about nudity. Red suspected there were a lot of other things Dolores didn't have a conventional attitude about. Not that Red really cared, but she made a mental note to be careful around Dolores.

Now, Dolores was pinching, and pulling the leather around Red's hips, and behind. What was this all about?

"You know, I don't think I really need to let that out," Dolores said, as if anticipating the question in Red's mind. "We just want you to be comfortable, and have enough room for a leotard, or pantyhose."

"Why would I need those inside this?"

"The extra layer keeps you warmer. Even some guys wear 'em for riding long distances in the cold. Nobody calls it faggy since the guys who run the Ironbutt started doing it."

"The Ironbutt?"

"You really *are* a newbie! The Ironbutt is a long distance motorcycle road race. Racers are supposed to visit all of the forty-eight states in a ten-day period. Just finishing is a big deal. Guys – and women – who do that are tough! Nobody dares criticize anything they do. Now, how does it feel? Can you move freely? Squat down, and see if it binds.

Red did a deep knee bend. The leather slid smoothly across her skin without binding or stretching anywhere.

"How's it feel?"

"Fine," Red replied.

“What do you do for a living?”

“I’m a senior in college.”

“That’s a sit-down job, but you don’t have a sit-down ass. How come?”

“I exercise a lot, and play tennis every day. In fact, I came close to making the Olympics.”

“That explains it. That jumpsuit was made for somebody who eats her lunch in aerobics class. A lot of ‘em keep so skinny that they don’t even have a woman’s tush, but this one did, so you inherit the room. Take it off so I can cut the legs, and we’re done.”

“We haven’t said we’d take it, yet.”

“Dannieeee!” Dolores yelled.

“Whaat?” came the reply.

“They haven’t decided whether they want this suit, yet. Here I’ve been pushing her into it. That ain’t right.”

“We just wanted to see how she’d look in it.”

“I’ll bet! You’ve gotta watch these guys, Red, they’ll dress you up in what they want to look at, rather than what you want to wear. What do *you* want to do?”

“Actually, I like it. It feels comfortable now. I’m used to wearing shorts, and leotards, and body suits, and I don’t like things baggy. As long as I can move freely, which I can, now, I’m happy. It certainly stands out, but I pretty much always stand out, being so tall. At least, in this I stand out in a *good* way.”

“Wait,” Red suddenly said, with a concerned look toward Doc. “How much is it going to be?”

“Before we get to that,” Doc put in, “Let’s check out the jacket, and chaps.”

So, Dolores folded the legs up to the marks she'd made, then Red put on her new boots, stuffing the folded cuffs inside. Danny held the jacket for her to put on over the jumpsuit.

The jacket was double breasted with a flamboyant wide lapel collar. Buttoning it all the way up brought the lapel directly across her throat to keep out wind. The jumpsuit's roll collar closed around her neck to complete the weather seal. They also found a pair of long leather gloves whose color matched.

"What's this long bit in the back?" Red asked, indicating where the jacket's hemline dipped in the back to cover half way between her beltline and crotch.

"That's so when you sit down on a motorcycle seat, your waist is still covered," Danny replied. "It's a lot warmer that way. You don't really need it over the jumpsuit, but you do if you want to wear it over jeans, or belted pants."

"You mean like the sleeves being extra long."

"Exactly," said Doc.

The chaps, while practically brushing the floor at her heels, weren't so long that they might catch *under* her heels, as long as she pulled the belt tight to keep them high on her waist. Again, Red found that they rode up to a comfortable position when she sat down.

"When you put these on," Danny told her, "start by putting on the belt, and make sure the sides, where they attach to the belt, are perfectly even side-to-side before you do up the legs. Otherwise you'll get them on twisted, and it'll look like one leg is longer than the other. When that happens, all you can do is take 'em back off, and start over."

"It's like you have to take a course to learn how to dress!" Red exclaimed.

"This *is* your course," Doc stated flatly. "Those boots don't go very well. I saw some in red with a low heel, and square toes."

After Red took off the chaps to try on boots, they walked over to where the men had gone to avoid looking at Red's breasts. There, Doc pointed out the pair he had described. Red wasn't impressed.

"This outfit deserves something a little edgier," she said. Spying a similar pair with a much higher heel that zipped up the sides to fit over her calf, and nearly to her knee, she said. "How about those?"

Doc looked her straight in the eye and said: "Anything you want. After all, this is your trip. You're the boss. If you're not happy, nobody's going to be happy."

There it was again. Despite her being surrounded by three people who knew a lot more about what she was doing and how to accomplish it, Doc put her in the position of leader.

"Would you wear pantyhose like the Ironbutt guys if I told you to?" she asked on a sudden whim.

Surprised, Doc stammered, then said: "I don't know. Are you getting kinky on me? I'd have to shave my legs, and I really don't want to do that. I don't even like shaving my face, which is why I don't."

"I just asked to see what you'd say. Maybe I *am* getting kinky on you," she said archly.

"Maybe its this outfit," she continued. "I'm feeling wild!"

"You're getting a lot of new experiences all at once. Take a deep breath, and think about how far you want to take it. It's easy to get caught up in the moment, and do something you'll regret later."

"I'm a big girl," she said drawing herself up to her full height for emphasis. It didn't work, because Doc was still a few inches taller than she. She suddenly realized how much she liked that.

"I'm just reminding you to consider the ramifications of everything you do before you do it. You have to set your own limits for yourself. Nobody around here, even me, will try to stop you from doing whatever you want to do."

"What are you talking about?"

“Look, I like you. You’re fun to be around. If I didn’t like spending time with you, I wouldn’t have agreed to go on this road trip with you. But, I don’t know you very well, and you don’t know me. I’m going to be taking you to places you probably would never go on your own, and exposing you to things and situations you might never meet otherwise. I’d hate for you to get into something and regret it later.”

Thinking back to why she resolved to be careful around Dolores, she realized what Doc meant. He was telling her to be careful around everybody, even him. Good advice.

“What if I wanted to get a tattoo?”

“I might remind you to make sure it was one you wanted to wear for the rest of your life, but I wouldn’t stop you.”

“I understand. But I still like this outfit. Is there any reason I can’t have those boots?”

“Absolutely not. I love ‘em, and I’d love to see you wearing them.”

“Awww-right! Let’s have some *fun*!”

Red, with a few non-verbal hints from Doc consisting of winks, and nods, negotiated with Danny a lump sum for the entire outfit, including boots, and gloves, that was way below what she expected. Then, she said: “Doc, you want to pay the man?”

To her surprise (and chagrin thinking about how proud she was to announce her Gold Card) Doc pulled out an American Express Platinum Gold Card.

“Is this okay, Danny?” he asked. “A lot of people don’t like to because of the fees, but I’m trying to conserve cash. This trip is going to be more expensive than I’d planned.”

“For you, I’ll do it.”

Red changed back into her jeans and sweatshirt long enough for Dolores to finish altering the jumpsuit.

Then, she put it back on and put what had an hour before been her “new” boots, jeans, and sweatshirt, along with the chaps, into a plastic bag Dolores provided.

“What’ll I do with these?” she asked Doc, indicating the earlier purchases.

“You’ll want ‘em. You can’t wear your leathers twenty-four-seven. After a day wearing them on a motorcycle, you’ll be dying to take them off. The jeans, and sweatshirt give you something to change into.”

6

Back on Main Street, Red led a window-shopping tour, which turned into an impulse-buying event. First stop was a biker boutique shop that sold everything from jewelry to custom motorcycle parts.

“Look for a helmet,” Doc suggested. “You’ll need one as soon as we get out of Florida. There’ll be a lot to choose from along this street, so you don’t necessarily want to grab the first one you like. You can always come back after seeing what else is available.”

“I notice you brought yours, but didn’t wear it. Why?” Red asked.

“They aren’t as useful as most people think. In a really hard impact, say above thirty miles per hour, they just shift around what gets damaged, and can actually cause injuries that you wouldn’t get without them. They’re useful if you fall over, and hit your head on a curb, but not much else.”

“What if you run into something, and get pitched over the handlebars?”

“That pretty much only happens in the movies. I’ve never seen or heard of it happening in real life. There’s almost no way to go over the handlebars without your body getting hung up on them. Usually, people come off to the sides, or back. Most of the injuries come from road rash where the pavement grinds off your skin, which is why leathers are so important. The worst injuries come from falling badly, or being run over by something. If you’re going fast enough to break things when you hit, there’s pretty much nothing you can do. A helmet can only protect

your head, and that's almost always the last place to hit anything."

"Why?"

"Remember, we're primates. Our distant ancestors hung around in trees. The ones that landed head first when they fell didn't live to have descendants. We're descended from the ones that automatically squirmed around to land right – feet first, then tuck and roll."

"The first time I came here," he added, "I saw a racer slide out on a corner. The bike started out sliding across the infield grass until something caught, and it flew almost straight up five or ten feet. By that time, the rider had gotten clear of it, and was ripping a furrow through the grass as he slid across on his butt – feet first, with his head held off the ground. When the bike came down, something caught again, and it flipped up in the air, again. It did that a third time before stopping. When friction slowed the rider enough, the sod stopped ripping, and he started bouncing, then he tucked, and rolled until he came to a stop. Then, he stood up, did a standing back flip to show everyone he was alright, and helped the emergency crew load the bike on a truck. The last I saw, he was straddling the bike in the back of the truck so it wouldn't fall over while they drove back to the pits."

"So, what's a helmet good for?"

"It keeps the sun and rain off your head. If you pile your hair up under it, the wind won't knot it up. The padding is good insulation when it gets cold. Oh, yeah, it's good protection in those few accidents where you actually hit your head," Doc laughed.

"Seriously, though," he continued, "just because they're not as useful as most people think doesn't mean they aren't useful at all. After all, it'd be pretty stupid to wear armor over your entire body while leaving your head exposed. While your head's not the most likely body part to be hit, and it's not the most vulnerable, either – we do have a built-in crash helmet in the form of a thick, bony skull – it can, and does get whacked. Sometimes for short trips in really nice weather, I don't wear a helmet, but you'll remember that I had it on when I first spotted you."

Red started window shopping with the jewelry display near the front of the store, but she didn't see anything

that stood out. Then, she fingered the displays of tee shirts, sweat shirts, and jeans. She spotted a couple of “cat suits” – full-body leotards with slashes and vents artfully cut into them to display a lot of skin while cleverly concealing just enough. She decided she didn’t want to be a walking peep show – at least not right now – and gave them a pass. She did pick out a medium-blue wool scarf.

“It’ll be good if it gets cold while we’re riding,” she said. What she was thinking, however, is how it would accent her red leathers.

“Unh-huh,” was all that Doc said, looking pleased, while giving no hint as to why.

When they got to the back wall, they found it decorated with a wide assortment of helmets. There were plain, solid color jobs, as well as those decorated with flames, stripes, pinstripes, and even airbrushed artworks depicting everything from dragons to nude women.

“I don’t think you need one of these,” Doc quipped, pointing at one of the nudes. “But this is a good range to give you ideas. Anything strike your fancy?”

“Where do I start?”

“For the moment, forget the decorations. That’s just paint. There are three basic styles. Well, maybe four. There’s the shorty, like this blue one, that just covers the top of your head. I put them in the same class as this fake-chrome Nazi-style thing. They look like what someone would wear who doesn’t want to wear a helmet, but is forced to. I can’t imagine them doing much good in a crash.”

“Then, there’s this half helmet, which is what I wear. It gives you a lot of protection, but keeps your ears uncovered so you can hear what’s going on around you. I’ve heard some riders complain that the wind makes a lot of noise whistling past their ears. They like an open-face helmet, which gives the back of your head and neck more protection, and covers your ears. I don’t mind the wind, and like hearing everything, so I prefer the half, but I’ve used both.”

“I’ve never gone for these full-face helmets. I imagine they’re like wearing a bucket over your head, and the face shield can fog up from your breath, but a lot of people like them. Women especially like them because they protect your face. You’ll find that you get a face full of everything thrown up from the road, plus an assortment of bugs, rocks, and so forth, some of which can be pretty nasty. I usually run a windshield for touring, but I still collect a lot of junk during a day of riding. I don’t mind, but you might. The full face makes conversation more difficult, and it’s difficult enough, anyway, but we could put an intercom in if you want that style.

“One more thing, with the full face, people can’t see anything, but your eyes. You’ve got nice eyes, and nobody’s going to mistake you for a guy, even if they can’t see your face well.”

“I think I’d like the full face, if we can find a good pattern. Otherwise, the half helmet.”

They didn’t find anything that jumped out at Red among the helmets there, so she decided to look elsewhere. Doc picked out an extra-extra-large man’s rain suit for her, and made her try it over her leathers.

“Make sure it’s too big,” he said. “It’ll be easier to get on. Everyone looks like a sack of potatoes in a rain suit, but if we get into rain, you won’t care what you look like. You’ll just want to be dry.”

Doc paid for their purchases, and they went door-to-door looking at helmets, and everything else.

Red even stopped in at a tattoo parlor, and looked through the books. While she ooh’d, and ahh’d over a couple of the patterns, she didn’t find one she thought she’d “want to wear for the rest of my life.” Doc admired a complex pattern with a yellow dragon wrapped around a yin-yang symbol, but didn’t go for it, either. They left empty skinned.

“What if I said I wanted to try drugs?” Red suddenly asked.

Doc’s face clouded over as he regarded her earnestly: “As a Zen Buddhist, I don’t think too highly of drugs. Why, is that something you’re considering?”

“Not really. I tried pot at school, but it left me feeling lazy for days afterward. I never tried anything else. I

like sports too much, and they drug test you if you enter any competitions. I was mainly curious about what you'd say. I didn't know you were a Zen Buddhist."

"No reason you should. I've managed to resist having it tattooed on my forehead."

"So, drugs are against your religion?"

"No. In fact opium is a favorite recreational drug in China, where Zen originated."

"Then, what's the hang up?"

"Drugs provide a cheap high that's similar to the satori Zen practitioners try to achieve. But, it's uncontrolled, and has both side effects, and after effects that are unpleasant. Drugs also tend to be addictive, which is as un-Zen as you can get. After achieving satori, Zen Buddhists generally lose interest in drugs, if they ever had any. Why waste time, money, and effort on a cheap imitation when you already have the real thing?"

"So, there isn't really a rule against it?"

"There aren't *any* rules for buddhas. You're expected to simply know what to do, and what to avoid. There are rules for students, who are too ignorant to be trusted to make right choices for themselves, and there are also rules that are part of the training. Your reaction to pot, by the way, would be typical of a Zen practitioner."

"What about alcohol?"

"Alcohol's down side is much less, as is its high. Most importantly, your body seems to clear it out much faster, and it need not be addictive. In moderation, alcohol has some good effects, just like caffeine. Some Zen practitioners avoid it, some don't. I don't."

"So, we can stop for a beer."

"Actually, after we get done here, I was planning to introduce you to the Iron Horse Saloon."

“We can get a beer there?”

“You can probably get anything you want there. You should be a little careful, though, if you don’t want to ride all day tomorrow with a big head.”

“Spoilsport!” Red exclaimed, but with a grin. Being long on athletics and academics, she’d never been a big party animal, herself.

Although, since she was letting loose her wild side, maybe she’d just

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Eventually, Red found a helmet she liked. She looked at all kinds of patterns before making a choice. She checked out solid colors, stripes, pinstripes. She particularly liked an airbrushed scene with a green dragon wrapped around on a solid red background, but not for her to wear. She didn’t think it was really “her.” She came close to choosing one painted with a stars and stripes pattern, but that wasn’t quite it, either. In the end, nothing could match the impact of a full-faced helmet that she found in the third shop they checked. It was simply painted with a solid red color that exactly matched the red of her leathers.

“It’s not clever, or artful,” she said ruefully, “But it just somehow looks ... I dunno ... would you say, more grown up?”

“I know what you mean,” Doc agreed. “The others look like they’re trying too hard, whereas the red one, combined with the leathers, has a lot more presence. The whole package looks solid, and real, and, well, more impressive.”

After purchasing the helmet, they went back to the first store they’d browsed, where Doc had seen a wireless intercom set he liked. After testing it with his helmet, which they’d retrieved from the bike’s tour pack, to make sure the intercom would work with both helmets, they bought it, and headed back to the bike.

Doc attached the headset to his helmet, while Red experimented with ways to put her new helmet on over her hair. She found the easiest was to simply stuff her hair inside the helmet as she pulled it over her head. She figured that piling it all inside would keep it from tangling in the wind, while avoiding the bother of tying it in a pony tail, which she'd have to stuff inside, anyway. A quick shake after she pulled the helmet off seemed to straighten it out, while leaving it with a very sexy wild look.

When both were ready, they chatted over the intercom for a few minutes to make doubly sure it worked. It did, so they got on the bike, and headed out for the Iron Horse.

When they got there, Red saw that the place didn't look like much from the street. There was a big sign proclaiming its existence, and announcing a live band. The sign stood over a smallish, mostly empty, paved parking lot in front of a long, low wooden building. There wasn't a single motorcycle in the parking lot, and Red started wondering what sort of biker bar it could be. The sign said it was "world famous," but you wouldn't know it from the front. What kind of biker bar has no motorcycles parked near it on the last night of a biker rally?

Rather than pulling up in the parking lot, however, Doc steered through an alleyway beside the building. There, Red saw what all the fuss was about.

The Iron Horse Saloon's main building housed a bar and general store, but most of the action took place in ramadas – basically sheds with a roof and three walls – open to a dirt parking area. These ramadas housed a bar with picnic tables for patrons to sit at or on, depending on their preference, a "restaurant" serving cafeteria style, and spaces for a number vendors.

As Doc steered the big Harley under a raised walkway from which patrons could survey everything that was taking place below, Red saw a parking area big enough to accommodate a few hundred motorcycles. On this night, it was packed wall-to-wall with motorcycles arranged in neat rows, except for part of the lot that was taken over by a bonfire near an open-air stage. When Red and Doc arrived, the stage show was already started, and half a dozen couples were dancing near the bonfire to the blues band up on the stage. Many more people were sitting around on benches, tables, or (mostly) on motorcycles, listening quietly.

The listeners were the only thing that was quiet, however. The band played loud enough to be heard over the sounds of unmuffled motorcycle engines driving in, and out, or around the parking area, or just being revved up. Conversations among several hundred bikers were shouted because, even in the farthest corners, the cacophony was deafening.

Doc drove slowly between the rows of motorcycles.

“Hold still!” he shouted through the intercom. Red realized that she’d been shifting around on her seat, looking at all the different things there were to see. Doc, meanwhile, had been maneuvering the big touring bike through the crowd at a walking pace. He’d yelled because Red’s wiggling threw the bike off balance, and he had to quickly put one foot down to save it from a fall, then brake to a stop, and put his other foot down as well to stabilize the thing.

“You can look around all you want when I get parked,” he said, “but until then, please sit still, and face forward. Slow riding’s the hardest thing to do on a bike. It’s almost impossible when you’re wiggling around.”

Chagrined, Red did as she was told, while Doc started forward again, quickly picking his feet up to the forward floorboards. Red was amazed that he could drive so slowly that way.

“How do you control it moving so slowly?” she asked.

“Practice – and concentration, so please don’t talk, either.”

Doc pulled up just ahead of a narrow space between two motorcycles. “Better hop off here. I can’t get it in with you on the back, and you’d never be able to get off when it got there.”

Red stepped off. Then, Doc walked the motorcycle back between the two parked bikes with just inches between its saddlebags and those of the other bikes. She could see that Doc was right. With just inches to spare, there was no room for a person on either side of the bike. Squeezing through a space between two other bikes, Doc unlocked and opened the tour pack. He then put his helmet in, and pulled a black leather cap out, making a big deal

of adjusting it on his head just so.

Following him between the bikes, Red pulled off her helmet, and shook out her long, red hair. Several nearby conversations suddenly broke off as their participants involuntarily turned to stare. Whether out of surprise, admiration, envy, or naked lust, bikers of both sexes couldn't take their eyes off her.

Noticing the stir, and recognizing the emotions her presence in the leather outfit incited, Red smiled broadly to Doc, who also had eyes for nothing but her. "I like this place!" she said.

Doc smiled back, arched one eyebrow, and said: "I do, too."

"Are you up for a beer," he continued, "or do you want to do some sightseeing first."

"I think the sightseeing will go better with beer," Red answered, trying to take everything in a once.

Doc led her on a convoluted course between motorcycles and around conversations, until they came to a bar tucked against the back wall of a particularly large ramada. Catching one of the two bartenders' eyes, he waved to her. After she finished pulling the beer she had started, and handing it to her customer, she walked over, and shouted, "Doc! I thought you'd pulled out. What'll you have? The usual?"

"I got sidetracked. Yeah, the usual," he called back. " 'Scilla, this is Red. Whatever she wants goes on my tab."

"Hi, Red. I'm Priscilla. Folks call me Pris, except that Doc likes 'Scilla just to be different," the bartender said, accepting the credit card Doc offered.

She regarded Red with a mixture of bartender friendliness, genuine good nature, and a bit of disappointment. She liked flirting with Doc, and she didn't think she could compete with this amazon for his attention. 'Scilla, herself, was about medium height, with a bony, anorexic figure. Her face was pretty in an emaciated way except for uneven teeth. Her hair was about the same color as Doc's, but, whereas his was professionally styled to best set off its natural waviness, (Why she hadn't noticed this before, Red couldn't say. Probably, it was because it didn't fit the

motorcycle-bum image she was still trying to force-fit him into.) ‘Scilla’s hair was thin, and straight, and unevenly cut just above shoulder length. What she lacked in physical attractiveness, however, she made up for in personality.

Deciding that her best reaction would be to make Red her new best friend, Pris (as Red decided to call her) brightened up, and asked: “What’ll ya have, sister?” Then, leaning back decisively, she flicked her index finger to point right at Red, and said: “You look like a Guinness girl! Am I right?”

“Sure,” Red replied, not having thought beyond the word “beer.” “Guinness would be great!”

“She really is a darling girl,” Doc said after ‘Scilla speedwalked to the other end of the bar to fill the orders. “Always happy and friendly, and loves conversation. She’ll talk as long as you want to listen, and listen as long as you want to talk. And, she works like a demon behind that bar at the same time.”

“Does she know you’re calling her by the name of a man-eating monster from Greek mythology?”

Flustered, Doc responded: “I mean no such thing! I just shortened Priscilla to the part of the word I like best. You thought I was talking about Scylla, the six-headed monster that decimated Odysseus’ crew at the Straits of Messina? No! Besides, Pris is the name of the homicidal nymphomaniac android in *Blade Runner*. That’s not a great comparison, either.”

Doc kept continually thwarting Red’s effort to fit him into a bike-bum stereotype. Now, he was rattling off references to literary works separated by nearly three thousand years. He even knew, off the top of his head, where the Greek story was supposed to have happened, which Red didn’t know, herself.

Just then, ‘Scilla (or Pris, depending on which monster reference you hang around the poor woman’s neck) came speedwalking back to them carrying two oversize plastic tumblers of dark brown foamy liquid, and a double-shot glass of amber rocket fuel. She put the darker brown tumbler down in front of Red, and arranged the other tumbler and the shot glass in front of Doc. Doc proceeded to pour the amber liquid into the foam. Putting a hand on either side of the tumbler, he started rotating it back and forth rapidly to mix the two liquids. After about thirty seconds, he picked the tumbler up, took a sip, and said: “Aaah!”

Red watched this performance critically, then said: “I thought you were having only one beer.”

“Well, this *is* only one beer,” Doc retorted defensively. “It’s one pint of Bass Ale with a double shot of Jack Daniels. That’s only one beer, isn’t it?”

With an indulgent smile, Red agreed: “That is only one beer, that’s true. ... If you only have one of them, and don’t count the double shot!”

“I tried drinking two of them once. It was at a bar up in Massachusetts, years ago. I went in and ordered one. It was about suppertime, and I ordered a burger or something’ as well. After eating, I nursed the drink while yakking with the other patrons for about an hour. Then the bartender offered me another on the house. Not being one to pass up free beer, I accepted – just to be polite, you understand. I nursed that one until closing time, then had to sit on the sidewalk next to my bike until about three o’clock in the morning before I was steady enough to ride home. I was a lot younger, and even stupider, then.”

“You don’t strike me as the mixed-drink type.”

“This is the only mixed drink I really like, although I did once have a really well made martini that was quite nice. Otherwise, it’s strictly beer, or whiskey straight up for me. But, this has a wonderful nutty flavor that I just love. It doesn’t really taste much like either the beer, or the whiskey. The flavors combine to create something unique.”

“You know, I can’t drive that motorcycle back to the motel.”

“You won’t have to. We can’t stay too late because we should get going early tomorrow, so I probably won’t even finish this.”

“See that you don’t,” Red said, feeling the need to exert some control over a situation that threatened to go otherwise. Maybe *she* was willing to let loose her wild side, but she didn’t want to be left with the pieces if *his* wild side got loose. She didn’t know how wild his wild side might be, but she suspected it was well beyond anything

controllable. She didn't want to find out for sure.

Doc noticed the change in attitude, but accepted it good naturedly. *He* knew just how wild his wild side could get!

As promised, Doc nursed his drink. Soon he was in animated conversation with another biker at the bar, and Priscilla and Red were pumping each other for information, each having her own separate agenda. Priscilla was assessing the competition, while Red was fishing for information about Doc.

"How long have you and Doc been together," Pris asked?

"I just met him today. We're not really *together*, just traveling together. I was on my way to Nevada when my car broke down. Doc's heading more or less the same way, so he offered me a ride. Have you known him long?"

"Since I got this job last year. They needed another bartender for last year's run, and I needed a job. Then, I stayed on. Doc shows up a few days before everyone else, and usually stays 'til a couple of days after the races end. He spends a lot of evenings here, when he isn't working. This year, he was supposed to leave right after the races on some personal business, but I guess not. When you came in, I thought you might be the personal business."

"What does he do?"

"I'm not sure. He seems to know a lot about electronics. What d'ya want in Nevada?"

"Um, it's family business," Red said evasively.

"D'ya like Doc?" Pris asked directly.

"Well, he's okay," Red replied, knowing Pris meant as a love interest. "He's certainly cute," she added. "He's big. He's got great muscles," she continued thoughtfully, "And he seems smart. He's also considerate in a rough

way.” She went quiet, thinking about what she’d said.

“But, I’m not looking for a man,” Red concluded, breaking her reverie, and changing her tone. “I’ve got too much going on, and I don’t think we have much in common.”

Looking at Red’s leathers, Pris said: “There’s motorcycles.”

“I’m not really a biker chick,” Red said, coloring slightly. “I just got this outfit today. Doc said I needed better clothing if I was going to ride for days, and days. I was wearing shorts, sneakers, and a tank top this morning.”

‘Scilla brightened when she heard this, then darkened again as she thought further. Then she said, flatly: “That’ll change. You like him.”

Red wanted to protest, but just stopped, and thought about what Pris had said. That was not the direction in which Red wanted things to go.

“It’s strictly business,” she said, lamely.

Priscilla raced off to serve another customer, leaving Red to think about the conversation. That was definitely not the direction she wanted to go. She had business to attend to that didn’t need to be complicated by romance. Especially, she didn’t need a romance with some motorcycle bum.

“Forget it, Red,” she said aloud to herself, unconsciously using the name Doc had coined for her.

“Doc,” she called out, “were we going to look around?”

“Red, this is Pet-Leg Pete,” he replied without answering the question, and indicating the biker he’d been talking to. “He’s crew chief on one of the race teams. They came in third today, and would rather come in first. We were talking about some changes that they hope might help make that happen. It’s work stuff, and we’ll need a few more minutes. Why don’t you check out the ‘Wall of Death’ show, which I think is going to start soon, then meet

me over in front of the bandstand?”

Red saw how Pete got the nickname Peg-Leg. He was even taller than Doc, but inclined to be fattish. As he shifted his considerable weight, most of which he leaned on the bar, she could see that his left leg was ramrod straight. Clearly, he'd once had a massive injury that left his knee locked. He carried an ornate wooden cane that he used to keep his balance while swinging his damaged leg to take a step when he walked. If the injury pained him, it didn't show in his round, jovial face, which was framed by ringlets of curly hair, and full beard that were a shade lighter red than Red's long mane.

To her surprise, he gave her only a passing glance. His entire attention was riveted on a napkin that Doc had been scribbling on. It was covered by what looked like an electronic circuit diagram. She'd seen such diagrams before, and learned to read them in freshman physics lab, but couldn't identify anything in this one.

“Peg, this is Red,” Doc continued, making introductions the other way. Pete looked up, and flashed her a vaguely disinterested smile. His attention was still on what he saw in the diagram, and she still hadn't registered on his consciousness. She wasn't used to this, and was somewhat annoyed.

“She's headed Out West on family business,” Doc continued, “but her car broke down, so I'm going to give her a ride. It'll be at least a week before I get back to work, but J.D. can take care of you.” Perceiving that Doc was now saying something that applied to his team's problem, Pete turned his attention that way.

“We'll figure out what you need, and I'll email it to him,” Doc promised. “Hopefully, he'll be able to get a head start on it tomorrow. By the time you get back to your shop, he'll at least have a plan. We probably can't get things done soon enough to do you any good for the next race, but we'll try. At least we can start getting some data that you can use later.”

Realizing that the men had become totally re-absorbed in Pete's problem, Red picked up her beer, and started picking her way to a largish round building with “Wall of Death” painted in big letters on its side. As she got nearer, she saw that it was a cylindrical building some twenty-plus feet across, and two stories high.

People had started ascending a stairway that led to a walkway surrounding the cylindrical wall. Joining them, she found that the building was actually a huge wooden barrel. The boards making up the sides were long two-by-six-inch planks running vertically from bottom to top of the circular wall. The catwalk placed the barrel's top a little over waist high for spectators to look down into the barrel's interior. The floor at the very bottom was flat, but tilted up at the sides so that it approximated a bowl with a rounded bottom and high vertical sides.

As the gallery filled, she heard the muffled roar of a motorcycle engine starting up. Spectators started talking excitedly among themselves, and elbowing to make sure they had a good view inside the barrel. "These guys are great!" A sandy-haired woman next to Red said to her.

"What do they do?" Red asked her.

"You just watch," her neighbor replied mysteriously. "You're gonna love this. You'll see."

The engine revving got louder, and the bursts of longer duration to pump up the crowd. As the bursts turned into long, high-pitched wails, a door built into the barrel's inside just above the inclined part of the floor flew open, banging loudly against the side, and a motorcyclist roared into the middle of the floor at full throttle, then made three turns around the flat part of the floor, and braked to a stop.

The rider was a tall, blonde man, who looked to be in his middle twenties. He wore a tight white tee shirt with "Wall of Death" emblazoned on it in the same lettering as on the building's outside. He also wore tight blue jeans cinched up by a cumberbund-wide black belt clasped by an enormous silver buckle. The pant legs, which were skin tight over his thighs, were just wide enough below his knees to go over heavy black motorcycle boots.

He was clean shaven, but wore his wavy blonde hair shoulder length, so that it streamed out behind him as he rode. His clothing was calculated to show his circus-performer's physique to best effect: tree-trunk-like legs leading up to an impossibly narrow waist, which broadened out into equally impossibly wide shoulders. As he turned around to wave to spectators in every part of the circular gallery (demonstrating his flexibility by effortlessly turning completely around to wave at spectators directly behind him without moving on the motorcycle

seat), those not treated to his beaming smile and wave got to view his massive V-shaped *latissimus dorsi* muscles. The men cheered with envy, and the women screamed with pleasure.

It was all perfectly choreographed.

After turning 360° twice to make sure everyone got their fill, he dropped his right hand to the throttle, and slowly steered the bike around the flat part of the floor one, two, three, four, and more times, each rotation at increased speed until he was a blur. As his speed increased, he leaned further and further into the turn until he seemed nearly horizontal.

Suddenly, the bike switched up to the inclined part of the floor, where it continued to accelerate until the motorcycle carried just enough speed so that it was pitched exactly perpendicular to the inclined part of floor supporting it. Next, the rider let go of the handlebars (obviously setting the throttle control to keep a steady pace), and stretched his arms out stiffly to the sides. After riding this way for just enough time to impress everyone, he brought his hands back down to the hand grips, and slowed the bike down, spiraling down to come to a stop once again in the middle of the floor.

As the sportscasters say: “The crowd went wild.” The woman next to Red started jumping up and down, clapping her hands over her head.

“Was I right? Did you love it?” she yelled to Red, as she stopped jumping up, and down.

“I loved it!” Red yelled back.

“Wait! There’s more!” the woman promised. Then, conspiratorially, she said to Red: “He makes me sooo wet!” Despite pretending to be conspiratorial, she said it loud enough that everyone else could hear, too.

Surprised, Red looked at her with a frozen smile. The woman had gone back to yelling, and bouncing around like a high-school cheerleader witnessing a game-winning touchdown. Red had thought that she’d known some uninhibited women at college, but was finding a whole new definition for the word “unrestrained.” Where the girls

at college had been acting uninhibited to show how free they were, this was the second woman she'd met tonight who wasn't acting. It was just the way they were, and never thought of behaving any other way, and neither one seemed to care what anyone else thought about it.

The woman, while nowhere near as tall as Red, still was above average height. While certainly not overweight, she didn't have Red's hard muscled athletic body, either. She showed the soft curves of a healthy young woman who never bothered with regular exercise. She wore black cowboy boots not unlike the pair Red had put in the motorcycle's saddlebag. A pair of worn-out blue jeans tucked into the boots molded themselves to her legs, and were cinched low and tight around her ample hips by a black belt with an ornate brass buckle. Just how low that belt buckle rode, and how narrow was her waist, was accentuated by a large rhinestone in her pierced navel that could easily be seen below her cut off denim jacket, which she wore with nothing underneath.

The jacket had shrunk to a few sizes too small before the sleeves were cut off, so the woman couldn't close any of the buttons over her breasts, which were not small. A short chain between the bottom button and its intended buttonhole kept the garment from flapping open and getting her arrested. It did not, however, prevent Red from getting a flashing view of her breast as she bounced up, and down excitedly.

Red was beginning to understand Doc's warning about deciding ahead of time how far she wanted to go. Looking around, she realized that *nobody* here cared what anybody else did, or what anybody else thought of what they did. If anything, they egged each other on to get more outrageous. It really would be easy to get carried away, as the sandy-haired woman was doing.

Red, however, decided that she hadn't yet reached her own limit. Not just yet. She was having more fun than she could remember, so, faking a conspiratorial look to each side, she said: "Me, too," just as loudly back to her neighbor, and joined in the clapping, and yelling. If the order of the day was encouraging outrageous behavior, she vowed to do it with the best of them.

Her newfound friend smiled, and turned her attention back to the performer in the barrel, who silenced the applause by overpowering it with the roar of his engine and started circling slowly again. Then he circled faster,

and faster, and jumped up to the incline again. Instead of setting his speed so the bike rode perpendicular to the incline, he kept accelerating until he really was riding horizontally, then steered the bike up onto the barrel's vertical inside wall.

The rider then began to ride higher, and higher on the wall, while going faster, and faster. By this time, the unmuffled engine was roaring at nearly full throttle. Its sound, which had been a staccato rapping, had risen to a steady buzz played at earthshaking volume. It sounded like a swarm of killer bees out of their minds on PCP.

As his orbit drew nearer the top, and closer to the spectators, the barrel's rim, already vibrating with the engine noise trapped in the confined space, began to sway each time the motorcycle came by. At first it was unsettling, but Red knew this was a professionally prepared thrill show, which meant the barrel was designed to sway for effect while being perfectly safe. After deciding to consider her fear unfounded, she let it go, and enjoyed immersing herself in the sheer power of the experience. She looked over at her neighbor, who was standing with her eyes closed holding onto the barrels rim, and swaying in, and out as the wood moved. Her smiling mouth half open, she breathed in, and out with the motion, enraptured.

Higher, and higher the motorcycle climbed, until it seemed Red could reach out, and touch it as it flashed by. Looking across the rim, she saw that a couple of spectators actually were reaching out to it, only to be restrained by big, tough bikers wearing yellow "Wall of Death" tee shirts. This show was as carefully controlled and choreographed as any circus high-wire act.

Soon, the motorcycle began rolling up, and down on the wall instead of just around. So, alternately it would roar by now practically within reach, then far away down the wall. This went on for a while, as the tempo of the bike's up, and down motion increased.

Suddenly, the spell was broken by the rider centering the motorcycle to orbit steadily half way up the wall, then slowly bringing the bike down the wall at ever decreasing power until finally, he brought it to a stop in the middle of the floor again.

The crowd went wild again. Red's neighbor stood glassy eyed with an ecstatic smile.

The rider suddenly juiced the throttle repeatedly. The roar of a second motorcycle joined in from outside the barrel like an echo. Then the two engine roars alternately pulsed as if they were calling to each other. The two engines pulsed faster, and faster, and louder, and louder. As they reached a crescendo, the door slammed open with a crash, and the second motorcycle burst in, skidding to a stop beside the first. The second rider was a smaller, younger looking version of the first rider, with darker hair.

Holding still just a fraction of a second, the second rider turned his bike to start circling the flat part of the floor. A fraction of a second later, the first bike turned to follow. The two bikes circled in formation, keeping exactly opposite each other in the barrel. After a few turns at that slow speed, they began accelerating, keeping the same spacing as if they were at opposite ends of an invisible rod that pivoted around the barrel's center.

As they gradually picked up speed, the second rider jumped his bike up onto the inclined part, followed by the first rider. The door slammed shut just before the lead bike crashed into it. Then the two bikes began alternating between riding on the incline, and riding on the flat floor. Again, the tempo picked up until it seemed impossible for the two riders to keep in time.

Suddenly, both riders were on the incline with their arms straight out to their sides. Then, they both stood up in unison, and rode around the incline with their arms out while standing on the footpegs. In another sudden shift, they jumped up to stand on the saddles with their arms out. After a few turns in this position, both simultaneously dropped to their seats with their hands on the handlebars.

Then, the first rider, who was still following the younger rider, rapidly accelerated, quickly catching up to his bike. Just as a rear-end collision seemed inevitable, the older rider jumped his bike up onto the vertical wall and whizzed past. The second rider accelerated to match the first rider's pace, and also jumped onto the vertical wall to follow one half rotation behind.

The two motorcycles started the bobbing and weaving motion up and down the barrel sides again, this time

alternating so that when one was high, the other was low. As if on signal, (which it probably was) both riders moved to the middle of the vertical wall, and stabilized with one following the other a half rotation behind.

Next, they both put arms to their sides, and rode there in formation for a few rotations, then started bobbing and weaving again, but with their arms out. Again the bobbing, and weaving tempo rose slowly to a feverish pitch, then suddenly stopped with both bikes riding half way up the wall.

Keeping their arms outstretched, they simultaneously stood on the pegs for one rotation, then jumped to stand on the seats. Finally, they started bobbing and weaving while standing on the seats. At each bob and weave, the riders steered the bikes by shifting their weight slightly in the artificial gravity created by the motion. So, from Red's viewpoint, she saw both riders standing on the seats with their heads nearly touching at the barrel's center axis. In opposition, they swayed up and down (which for them was side-to-side), with the bikes following suit. The lower rider would sway upward, while the upper rider would sway downward. The lower rider's bike would then drift upward, while the upper rider's bike drifted down. Again, the sound, motion of the barrel rim, and steady cacophonous roar mesmerized the spectators.

Forming up again in the middle of the barrel's height, the riders dropped into the seats, and brought the bikes down to a standstill at the bottom to the sound of another wild ovation. When the applause started to die down, the riders turned their bikes, and rode out through the door.

But, the motor sounds did not stop, or even die down. Clearly, something else was in store.

Suddenly, the older rider burst back onto the floor, executed three circuits, and stopped in the middle of the floor. He wasn't alone, though. A young woman sat on the handlebars wearing black chaps over a black leather bikini and knee-length spike-heeled boots. Red did a double take when she recognized the woman as the bartender, Pris. In that outfit, wearing stage makeup, and her hair pulled into a ponytail, she looked far more attractive than she had behind the bar.

The look on her face was a combination of excitement, exhilaration, and "what have I gotten myself into"

fear. How much of it was put on, Red couldn't tell. Clearly, Pris had done this before, because she sat the handlebars assuredly, with her legs relaxed on either side of the front wheel, and her feet on footpegs attached to the front-wheel pivot.

"Pris looks scared," Red commented, not really expecting her neighbor to know the bartender by name.

"Yeah, she's trying something new tonight, but I don't know what it is," the woman replied, obviously knowing Pris better than Red did. "She's been practicing it all week, but never did it before a crowd. I think it's more butterflies than anything."

"Yo, Pris!" the woman yelled, waving violently, then pumping her fist in a circular motion, which gave Red another look at her breast at each pump.

Pris didn't seem to hear. She was focused intently on what she had to do.

The rider turned the bike to start the familiar rotation around the barrel's floor, then jumped up to the incline. When he'd stabilized the motorcycle at the incline's middle, Pris stretched her hands out to the sides. Red noticed how the tight chaps on Pris's narrow legs made them look impossibly long, and the high, narrow cut of the leather bikini bottom behind the chaps appeared starkly revealing, while actually revealing nothing.

Pris was standing on the footpegs attached to the front wheel's axle bearing, and leaning on a pad wrapped over the middle of the handlebars. The pad reached just to where the tops of Pris's thighs met her buttocks, giving her excellent support while allowing her to move her upper body freely.

Pris used that freedom to position her upper body "vertically" with respect to the motorcycle. That is, the line of her spine was ramrod straight on the motorcycle, which was inclined at right angles to the inclined boards it was riding on. Pris then extended her arms to the sides. After a few rotations, the rider stretched his arms out to the sides as well. Then, both began rhythmically waving their arms in a motion like birds beating their wings.

The rider put his hands back to the handgrips, and accelerated the bike up onto the vertical wall while Pris

continued the birdlike motion with her arms. Then, she stopped the beating, and just kept her arms outstretched.

Stabilizing the motorcycle in the middle of the wall, the rider stretched his arms out, too, and started the up, and down motion of the motorcycle on the wall. After several turns in this position, Pris leaned backward until her head was in the rider's lap, and her shoulders rested on his thighs. Her arms were still outstretched to the sides so that her fingertips nearly touched the track every time the bike leaned to turn upward or downward on the wall.

Soon, the rider dropped his hands to the handgrips, and brought the bike back to the middle of the wall. Pris brought her arms in, and sat straight up. Then, she reached her hands down to the handlebars, and pushed her weight back so she was sitting directly on the fuel tank. Gingerly, she swung her feet around to sit facing backward on the tank.

"This must be the new part," Red's neighbor commented.

Pris put her hands on the rider's shoulders, and hooked her heels behind his waist. Then, with a mighty pull, she slid down the tank to hug the rider with both arms and legs.

"Ohhhh!" exclaimed Red's neighbor as Pris's crotch met the rider's belly. Startled, Red looked over to see her standing stiffly clutching the barrel's rim. Her staring eyes were wide as saucers and shining brightly, while her tongue reached out and up so that its tip pressed against the outside of her front teeth.

"Nnnngggh!" she said.

Red gasped, and the woman looked over. Seeing she'd been observed, she flashed Red a lecherous grin, waggled her behind, and winked. Then, she turned back to look into the barrel.

8

"I'm Annie," the sandy-haired woman said as they descended the stairs after the performance, the remainder of which had consisted of Pris taking various poses with her legs wrapped around the rider's narrow waist, all of

which were designed to show the bikini to maximum advantage. First, Pris had leaned back along the tank with her arms outstretched so that her fingertips again nearly touched the boards as the bike leaned one way, then the other. Then, she'd stretched full length over the bike's front end to touch the footpegs on the front wheel's axle. All to Annie's continued delight.

Annie apparently was alone, since she continued walking close to Red, making no move toward any other companion in the crowd.

"Call me Red," Red responded. "You really seemed to enjoy that show," she added lamely.

"Oh, yeah!" Annie replied excitedly. "Let's go get a beer. Then, I gotta dance this off," Annie continued, giving Red's arm a sisterly hug.

Doc finally found them on the dance floor in front of the stage. He sat on a nearby picnic table to watch. Sipping his still only half finished boilermaker, he saw the two women were dancing unsteadily to a boogie-woogie beat. An amused smile fixed itself on his face when he saw that, rather than dancing separately, they were dancing together – with a lot of body contact.

Doc wondered how much of the body contact was Red's idea. Her companion was clearly leading the moves, but Red didn't seem to be holding back. From the slightly dazed look in her eyes, though, he questioned how much of this she'd recall in the morning. Doc surmised that alcohol disrupted any ideas still attempting to cross Red's mind in any coordinated way. She looked totally blotto.

When the band took a break between sets, the two women saw Doc sitting on the table top, and walked toward him.

"Doc, this is Annie. She's been teaching me about dirty dancing," Red started to say, when she realized that Annie had already swarmed into Doc's lap, wrapped her arms around his neck, and pulled his face to hers for an intense, open-mouthed kiss.

Doc put the plastic cup down on the table top next to him, then wrapped his arms around Annie's back to pull her tightly to him. Annie responded by rubbing her chest in a motion that spread the sides of her jacket wide so that her breasts were in direct contact with the black tee shirt covering Doc's chest. As Red stared, the kiss expanded into a full tongue-down-the-throat job.

When they came up for air, Doc looked up at Red, smiled, and said: "I'll bet she was!"

Then, looking back down to Annie, he said: "She's too tall for you."

"Doc, you know I like my women big."

"You like everything big."

"That's why I like *you*," Annie concluded, rubbing her breasts into Doc's chest again.

Suddenly, Annie stopped, pulled back slightly to look directly into Doc's eyes, and said: "Hey, I didn't know Red was your girl." Then, as if in a sudden inspiration she added: "Do you guys have a room?"

"Yes, and yes," Doc replied.

Shocked to sobriety, Red suddenly realized she'd been rubbing bodies (and secretly enjoying it) with a nymphomaniac who now turned out to be a flaming lesbian as well. This was definitely what Doc had warned her against. Now, Annie was proposing they spend the night in a sybaritic *menage a trois*.

Oh, no! Doc was obviously on fluid-swapping terms with Annie. Being a man, he'd think a three-way was a great idea, and was about to make it happen. What could Red do to get out of this one?

Near panic, she looked up at Doc, expecting to see a lecherous leer, and dripping fangs.

Instead, he was looking intensely into her eyes, as if he could see right into her mind. He'd seen them dancing. What if she really *was* lesbian, and didn't know it? What if Doc could see it in her eyes? What if he didn't see how scared she was? What if he didn't care?

Doc's expression changed to a kindly big brother smile, as he read these thoughts on her face. "Not tonight, Annie," was what he said. "We have to ride early tomorrow, and need to sleep. In fact, I came over to drag Red off, so I could put her to bed right away."

"You mean 'take her to bed' – by yourself. Why are you being so greedy?"

After a good deal of discussion, Doc convinced Annie that he wasn't going to allow her into Red's bed. Pouting, Annie danced off to look for other prey.

"How much booze did she get into you?" he asked Red.

"Three more pints of Guinness."

Laughing aloud, he said: "I thought so. Even so, you handled it well."

"I'm embarrassed. If you hadn't been here, who knows what she'd have gotten me to do. In fact, for a minute there, I thought you were going to hold me down for her."

"I'm not that cruel. I *do* know what she'd have tried to get you to do. What you would have done had I not been here, I don't know, but you would have handled it alright, I'm sure."

"But, I was here," he continued. "That particular test has been postponed. You have time to think about what you'll do the next time."

"Next time?" Red asked, nervously.

"There's always a next time. Everyone gets such opportunities all the time. And, every time it comes up, they learn something about themselves, and about those propositioning them."

"Does it happen to you? I mean, invitations to have sex with men."

"Of course. Over the years, I've learned that sex with other men simply does not interest me. I have

homosexual friends. I like them as people, but not as sex partners. Those who understand, and can accept that, continue to be my friends. Those who don't are encouraged to go play somewhere else."

"But, I was having fun. Does that mean I'm a homosexual?"

"It means you were drunk out of your skull. What most people never allow themselves to realize is that human bodies feel pretty much the same, no matter what sex they are. What's important is how you feel *about* those bodies, and that's a whole lot more complicated."

"What'll I do? I don't want to be a dyke."

"Stop worrying about it," Doc said, laughing slightly. "Go home and sleep off the booze. Then, you can think about it if you want to."

"You're lucky, actually," Doc continued. "You got a good feel (literally) for what it's like before you really had to make a choice. Most people have to decide without knowing. After you're sober, you've the rest of your life to think about it, and decide who you are, who you want to be, and who you want to have sex with."

"I like men."

"Good. That's a start. Some day you'll be equally sure about women. Right now, I'm sure you're drunk, and it's past your bedtime."

Red followed Doc over to where his motorcycle was parked, and stood around waiting while he brought it out from the tightly packed line. He helped her maneuver the full-face helmet over her head, then held the bike vertical while she climbed on. Her long legs again made it easy to swing her leg over the seat, but she had to lean heavily on Doc's shoulders to keep her balance.

The drink had gotten to her again, so instead of leaning back against the seat's backrest as she did on previous rides, she put her arms around Doc's chest. She was surprised by a jolt of pleasure surging through her body as it came in contact with his. His body reacted with a slight shudder that told her he felt it, too. So, she

pulled him close, and held on, leaning her helmet against his shoulder. By the time they reached the motel parking lot, she was asleep.

Doc leaned the bike on the kickstand, which motion jarred Red partially awake. Doc leaned her back into the passenger's seat, and unclasped her hands from around his chest. Making sure she was awake enough to stay in the seat, he dismounted himself, then practically lifted her from the seat.

Leaning on Doc, she weaved over to her door, and tried to unlock it. After a couple of attempts to fit the key card in the slot, she had to let Doc do it. Then, he leaned her over his shoulder to pick her up in a fireman's carry. He carried her over to the bed, and rolled her off his shoulder, so she flopped on her back across the bed, her head lolling over the far edge.

While she snored, he peeled her boots off one by one, and stood them up near the night stand next to the bed. Then he sat her up and peeled off her jacket, which she'd kept on the entire evening despite the soft, warm weather.

Then, he confronted his dilemma: whether to bow to propriety and leave her in her leathers, or bow to comfort and strip them off before tucking her in between the sheets. He thought how it would feel to spend the night sweating into tightly fitting stiff new leathers, then have to wear them all day the next day. Then, he thought about how it would feel to sleep between nice clean sheets, and wake up to put on leathers that had been airing out for several hours.

He decided propriety be damned.

Standing Red up, Doc unzipped the red leather jumpsuit and peeled it off her shoulders. She stopped snoring, but didn't seem to wake up. Instead, she stood sleeping on her feet like a zombie, so he sat her back down, and worked her arms out of the jumpsuit: first the left, then the right. When he pushed her back down on her back, she started snoring again.

Working the jumpsuit out from under her, he pulled its legs off over her legs. Turning one of the chairs around to face the bed a few feet away, he arranged the jumpsuit over the back with the zipper wide open to let the

interior air out. Then he put the boots on the floor in front of the chair.

“There, when you wake up, you won’t have to go on a snipe hunt around the room looking for them,” he said to the unconscious form on the bed.

He’d laid her down across the foot of the bed to make it easier to peel back the bedclothes. He then picked her up, again slinging her over his shoulder, and laid her on the mattress, head on the pillow. He pulled the sheet and thin blanket up over her, figuring that if that was too much she’d wake up enough to push it off. The thick feather bed the motel used as an outside cover he pulled all the way to the bottom so that she could roll over wherever she felt most comfortable without getting back under its stuffiness.

When he made a final adjustment of the sheet, and blanket, she rolled toward him onto her side and said: “Nnnnggh.”

Then, opening one eye, she asked, coyly: “You aren’t going to take advantage of me?”

Chuckling he said: “Not this time. I’m here to help you, not take advantage. Good night.”

Then, on impulse, he kissed her gently on the hair above her ear, and tiptoed out, quietly shutting the door.

Smiling, she said “Nnnnggh” again and went back to sleep.

Three hours later, she awoke from an erotic dream. Turning over softly, she slipped her hand inside her panties. Murmuring, “Doc,” she soon went back to sleep.

9

Doc woke to a desperate banging on his door. Looking around, he saw that it was just past dawn. Pulling on a pair of jeans, he went to the door to let in an embarrassed Red, who was clad only in a large bath towel, with a second towel wrapped in a turban around her head.

“When I woke up, I took a shower,” she breathlessly explained. “Then I went out to get clean underwear from the bike. When I got there, I found I couldn’t get into the saddlebags because they’re locked, and I don’t have a key. Then, I couldn’t get into my room again because I forgot my key card. Did I wake you?”

Pulling one of the chairs out from the table in a corner of his room, Doc said: “Please come in, and sit down Ms. McKenna. Your clothes, including your clean underwear, are in your room where you put them yesterday afternoon before we went out.”

“Oh, I’m such a shithead!” she groaned, sitting down, and burying her face in her hands, exactly as Doc had found her by the side of the road the previous morning.

“No, you’re hung over and trying to function as if you weren’t. You sit there, and give in to feeling punk. I’ll dig up some aspirin and a large glass of this excellent sulphur-tainted tap water. Then, you’ll apply said first-aid remedy while I call the front desk to open your room. Then, I’ll take *my* shower while you sit there looking pretty, until someone comes to unlock your door. We can meet in the lobby, where they have a continental breakfast already laid out.”

She did exactly as she was told – that is to say, she sat there feeling punk – while he did as he promised. As advertised, the tap water smelled vaguely of rotten eggs, but it washed down the aspirin, and helped assuage her raging thirst. She hadn’t realized how thirsty she’d been until she felt the water pour down her throat. As soon as it hit her stomach, she felt all the tissues in her body simultaneously breathe a sigh of relief. She felt like a dry sponge put down in a puddle of water.

“That should help until we get you involved with something more drinkable,” Doc commented.

Turning to the telephone, he pressed “0” for the front desk, and waited.

A few seconds later, he said: “The lady in room one-zero-four has managed to lock herself out. Could you send a knight in shining armor to rescue her by letting her into her room?”

He listened for a few more seconds.

“She left the key on her table, and the door closed before she could get back to it.”

Some more listening. Then his face clouded over.

“That might be possible, but she’s rather naked. While any male guests she might meet in your lobby, or on the way there, might be quite amused, their wives would not be. You would then find yourself confronted by a six-foot, three-inch wet hen who will blame *you* for her predicament. I don’t think you’d like that. In fact, I can pretty much guarantee that she’d make sure you didn’t like that.”

More listening.

“Good. When you get here, knock on the door to room one-zero-five. She’ll be cowering here waiting for you. Oh, by the way, please bring her a large bottle of very cold water while you’re at it. Thanks.”

“You seem to be in a good mood,” Red said, sarcastically.

“I am,” Doc responded. “It’s a beautiful day. Unlike some people we know, I didn’t drink a lot last night, and I got a good night’s sleep. I feel great. On top of that, a beautiful lady woke me up – which is better than an alarm clock any day, even if she is my employer – and I’ve already managed to do her a service. Things are going very well for me.”

Despite her hangover mood, Red found herself amused. Smiling wanly she said: “Your employer is grateful. Alright, you can stay on for another day. I’ll probably kill you in the morning.”

Laughing, Doc said: “Aha, you’ve seen *The Princess Bride*, too. That’s what the Dread Pirate Roberts said to what’s his name ... Leslie? No, that was in *The Great Race*. Westley! ... every morning for umpteen years while grooming him to take over the ship.”

Red fixed him with a grumpy stare, and said nothing.

“I’ll just go take my shower, then,” he concluded sheepishly.

And he did.

Red undid her towel-turban, and used it to dry her hair while waiting for her rescuer to come from the lobby. Despite things, she found that she was having a good time, again.

She realized that she was still in her adventure, and it was still exciting. Even her hangover, which wasn’t all that bad because she’d slept most of it off, provided an additional challenge to add spice to her adventure.

Even getting locked out of her room naked (well, almost) turned out to be fun. She was looking forward to the look on the face of whoever came to let her in. “You’re getting to be quite the little exhibitionist,” she told herself.

The look on the desk clerk’s face was a mixture of relief and disappointment when the woman who opened the door of room 105 was dressed in a towel, instead of being buff naked. Relief because he’d had no idea how to act around the beautiful amazon he’d checked into room 104 yesterday when she was fully clothed, and now he was asked to interact with her professionally when she was naked. Although his training in hotel/motel management did cover such situations theoretically, actually facing it for the first time with such an intimidatingly attractive creature was quite a different matter.

His mood included disappointment because he’d been looking forward to the experience. His disappointment was tempered by the fact that she was so tall that even the oversize bath towel was barely large enough to cover the geography it was being asked to hide. Altogether, he found himself in an exquisite difficulty.

Red followed the involuntarily grinning desk clerk to the door marked 104, and into the room. Looking around, she spied her new shoulder bag on the long, low credenza supporting the television. She had a naughty impulse to give the clerk a “beaver shot” under the towel as she leaned over her bag to extract her wallet to give him a tip. Deciding that discretion was the better part of valor, she suppressed the impulse. Picking up the bag, and turning to face the clerk, she rummaged in it, pulled out the wallet, and handed him a couple of small bills.

Smiling coyly, she almost gave him a peck on the cheek as he turned to leave the room, but she decided not to go there, either.

Without thinking why, she put on her sexiest pair of panties under the leathers. She dispensed with a bra, as, since Dolores ripped out the original padding, the full cut of the jumpsuit leather supported her breasts well. It promised to be a warm day, and she figured a bra would just make it warmer without doing anything useful.

After dressing, she slung her bag over her shoulder and carefully put the key card to her room in it. She double checked that it was there before allowing the door to close.

Red was on her second large glass of orange juice when Doc walked into the lobby, and sat down opposite her at the table she'd chosen for its strategic location in full view of anyone entering the room (making it easy for him to find her when he arrived) combined with close proximity to the liquid-dispensing machines.

"Ahh, the color of that suit matches the bloodshot in your eyes," he said. "That'll learn you about letting bisexual nymphomaniacs buy you drinks! Would you like some coffee, too? Or, aren't you hydrated enough for coffee, yet?"

"I'll go up with you. I'm famished, and those sausages and scrambled eggs look good."

Doc agreed, but added a cheese danish to his plate as well. Then, he went back for coffee and juice. Red went light on the sausages and eggs, despite claiming to be famished, and she opted for a third glass of juice instead of coffee.

"They're going to cut me off for drinking all their juice," she said when she got back to the table.

"There's more where that came from, so I wouldn't worry. The desk clerk's scared of you, anyway."

"So," he changed the subject, "are you almost ready for your first full day on a motorcycle, or have you been on motorcycle trips before?"

“Well, I’ve been on short rides across town with friends, but never hour after hour.”

“What I like to do is fill the tank before starting out,” Doc explained, “then run it down to its reserve, which takes about four hours on that bike. Then I stop for lunch, refill the tank, and run that one out before stopping for dinner. I usually stop for a break about every two hours as well. The biggest problem is having to pee, so going light on the coffee is a good idea.”

“I thought of that, but I don’t think that’ll be much of a problem today. I’m still dying of thirst.”

“I’m not surprised. You didn’t have much to drink yesterday except booze. Even that little amount of riding we did was enough to make you dry. Dehydration is a major danger on a long motorcycle trip. You don’t realize how much water you’re losing until it’s too late.”

Red chewed her breakfast thoughtfully for a while, then asked a little shyly: “What are you supposed to wear underneath these leathers?”

“Well, I’ve never worn a jumpsuit. While they do make the masculine equivalent, I prefer leather pants and a jacket, with a regular outer shirt under the jacket. Otherwise, it’s up to you, and the weather. On a warm day like this, you can get away with just about anything. It’s better to be overly warm than overly cool.”

With a sly smile, he added: “Our girlfriend, Annie, now, would wear nothing under the tightest pants she could get into, just for the stimulation.”

“Don’t call her *my* girlfriend!” Red retorted, but with a smile. “You’re the one who was swapping spit with her.”

“She *is* a wonderful spit swapper. That’s for sure. But, seriously, underwear will help keep your leathers fresher, and if you don’t wear socks, your boots will get stinky. Of course, I’d be happy if you wore nothing at all under *that* suit.”

“I’ll bet you would!”

Doc sat still with a wolfish smile for a few seconds thinking about it. Then he returned to the present, and said: “Start out dressing for the coldest part of the day, which is usually when you first start out, anyway. Remember, it feels like sitting on a park bench in temperatures about twenty degrees cooler than the thermometer says. You want to start out with your jacket on, and zipped up. Then, add whatever you need underneath to keep you comfortable. As the day warms up, you can unzip the jacket. Then, if it’s still too warm, you can unzip the jumpsuit part way.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you.”

“Is that any way to talk to the hired help? I wouldn’t see it, anyway, sitting in front of you. What I meant is that there’ll be a lot of wind. Letting in even a little bit of that breeze in will cool you off a lot. The point is that you can’t take the jacket off until we stop. Later on, unzipping the jumpsuit might make the difference between being comfortable, and roasting. I’m just pointing out the options. I don’t think today will be especially hot, or cold, though. You’ll probably end up wearing the jacket all day, just unzipping it in the afternoon.”

“Now, if you don’t mind,” Doc said, waving a newspaper he’d picked up in the lobby, “I need to find out what the prickly shits have been up to.”

“The *what*?”

“It’s a term Robert Ludlum used in *The Road to Omaha* to refer to all the so-called-important people in the world, who do things to suit their own purposes, even if they screw things up for the rest of us. You know: politicians, bank regulators, terrorists. People like that. I didn’t particularly like the book, but that term says it so well”

“Ahhh,” Red said, nodding agreement. “It does convey the message clearly, and concisely, although I don’t think that old-lady Sunday-school teacher over there approves of it.”

“I don’t care what she thinks,” Doc commented. “What’s important is whether it offends *you*.”

“Hey, I’m a college girl. Aren’t we supposed to like raunchy things, just to show how liberated we are?”

“Well, you’re not a goofy freshman, just out of high school and trying to prove you’re grown up. You’re ready to graduate from one of the most intellectually demanding universities in the most smarty-pants part of the country, with a degree in a subject that gives most people phobias. That qualifies you as a fully licensed adult in my book. If you have a preference, I’m ready to accede to it.”

With a pleased smile, she said: “I don’t really mind, but don’t use it too much. It could wear thin awfully fast. Do you read the paper every day?”

“Not this one, it’s written to appeal to your average thirteen year old. But, it’s the only one in the lobby.”

“Once again, you didn’t answer my question,” Red said, frowning. “Now, *that’s* getting annoying. Are you hiding something?”

“I just don’t want to talk about me. If you must know, stock-market investing is a bit of a hobby with me. To have any success at it, you have to keep up with current events.”

“The man has unknown depths! Are you a fundamentalist, or a technician?”

“It’d be stupid to be either. You have to use both. I like to use fundamental analysis to decide which companies I want to own, and technical analysis to figure out when to buy and sell based on stock-price patterns.”

“Most investors disagree. They believe in one, or the other.”

“Most investors screw up, not that I *don’t* screw up, but you never really have enough information to make a decision, anyway. It’s stupid to ignore any that’s available just because somebody slapped one label on it, and you ‘believe’ in a different label.”

“If you never have enough information to make a decision, how do you ever make one?”

“You gather what information you can, then make an educated guess. It can be scary as all get out, but that’s

part of the attraction.”

“You mean it’s like gambling?”

“Sort of. The psychology is probably the same, but you can stack the odds in your favor. Casino-style gambling is too much like assisted suicide, because the odds are always stacked against you. Financial investing is more like dangerous work. You have the risk of getting creamed, but the odds are that you can get out with a whole skin.”

By the time they’d worn this discussion out, and together scanned the headlines in vain for anything that might be worth knowing, it was nearing nine o’clock, and long past “an early start.” Doc was desperate to get on the road. They cleared the table, left the newspaper neatly folded on it, and headed back to their rooms to pack the bike.

Red took Doc’s comment about footwear to heart, and put a pair of athletic socks on under her boots. At Doc’s suggestion, they’d left most of her belongings packed in her suitcase in her car. Doc had, for some reason that Red thought was strange at the time, suggested that she bring all of her underwear, extra tee shirts, toilet items, and jewelry with her to the motel. They’d scrounged a plastic bag from Bill at the garage to use as an overnight bag.

As a result, she ended up with exactly the items she needed for the long trip, but nothing else. All she had to do was move them, along with her new jeans, sweatshirt, and black boots (which she now saw as spare clothes for when she wanted to get out of the leathers), and the clothes she’d worn yesterday (wrapped in the plastic bag to keep them separated from her clean clothes) into the liner for the right-hand saddle bag.

Coincidence? Yesterday, she’d have had alarm bells going off in her head. Now, however, she just shrugged it off as another example of Doc having contingency plans laid out six moves ahead. She resolved never to play chess against him for money.

Doc walked in just as she was slinging her leather bag over her neck so it couldn’t slip off her shoulder.

Looking around, he said: “You might want to leave a tip for housekeeping. They work hard enough for the little money they get. Besides, it’s good policy for bikers, especially, to tip heavily. We’ve got a bad reputation to live down, so it’s good PR.”

“How much?”

“Enough to say ‘thanks.’ I like to leave a dollar a night. It’s my one exception to my rule of always conserving cash on a trip.”

“So, giving the desk clerk two dollars for opening my door was the right thing to do?”

“Yes. I usually figure a dollar for every time a hotel employee goes out of their way for me. A dollar a bag whenever they schlep luggage. A dollar a night for the maid, and so forth. The desk clerk went way out of his way this morning – he had to find someone to cover his post, then walk all the way out here, and back – so I plan to give him an extra ten from me as well, along with a big thank you.”

“Was my two dollars not enough?”

“No, nobody expects someone to come up with big bills on the spur of the moment, or for every service. A dollar would be normal. Paying the tip right away told him that you appreciated his help. The second one showed extra appreciation for his inconvenience. I hope you gave him a smile, too.”

“I almost gave him a kiss.”

“Well, that would have been too personal. Remember, they meet dozens, or even hundreds of strangers every day. Let them keep you at arm’s length.”

Together, they did a final walk through to make sure she hadn’t left anything, with Doc quickly opening every drawer and cupboard, and even peeking under the bed. When they were both satisfied, Red picked up the saddlebag liner, which she now thought of as her suitcase, in one hand, her helmet in the other, and walked out through the door. After her dawn fiasco, she held the door open with her foot just long enough to verify that she

had her key in hand, then let it close.

Doc had already cleared out his room, and packed his stuff on the bike. He handed Red the keys so she could put the liner in “her” saddlebag.

“Do I have to carry this bag all the time?” she asked, indicating her shoulder bag.

“Not if you don’t want to. Just put it into the tour pack.”

Red did so, and was about to ask what route Doc had planned, when she saw him pulling a large map book out of a large pouch mounted on the motorcycle’s fuel tank.

“I plan to take Route 95 north to Route 10 in Jacksonville. That takes us by the Southern Route to Phoenix by way of Tucson. I thought we might stay at my apartment in Scottsdale for a day or so. We can do some research to learn as much as possible about your father, his claim, and the situation in Nevada. Then, we can decide what to do next.”

“We go find him! That’s what this is all about.”

“Yes, but we can’t just walk out in the mountains and yell ‘Daddy, where are you?’ We need to narrow it down as much as possible from Scottsdale. We’ll probably have to check records in Carson City, too. Besides, by the time we get to Scottsdale, I’m not going to want to sit on this thing anymore. You’ll probably feel the same.”

“Look, I have coordinates for where his claim is. Let’s just go there, and look.”

“Before I go there,” Doc insisted, “I want to see some satellite photos. For all we know, it’s right next to a highway underneath a Burger King. In that case, we fly to Carson City and rent a car to get to it. On the other hand, it could be half way up a mountain in the remotest part of the Sierras. I’ve flown over that area. There are places you couldn’t get a horse into, never mind a car, or even a motorcycle. We may have to hike in and camp. We don’t know any of that now, but we can find out in Scottsdale.”

Red wondered what he meant by “flown over.” Commercial airliners fly too high to see the kind of features he was implying.

“What if somebody’s already mining there?” he suggested, bringing her mind back to the discussion. “You’d want to know who owned the operation, and what their connection is to your father. What if there was foul play? If so, you sure wouldn’t want to walk in and announce yourself as Jim McKenna’s daughter about to look under every rock to find out what happened to him, now would you?”

“You think there was foul play?” She looked horrified.

“I have no information whatsoever. That means all possible scenarios are equally probable. That’s why I want to get as much information as possible in Scottsdale, where I have friends that can help if we need it. No good commander will sally forth from his home turf without first sending out scouts to learn as much as possible about the enemy’s position. Read your *Art of War*, fer goshsakes!”

“Scottsdale is not my home turf.”

“It is while you’re with me. I may not know anything about mining, or Nevada mining claims, but Scottsdale’s right down the street from Arizona State University, and all the cops, lawyers and experts in Phoenix. The telephone connects to anyone you want to talk to in the world. The computers can download any information available on the ‘Net. It’s all being handed to you on a platter, along with a spare bedroom at the end of the day. Your plan has us wandering around in the wilderness bumping into trees,” he said, starting to show irritation.

Red didn’t like the idea that their best course of action just happened to involve making Doc’s apartment home base, but what he said made sense. She tried to detect a flaw in his logic, but couldn’t.

Seeing Red’s brow furrowed in a scowl like she’d just taken a bite of something she wasn’t sure she liked, and was deciding whether or not to swallow it, and realizing he was getting stubborn, himself, Doc said: “We don’t have to decide now. Route 10 is the shortest, fastest, and safest route west at this time of year. Any other route to Nevada would take us north into more and higher mountains, colder weather and maybe even snow, and I don’t

think we could find one that was shorter. It's a coincidence that Route 10 runs practically past my front door. We could try stopping by your apartment in Boston, instead, but I think that's a bit out of our way."

Smiling wanly at the sarcasm, Red still couldn't find a flaw in the plan. "It's just too convenient," she said. She hesitated, then continued: "I haven't read *The Art of War*, but it makes sense to do some scouting before going to Nevada. I'd imagined just going there, finding something like a cave entrance, and looking in. But, I wouldn't even know what to look for."

"Mines entrances aren't that hard to find," Doc explained. "They look like holes bored into the sides of mountains with piles of dirt dumped downhill. They're easy to spot from miles away. The problem is finding the right one. Those hills are pockmarked with them, each one representing some prospector's failed dream. Eighteen forty nine was over a hundred fifty years ago, which leaves a lot of time for deluded treasure seekers to burrow their little pits."

"I have a couple of translations of *The Art of War*," he continued, trying to end the discussion that kept threatening to turn into an argument. "You can read it when – if – we stop in Scottsdale. You should also read Machiavelli's *The Prince*. They're both short, but it's amazing how much they agree, coming from such different cultures."

10

The route Doc had outlined was all interstate highways. After settling the bill at the motel registration desk, Doc steered the bike to a gas station practically next door to top off its tank. After filling up, he had to drive another quarter mile, then turn around and backtrack to the highway on-ramp, which was practically next to the motel but on the opposite side of the median strip.

Doc drove fast, but not so fast so as to attract undue law-enforcement attention. From her perch on the raised passenger seat, Red could see over his shoulder to the speedometer mounted in the front fairing. It read exactly 84 mph, which was exactly 14 mph above the posted speed. She noticed that he kept working the throttle, now adding

power, then backing it off, to keep the speedometer needle steady at 84 mph.

Traffic was light, and Doc kept the big touring bike in the third of four lanes most of the time. They were moving faster than most of the other vehicles, and Doc would move to the left-hand lane from time to time to pass other vehicles. As soon as there was clear road ahead, though, he would move right back into the third lane.

Once in a while, a vehicle would roar up from behind, and pass them on the left. Usually, they'd pass very fast, especially the bikers abandoning Daytona Beach to the next wave of tourists. The fastest would blast past without warning.

A loud BRRATT noise would suddenly sound in their ears with no warning. By the time the sound registered in Red's brain, the speeding motorcycle would have flashed past, seemingly inches away. Every time it happened, it startled her. She couldn't get used to it. Looking forward, she saw Doc's shoulder involuntarily twitch each time, as well.

Trucks were another interesting experience. Again, they seemed so close she could reach out, and touch them. She could hear the suspensions squeaking as they rode past. (Doc invariably was moving faster than they were, and passed them on their left.) Some tractor-trailers carried livestock – mostly pigs. As they passed these, Red could hear the animals' squeals, and smell their odors.

When they came upon a truck pulling a particularly big flatbed trailer carrying an enormous bulldozer, Doc swung quickly into the left lane, giving it as wide a berth as possible. He even adjusted his speed so that there was a car between them and the truck as the bike passed it. Looking over her shoulder, Red saw a rock the size of her fist drop off the bulldozer's track, bounce off the trailer bed into the lane Doc had vacated, and bound across the road. If they'd been in that lane, it could have killed them both.

It was if Doc had known it would happen.

Many other drivers would, when they came up beside these big trucks, slow down to creep fearfully past. Doc, on the other hand, kept their speed up, or even sped up a little. Red realized that by maximizing the speed at

which they passed a truck, he minimized the time they spent in the danger zone next to it. All in all, it became clear to her that he was calculating the probabilities of all the bad things that could happen as he moved through traffic, then taking steps to minimize the danger.

“Do you play chess a lot?” she asked him through the intercom.

“Not really,” came the answer. “I don’t like to calculate moves that far ahead. There are too many variables.”

“Isn’t that what you’re doing while moving through traffic?”

“Yes, but I have no choice. I have to do it, or die. Besides, I’ve been doing it so long that I have all the high-probability possibilities memorized. There aren’t really that many. I know how to recognize the warning signs, and have a bunch of strategies ready to put in play. Then, it’s action meditation.”

“What?”

“Action meditation, like Zen archery, or Kendo – Japanese fencing. You build a skill set, then train your muscles to react automatically. Finally, you enter satori, and watch the Universe of space and time unfold. You see the future as a probability field, with all the possible things that can happen, and have a sense of how likely they are from your current position in space-time. As the future approaches, the probabilities change more-or-less gradually. The probabilities for some things grow larger, but for most things they fade to nothing. You focus on the fastest growing probabilities, and ignore the rest. Suddenly, one eventuality spikes into a certainty as it reaches the present. After that, it’s gone. The past is nothing but footsteps in the snow.”

“Do all Zen Buddhists do that?”

“*Everyone* does it. Most people do it in a haphazard way. Those that practice action-meditation do it consciously. Sages have perfected the technique, and apply it all the time.”

“So, it takes a lot of concentration. Doesn’t that interfere with driving?”

“No! If anything it’s the opposite of concentration. It’s what the Taoists call *wu wei* – non-action, or non-doing. You don’t actually do anything, including making any decisions. You just watch it happen. Your eyes automatically scan to gather information about the outside world. Your brain automatically sorts through that information, and creates a simplified model in your head that summarizes the relevant bits of information. Another part of your brain automatically does ‘what if’ analysis on that model, running it forwards, and backwards in time to imagine what might happen. Another part of your brain compares different scenarios based on different actions you could take, then chooses the one that it likes best. That information automatically goes to the motor centers in your brain, then out to your muscles. What you consciously experience is the model your brain created evolving through time. You feel impulses to do this or that, and watch as your muscles follow those impulses. It all happens like a video game someone else is playing. *You* don’t do anything, except keep your hands off the controls and let it all play out.”

“And, you never make mistakes?”

“Well, yes, and no. What you might call a mistake is just the Universe evolving in a way you don’t like. Sometimes it’s because something you did pushed it in an unexpected direction. Sometimes, it’s because something outside your control happens that pushes the probabilities in a direction you don’t like. If, however, you’re paying attention, you can see the probabilities shifting toward an outcome you don’t like, and may be able to do something to correct it. Sometimes the best you can do is learn from the experience. The point of *wu wei* is that you keep your hands off any controls, and let the process unfold as it’s supposed to. If you try to exert conscious control, it’s like grabbing a control to control the controller. The outcome is invariably a crash and burn.”

“How long does it take to learn this stuff?”

“Well, you don’t actually learn it, since it’s the way our minds and bodies work, anyway. What you learn is to stop trying to interfere with the process, which, of course, is instantaneous as soon as you stop trying to interfere with the process. It’s tied up with the paradox of the bodhisattva.”

“The *what*?”

“A bodhisattva is an advanced master at the point of reaching enlightenment, who refuses to take that final step until all sentient beings reach enlightenment as well. The paradox is that to make that vow, one must already have attained enlightenment. Thus, no bodhisattva can exist unless all sentient beings have achieved enlightenment. Since we know as a historical fact that there have been many bodhisattvas in all time periods down to the present day, *ipso facto* all sentient beings, living, dead, or unborn, have already achieved enlightenment. It’s the foundation for all Mahayana Buddhism.”

“So, you’re saying that everyone is potentially a Zen Buddhist master?”

“No, there’s no potential to it. Everyone actually is a Zen Buddhist master, already. They’re just deluded into thinking they’re not.”

“So, the Pope, for example, is a Buddhist master.”

“The Pope is, in actual fact, a Buddhist master. More importantly, *you* are a Buddhist master.”

“So, what’s all this business about sitting in a lotus position for hours at a time over a period of years?”

“Okay. What actually happens is that the student, believing he, or she, is not a buddha, and sincerely wanting to become a buddha, is willing to make any effort to become a buddha. In fact, the student begs, pleads, and harasses the nearest master for practices, and exercises that will help him achieve buddhahood, thereby driving the poor master totally bonkers because he (or she, since there are female Zen masters) just wants to go off in a corner to think happy thoughts. It’s why sages fight to avoid taking on students: they’re sooo annoying!”

“Anyway, to shut the student up, the master asks him (or her) to solve some impossible riddle, called a *koan*. The master then tells the student to go away, and meditate on the puzzle (thereby getting some peace and quiet for the master), and come back later with a solution. Every time the student comes up with what they think is a solution, the master scoffs, says it’s stupid, the student is an idiot, and so forth. Then, the master sends the student off to meditate some more.”

“Once in a while, the student comes up with something that shows he or she really is starting to get the point. When that happens, the master says something encouraging, and gives the student a whole new puzzle to work on.”

“This nonsense can go on for years.”

“Eventually, the student, if he, or she, is sincere, diligent, and good Zen material, gives up. They decide that all this effort is futile. They’re no good. They’ll never achieve enlightenment. They just sit there, depressed, feeling nothing, and doing nothing.”

“So, at long last, their minds have quieted down, which has been the object of the whole exercise, anyway. They notice that everything they’ve been seeing, thinking, feeling, and experiencing no longer seems real. It’s all rubbish, like a curtain hiding the actual universe from view. The curtain, by the way, is called ‘maya.’ So, like Dorothy in the Land of Oz, the student peeks behind the curtain. In that instant, they achieve enlightenment.”

“Usually, they start laughing hysterically. It all suddenly makes complete sense to them. There’s nothing to learn, and nothing to achieve because they knew it all along, and had reached their goal before they started out.”

“That’s like the thing about the sound of one hand clapping!” Red surmised.

“Very good, grasshopper.”

“So, it’s all a mind fuck!”

“Yes, and no. No, because it’s the only way to get a deluded mind to peek behind the curtain. Yes, because to an enlightened mind, there really isn’t any curtain, anyway.”

“I think you just lost me.”

“Go, and meditate on it. Come back in a month to show me your answer.”

“Oh.”

After about another hour, they took the Interstate 295 loop to bypass Jacksonville, Florida, and connect with Interstate 10, which would carry them the rest of the way west to Phoenix. Once past the Jacksonville traffic congestion, Doc pulled into a truck stop for their first break. Sitting on the curb next to the bike sucking down cold drinks, Doc started quizzing Red about her life in college.

“So, how do you like being a Harvard student?” he began.

“Uh, well, it beats a third-rate state college, if that’s what you mean,” Red said, not knowing where he wanted to start, so she started at the beginning. “They give incoming students lectures on how hard it is going to be, and what a privilege it is to attend Harvard, and how most of us wouldn’t survive to graduation. If they were trying to frighten and depress us, it worked. I felt like I was behind the eight-ball before I started.”

“I actually tried too hard at the beginning. I’d take tons of notes, then have trouble reading them later. The professors started burning through textbook chapters with the very first class. I had just bought the books, and hadn’t read the material, so I found myself already behind, and had to play catch up. Then, I had trouble sleeping because I was upset about being behind, and had trouble staying awake in class, which made it harder to catch up, and so forth. Luckily, it was a kind of math that I’d studied in high school, so it wasn’t too bad. Some of my classmates had it much worse.

“By the second semester, I knew what their game was, so I got my books ahead of time, and read the first few chapters. It was still a lot of work, however, because they assigned tons of exercises.”

“What were your easiest, and hardest subjects?” Doc interrupted.

“Well, calculus was the easiest because I’d studied it in my senior year in high school. The hardest was actually history. We spent practically the whole semester on the French Revolution, which I’d never paid much attention to. The professor thought she was a socialist – she almost came to class wearing a red beret. She spent a lot of the time shooting her mouth off about how the aristocrats had it coming because they didn’t care about the peasants, and the evils of capitalism, and how the bourgeoisie was responsible for the Terror, and so forth. People

like that set my bullshit radar off, so I wasn't buying any of it. That made it hard."

"Why didn't you believe her?"

"I'd read about the Little Ice Age that was still affecting Europe at that time, and how the cold, rainy weather had been destroying grain harvests for years. Farmers in other countries had started substituting potatoes, which grew better under those conditions, but the French peasants refused to. King Louis had tried to get them to switch, publicizing that he ate potatoes every day, but the peasants just dug in their heels. Come the Revolution, when the peasants complained that they didn't have any bread, it was their own damn fault. They'd been too pig headed to adapt. The bourgeoisie, who had been into science, and the enlightenment, could have told them about better farming practices, but the peasants were too jealous of anybody with money to listen."

Doc liked that she not only thought for herself, but could explain her reasoning. Most people – even intelligent ones – usually accepted the opinions of whatever group they identified with, and spouted rationalizations rather than reasons.

"Of course," Red continued, "anybody who's that ignorant is easy prey once order breaks down. That's why the country turned into a killing festival run by a succession of petty tyrants. They couldn't stabilize the thing until Napoleon brought back a monarchy in the form of his empire. I've no idea what the socialists contributed to the whole thing beside empty slogans. After listening to Dr. Grant yammer on for a whole semester, I still don't know. I just put on my own figurative red beret when I walked into the classroom, agreed with everything she said, and tried to parrot it back on tests. It apparently worked, because I came out of the course with an A."

At first, Red thought Doc's questioning was just to make conversation, but, when he kept pumping her with questions, even after they got back out on the highway, she began to think he was probing for something. She couldn't figure out what it was, because he asked about many unrelated things. Sometimes he'd ask about a particular professor. Sometime's he'd ask about her friends. There was quite a lot about sports she participated in (tennis, of course, and womens' basketball, and karate just for fun. She also like rowing, and a few other track-and-field sports.); and sports she liked to watch (almost none except baseball, where she liked the statistics and

strategy).

There was no pattern to his questioning, though, so she finally gave up, and just talked. It was the most she'd talked about herself since that long interview with the Harvard recruiter four years earlier.

The only subject Doc avoided was her family. There were no questions about her father, stepfather, mother, or anything about her home life. Since these were subjects she wanted to avoid, also, she let it slide.

After about an hour of this questioning through the intercom, which made it seem like a telephone interview, Doc said he had to concentrate on his driving. Red couldn't see how the traffic was any different than it had been when he'd been quizzing her hot and heavy, but she was getting tired, anyway, so she just sat back and watched the scenery go by. When they stopped for lunch, she realized Doc hadn't uttered a word or made a gesture for over an hour. She would have thought he was asleep, except that he kept perfect control of the bike.

The questioning started up again after they'd stopped for lunch, but only kept up for about a half hour. Then, Doc wanted to concentrate again.

During all this time, however, Doc refused to answer anything about himself. He also didn't want to talk about their plans. It was as if nothing beyond their arrival in Scottsdale existed. When she asked about it, he just said they should wait, and see.

11

Chopper Dan was already three sheets to the wind when he leaned the bike he named himself for on its kickstand outside Pinky's Roadhouse near the Alabama-Mississippi border. He was unsteady dismounting, but didn't notice because the bellyful of reds he'd gulped down earlier was telling him he was indestructible. Pushing his way through the door, he took up the only available stool at the crowded bar.

"Gimme a Bud," he growled at the bartender. Chopper Dan drank Budweiser beer because it was the King of Beers, and he was the King of Bikers. Also, he drank Budweiser because it was the number one beer in America (in

his mind, anyway), and he was a Number One American. He didn't want no beer made by them whiney Europeans, or them nasty Mexicans. He didn't get along with Mexicans. Didn't much like them niggers, either. 'Cept maybe some of their women. Sometimes.

It took the bartender a minute or so to go over to the cooler on the other side of the bar, pull out four beer bottles, open them, and distribute them to four patrons, including Chopper Dan. The bar was a large, four-sided rectangular affair that took up half the space in the roadhouse's main room. The building was large enough to accommodate a bandstand with a good sized dance floor out front, then a dozen tables between the dance floor and bar. More tables surrounded the bar on either side, and in back, where patrons could avoid the direct force of the band's sound. 'Way at the back, four pool tables created a hubbub of their own.

Chopper Dan looked over the girls that were line dancing in front of the bandstand, looking for one that might provide him with some fun. His eye fell on a magnificent redhead, who stood head and shoulders above all the other girls. Her tallness didn't bother Chopper Dan, though. The reds in his belly told him he was a giant, himself. The lean muscle moving under the redhead's leather body suit didn't tell him anything, either. He was mostly interested in the full breasts that somehow didn't bounce and flop around when she danced, not like most of the women he got together with.

"Who's the new redhead?" he asked the bartender when the beer arrived.

"Stay away from her, Dan," the bartender warned. "She's with the owner."

Dan wasn't impressed. He'd seen Pinky, and wasn't impressed by him, either. Pinky might be wiry, and tough enough for the usual slobs, but he wasn't very big. Dan figured he could grind Pinky into the sawdust on the floor anytime he wanted. This redhead was way to tall for Pinky, anyway. Dan figured she'd be happy to ditch Pinky, and ride with him back to his shack on the bayou. Then, he'd show her what a *real* man can do!

He sat there, thinking about what he could do to her back at his shack, until the dance number was over and the redhead walked over to the far side of the bar. Flushed and happy, she ordered a Guinness from the bartender.

Damn limey beer!

By the time the bartender pulled a pint and set it in front of the redhead, Chopper Dan had worked his way over next to her. He had to elbow his way past a big biker with brown hair and beard wearing a black leather cap to get next to her. The reds encouraged him to ignore the biker, along with everyone else except the redhead.

“Put that on my tab,” he told the bartender. The bartender kept to himself the fact that he wouldn’t run a tab for Chopper Dan on a bet. He looked sadly at Chopper Dan, and waited. He knew Chopper Dan, and he knew what Chopper Dan was up against. He didn’t really know the redhead, but she moved as if she could handle herself pretty well – better than Chopper Dan, anyway – and he knew the guy she was with could take care of anything that was left. He just waited for it to unfold, and hoped that the damage would be minimal.

“Thanks, but I’m okay,” Red said to Dan pleasantly. She didn’t like Dan’s look, but hoped being polite was the right thing to do. Doc had said that bikers were polite to avoid setting off any short fuses. She hoped the strategy would work here.

“No, I’m buying you a drink,” Dan insisted.

“I’m with someone else,” Red replied, her smile starting to slip.

When Chopper Dan heard the New England accent she’d picked up living four years in Boston, his rebel blood started to boil. He’d teach this snooty yankee bitch a lesson!

“No, you’re with me,” he growled, grabbing her right hand in his left, and twisting her around to face him. It didn’t register on Dan that she didn’t look afraid. She looked startled, and angry, but not afraid. As he turned her, her body seemed to turn into coiled steel. This, too, didn’t quite make its way through the cloud of alcohol and drugs to what little consciousness still flickered in Dan’s brain.

“NO!” Red yelled in his face. Her mind started to race back to the moves her karate instructors had primed her with for this sort of occasion. She tried to pull away, but Dan’s grip was too tight.

“I’ll teach you, yankee bitch!” Dan yelled, as his right hand went into the windup for a roundhouse slap.

As his hand went up, five large fingers wrapped around its wrist, and stopped the motion in a vise of iron.

“I don’t think so,” said a *basso profundo* growl from behind, whose tone of implacable menace filled him with mortal dread. A second set of fingers clamped down Dan’s left forearm, lifting the arm, which was still holding Red’s right wrist in what Dan thought was an unbreakable grip. As the hands rose up to shoulder height, propelled by what felt like a hydraulic crane, the fingers shifted to find a certain nerve in Dan’s forearm.

Suddenly, Dan screamed like a girl. His fingers that were clamped around Red’s wrist sprang open involuntarily. He no longer cared about fun with the redhead. He no longer cared about punishing the yankee bitch for all the humiliation heaped on him and his forebears going back two centuries. He cared only about the agonizing electric current he felt running from his finger tips to his shoulder, paralyzing his left arm.

The hands gripping his wrists pulled Chopper Dan back away from the redhead and the bar, steadied him as his knees started to buckle, then let go. When freed, his right hand flew over to grab his left wrist, which was still screaming into Dan’s brain about excruciating pain. Dan heard the frightened-girl voice still screaming as well. Somewhere in his confused mind, Dan hoped that little girl voice wasn’t his, but, of course, it was.

Behind him, a pair of strong hands caught him as the room spun. He tried to look around behind to see who it was holding him up, but that just made him dizzy. The hands guided him backward to a chair, and sat him down. The deep, gentle voice, soft, kindly, and melodious said: “Just squeeze it, and rub it. That’s it, knead the muscles. The pain will go away in a few minutes, and you’ll be able to use your arm again. It’ll hurt for a few hours, but it will all go away, then you’ll be fine.”

The pain did start going away as soon as he started squeezing his arm. He looked around for whoever saved him from the pain of that deathgrip, but he was gone. Two of Pinky’s bouncers came through the crowd, and helped him out to his chopper, where he sat, kneading his arm and wondering what had happened. After a quarter hour, during which time the bouncers never took their eyes off him, he kicked over the chopper’s engine, and drove back

to his shack on the bayou. Tomorrow, he'd be mad. Tomorrow, he'd get even. But, tomorrow they'd already be gone.

Back at the bar, Red said to Doc: "Once again, you saved me from a fate worse than death. I've never heard anyone sound so manacing – brutal!"

"It just takes a little practice. I was trying to let you handle it, but it was beginning to look like he'd land that slap before you got your guard up. I didn't want that."

"I was trying to remember what my karate instructor taught me, but it wouldn't come fast enough."

"It wouldn't have helped much. You probably could have fought him off, but you'd have been damaged before you got into action. Karate can help you avoid losing a fight, but it's better to stop the fight before it starts. Nobody ever wins a fight."

"So, we didn't win?"

"Not really, we just didn't lose much. We were having fun before he showed up to ruin it. To stop him, I had to cause pain for another creature, which is always unpleasant, even when it's a piece of shit like that one."

"How'd you react so fast?"

"Remember 'action meditation?' I saw it coming ahead of time, and so had time to get in position to back you up. I could see what he was going to do before he did, the moron! It was stupid, and unnecessary."

"Dave," Doc said turning to the bartender, who was still standing there amazed that there'd been so little disturbance. Several patrons had turned around to see what the screaming was about, but when they saw the bouncers practically carrying Chopper Dan away, still clutching his arm, they lost interest. It looked like some minor drunken accident that had been handled. Instead of the carnage the bartender had expected, there was just a moment's disturbance.

“Dave!” Doc repeated, breaking the bartender out of his reverie, “Who was that guy, anyway? We should probably try to keep him out. He acted too stupid to live, but we don’t want him dying here.”

“He calls himself ‘Chopper Dan,’” came the reply. “He lives around here someplace, and comes in a couple of times a week. I’ve had to shoo him out for mouthing off too loud, but this is the first time he’s actually tried to hit anyone. He spends a lot of money, so I haven’t tried to keep him out. Usually, by the time he’s drunk enough to want trouble, he’s too far gone to pull it off. This was different.”

“He looked high on top of the booze. Could have been downers. They can make you feel like a tough guy if you’ve had enough. He was too easy to handle for it to be PCP.”

“How about if I warn him next time he comes in that we’ll bar him if it happens again.”

“If you think you can keep him from hurting anyone. That’s bad for business, but you know more about what you’re doing than I do.”

“I’ll tell him the owner wanted to call the cops, but I stood up for him, but I can’t do it again if he starts a fight. That should work.”

“The owner?” Red interrupted. “Is Pinky here? Who is he – or she?”

Doc, and Dave looked at each other and laughed. Then, Doc explained: “There is no Pinky, or not anymore. Dave and I are partners in this bar. I put up the money a couple of years ago to buy the place and expand it. Dave runs it for his share of the profits, and a salary. We kept the name ‘Pinky’s Roadhouse’ because it sounded cool.”

“You know what’s really funny?” Dave added. “Chopper Dan thinks he knows who Pinky is. Maybe he met the original owner years ago, and doesn’t know the difference!”

The two men laughed again, but Red was still too shaken up for humor. She leaned on the bar, sipping her drink, and thinking about what might have happened if Doc hadn’t been there. When it happened, she had been angry. Now, thinking about what could have happened, she was scared.

When the band came back from their break, Doc led still-trembling Red up to the bandstand, and asked them to play a waltz. When the music started, he held her close and let her lean on him. He could feel her whole body shaking.

Part way through the number, however, Red put away her fear and started enjoying the closeness. Percieving that Red was coming out of her funk, Doc moved back into a formal waltz position, and carried her into a swirling box step. A little stiff at first, she quickly became caught up in the rhythmic motion.

At first, their movements were impeded by other couples, but soon most of the other couples moved to the perimeter to dance in place while watching. Doc and Red found themselves sharing the bulk of the dance floor with one older couple, who were enjoying the opportunity for a classic ballroom waltz, which takes a lot of room and a lot of coordination between couples to get right.

“Hey, you actually know how to dance!” Red said in surprise.

“So do you,” Doc replied.

“My mother made me take dancing lessons,” Red replied. “She said it was the best way to meet boys. It didn’t work out. Do you know how short boys are when you’re twelve?”

“I remember being one of those short boys, barely coming up to the girl’s chin,” Doc replied. “Imagine having your dance partner’s budding breasts poking between your chin and your chest. I remember one girl who went through puberty a year before everyone else. Had a very full figure at that! Dressed herself like an old-world courtesan. She kinda liked me, so she pestered me to dance with her all the time. Made me break out in a sweat because I knew what I liked about her, but couldn’t figure out what to do about it. Torture!”

“For a while there, they didn’t even come up to my chest!” Red one-upped him. “They’d dance around staring at my belly button. I felt like a black widow spider with an undersized mate who was afraid I’d eat him.”

Happy again, Red forgot about brutal drunks trying to beat her up just to be cruel. To the delight of the older

couple, Doc conspired with the band to go through their whole repertoire of dance music.

The older couple proved to be enthusiastic experts, even performing some of the advanced throws in the Jitterbug, which can be dangerous with a clumsy partner. Doc and Red prudently stuck to the basic steps, which are quite energetic enough. Red, however, was disappointed when Doc avoided the dirty dancing steps she'd learned from Annie.

Red was a little clumsy with the Cha Cha, not having practiced it since she was a girl. Doc at least remembered the correct moves in the correct sequence, but his form was off. The older couple moved through it like a syncopated machine, ad-libbing flourishes worthy of a 1940s song-and-dance team.

Other couples joined in on the numbers they knew how to dance to, sometimes knowing the correct steps, but mostly just jumping around in time with the music. Many knew the Texas Two-Step, it being a country-themed roadhouse. Even those who didn't know the Twist got up and tried it. The Twist, after all, is so simple a four-year-old can learn it in about fifteen seconds.

When the band decided to challenge them with a Charleston, Red had no idea what to do, and beat a hasty retreat. Doc was able to put in a credible solo performance, but the older couple had him completely outclassed. Nobody else even tried.

The band and the older couple were disappointed when Doc dragged Red off after that set. Everyone else seemed relieved. They could go back to simply feeling each other up during waltzes, and jumping around to burn calories in time to fast stuff.

Doc had arranged for them to stay in two of the cabins tucked into the pines behind the roadhouse. These cabins had been the main attraction for the original business, which had mainly provided lodging and meals for travelers before the Interstate took all the traffic away. Dave kept them up as an additional source of income from roadhouse patrons who got too drunk to drive home and were smart enough to know it, or travelers on the Interstate who were attracted by signs advertising "Dining, Dancing, and Lodging." Red had at first thought it was

those signs that had brought Doc to the roadhouse, even though it was early to stop. Only later did she find that it was a regular stop on the transcontinental migrations she'd come to realize were an important part of his lifestyle, and then to find out that he had a financial interest in the business.

Despite being exhausted, Red couldn't settle down. She tried watching the tiny television she found in the room, but it got only local channels. Staring at a broadcast of local news and weather (the latter being all that piqued her interest because she knew she'd be riding through it), she found herself indulging erotic fantasies. So, she shut off the set, stripped down, and crawled between the fresh sheets.

As an experiment, she tried starring Annie in her fantasies, but it didn't work. She decided she wasn't really interested in women, after all. It was more interesting to imagine including Doc. Soon, Annie disappeared, and it was just Doc. For the second night in a row, she slipped her hand between her legs, massaging until she fell asleep.

12

"Red, do you mind if we add an extra day to our trip?" Doc asked at breakfast the next morning.

The roadhouse was the only business near the exit they'd taken off the highway the day before. It was not set up to provide breakfasts, so they got up early and drove to the center of a small town a little further west. There, they'd found what Doc called a "full-service town," complete with churches, schools, hardware stores – and restaurants serving breakfast.

They picked a narrow little hole-in-the-wall on the main street, which was snuggled in between a hardware store and a pharmacy. While Doc walked down another block to find a newspaper, Red said she needed a couple of things at the pharmacy, and she'd meet him in the restaurant. By the time he got back, she'd picked a table set up by the big window at the front of the restaurant.

Like most of the buildings in this part of this town, it had been built during the first quarter of the twentieth century. The store fronts were all glass walls, with the actual entrances recessed several feet. This structure

afforded the store owners ample space for window displays to entice patrons. The recessed entrances provided shelter from the elements, which motivated casual passersby to escape the snow/wind/sun/rain outside to step in and study the displays. It was such a win-win arrangement for everyone that Doc, for one, couldn't understand why it was ever abandoned.

The restaurant had taken full advantage of this excellent arrangement by setting up a table in each of the display areas flanking the front door. Red had parked herself at the table on right-hand side (going in). She sat there, looking pleased and pretty, while watching (and being watched by) people passing on the street.

Over the past two days, she'd learned to enjoy the attention she always got from total strangers seeing her for the first time. It used to make her self conscious, feeling that somehow all those stares were disapproving.

Ever since Doc found her bawling her eyes out by the side of the road just a couple of days ago, however, everyone (well *almost* everyone) she'd met had been so very nice to her. Even Annie, the predator, had come to her because she *liked* her. Even the old-lady Sunday-school teacher who'd been offended by Doc's language at the continental breakfast yesterday had smiled and nodded pleasantly to Red. Even Chopper Dan had, in his own crude way, been attracted to her, not repelled.

Doc's attitude had rubbed off on her, she realized. He went into every situation with the attitude that he belonged there. He genuinely liked people, and expected them to like him in return.

Those, like Chopper Dan, who were disinclined to be nice, Doc viewed as having an unfortunate character flaw. Doc didn't see it as a reflection on him, but as a sad commentary on the other person, which he resolved to politely ignore as long as possible.

It worked for him, and Red found it worked for her, too. Instead of timidly trying to hide, she enjoyed mingling with all those nice people out there.

"Besides," she told herself naughtily, "you're turning into quite the little exhibitionist!"

A cup of coffee and a large glass of orange juice were already waiting for Doc when he pushed through the door. Knowing she was anxious to get on with her father hunt, he expected her to say “No” to his idea for lengthening the trip.

Instead, she didn’t bat an eyelash. She just asked: “What do you have in mind?”

“Well,” he said, still expecting an objection, “I usually take a day off in Austin, Texas to relax and have fun. Austin is a great town for relaxing and having fun. I made a reservation at The Driskill months ago, before I knew you were coming along. If we’re not going to make it, I really have to call them right away to cancel. Otherwise, they’ll hit me for the first night, and it’s a pretty expensive hotel. If you’ve never been to Austin before, I’d like to show you around a little. My treat.”

To Doc’s surprise, she looked pleased at the prospect: “Sounds like fun. I’ve never been there, but I’ve heard it’s a real party town.”

“Yes, it’s a party town, and the Driskill is a short walk from party central. It’s a ten-hour ride from here, so it’ll be late afternoon or early evening when we get there. If you’d rather skip it, we could stay the night between Houston and San Antonio.”

“No,” she said emphatically. “I want to do it. Maybe we could stay up later tonight, and sleep late tomorrow. Then, play tourist all day, get a good night’s sleep, and hit the road in the morning on the next day. That’d be fun!”

Why she was suddenly so willing to take a whole precious day out to “play tourist,” he didn’t know. She didn’t look saddle sore, unless she was faking the bright-eyed-and-bushy-tailed look. He could think of no reason she’d fake anything. It seemed out of character for her. She didn’t seem to care enough about what others thought to dissemble. That independence was one of the things he liked most about her.

Could it be that she was dreading what she might find at the end of her quest, and happy to add a carefree day on the road to delay it? That, too, seemed out of character. Like most athletes, she tended to meet challenges head on.

Who knows? Maybe someone she knew in Boston had bent her ear about how wonderful Austin was, and Red had been wanting to go there ever since. Doc realized he'd never guess, and might never find out for sure. He decided to just be happy with the way things turned out.

To get there as early in the day as possible, they rushed through their breakfast, and didn't even look at *The Wall Street Journal* Doc had managed to find. Instead of waiting for the restaurant to cook the hot breakfast they'd had in mind, they wolfed down coffee and doughnuts, and were on the road with a full gas tank within a half hour.

Doc was not, however, so much in a hurry as to forego quizzing Red through the helmet intercom as they roared down the Interstate. Today, he was mostly interested in the content of her classes. What types of mathematics most interested her? What did she want to do with it? What projects had she worked on? Eventually, it got around to what she wanted for the future.

"I think I've pretty much wrecked my future," she lamented.

"How so?"

"Instead of going back to finish my last semester of classes at the end of Spring Break, I'm out here traipsing cross country with you. I didn't tell anyone I wouldn't be back. As far as anyone at Harvard knows, I've simply dropped off the face of the Earth."

"You make it sound like I seduced you into running away to join the circus. If you'll recall, you were fully committed to this project before you ever met me."

"I know, and I'm not blaming you, and I'm not having second thoughts, either. I knew what I was doing when I started. I'd already decided that finding my father was more important than finishing college. I'm just being realistic that I've trashed my grade-point average, and with it any chance at the good jobs. I'll be lucky to graduate, now. This kind of thing will follow me the rest of my life."

"Maybe it's not all that bad. You can finish the classes in the summer. Explained the right way, this little trip

could be a plus. It shows resourcefulness and initiative, which might get you a better job in the end.”

“I hear that resourcefulness and initiative are not prized in new recruits.”

“That depends on who’s doing the recruiting, and what they’re looking for. I happen to know that my company, for example, is looking for a research analyst with a strong math background. They like resourcefulness and initiative. If you were interested, I could put in a good word. They’d probably make you start a graduate program, but they’d pay for it.”

“I’d have to move to Arizona, wouldn’t I? I don’t know if I’d like it.”

“Maybe, maybe not. I think you’d like it there, but the company works with telecommuters, too. On the other hand, Bean Town is not exactly a backwater for science and technology. You might be able to do as much staying there as in Phoenix. Why don’t you talk to Pat when you get there, and make out an application. You’ve got nothing to lose.”

“But, I haven’t even graduated, yet.”

“So?”

“Will they even talk to me?”

“Of course. You wouldn’t be the first one they’ve hired before graduation.”

That gave Red something to think about. It had bothered her that she’d pretty much trashed her last semester. Her record wasn’t going to put her at the top of her class, but “just” *cum laude* from Harvard would have let her write her own ticket, anyway. Now, she figured she’d blown it.

If she could get some kind of job – any kind of job, in fact – with Doc’s company, she could get away from having to live off her stepfather. There were good schools in Arizona, too. Both Arizona State, and University of Arizona had built good reputations among academic researchers. She’d have to work hard, but if they’d pay

educational benefits, maybe she could get back on track.

Smiling, she leaned forward, and hugged Doc. It was a long shot, but once again he'd given her a ray of hope. It was one less thing to stress about, for now.

After a while, Red leaned back against the passenger-seat backrest, which was actually a much more comfortable position, and afforded her a panoramic view of the scenery. She saw that Doc rode sitting pretty much straight up, carrying his weight along his spine resting on his pelvis supported by the seat. Thus, his skeleton carried all the forces, with his muscles working only to keep balanced. She thought that was clever. Most of the time, he let his left arm dangle, or rested his left hand on his thigh, while barely touching the right handgrip. In fact, he held the handgrip delicately, as if it were the a teacup or the stem of a champagne flute. He even raised his little finger, just touching the throttle between his index finger and thumb. It was very elegant, but made her nervous. How could he maintain control when they hit a bump, which they did often?

"How can you steer without holding onto the handlebars?" she asked. "This bike is so big, I'd think you needed every bit of strength to control it."

"Altogether," he replied, "this bike fully loaded with the two of us aboard weighs well over a thousand pounds. I've been known to pump a little iron in the gym from time to time, but there's no way I could lift that. It's all about stable motion, and balancing forces: dynamic stability. The steering has a fundamental oscillation period of several tens of seconds, and just enough impedance for critical damping."

"Impedance?" she interrupted.

"You did study oscillatory motion in school didn't you? Hook's Law, mass hanging from a spring, and so forth. Ring bells?"

"Yes, of course," Red said. "The farther you stretch the spring, the harder it pulls back. The mass controls how fast it accelerates under that restoring force. That sets up an ordinary differential equation with an oscillatory solution. Then, you add in a damping term to resist movement. Adjusting the damping coefficient determines the

kind of motion you have. Too little damping let's the mass bob up and down for a long time. Too much damping, and it just slowly sags to it's equilibrium position, like a pearl dropped into shampoo. Critical damping is when the spring force and damping force balance perfectly. It's a standard example in Differential Equations 101."

"There's also something like it in the curriculum for every physical science, or engineering discipline," Doc added. "They all use different words, and different concepts to set up the equations, but it all boils down to the same differential equation of motion. Physicists like to use a potential energy diagram. Naval architects favor a geometric diagram called the metacentric parabola. I like to follow what they do in electrical engineering because it's closest to the differential equation."

"And...." Red prompted him to continue.

"In electrical engineering, impedance refers to anything that creates a force that tracks, and opposes the motion of electrical charge. So, your differential equation has three terms: one for the spring, one for the mass dangling from it, and one for whatever causes the damping. In electronics, the spring becomes a capacitor, which stores electric charge. The mass becomes a magnetic coil called an inductor, and a resistor does the damping by resisting the flow of electric current. Clear so far? I don't know how much of this you know already."

"I'm following you. It's not my field, but I've heard other students talking about it."

"Okay. So, your spring, mass, and damping terms translate into capacitive, inductive, and resistive terms. Electrical engineers put them all under the umbrella term 'impedances.' The coefficients for each term are the impedance values, so the resistance of a physical resistor that you'd buy in an electronics store, like Radio Shack, becomes its 'resistive impedance.' The capacitance of a capacitor gives its 'capacitive impedance,' and the inductance of a coil gives its 'inductive impedance.' Still clear?"

"Uh, huh, but I still don't see how it applies to motorcycle steering."

"When you start talking about designing control systems, one control system may include electrical components, like amplifiers, switches, and motors, along with mechanical components, like motor mounts, shafts,

and bearings, and even digital computers and software. All those different components affect those three terms in the differential equation.”

“To analyze such systems,” he continued, “you have to step back to that general equation of motion, which applies to so many engineering problems. It helps to keep the electrical-engineering jargon. So, controls engineers have to step back, and look at how these different components affect those three terms in your differential equation. So, the overall system damping might come from a combination of electrical resistance, bearing friction, and some numbers stored in a computer.”

“For shorthand, I like to just use the term ‘resistive impedance,’ or just ‘impedance.’ So, when I look at the system to control a motorcycle’s steering, and say ‘impedance,’ I mean all the things that go into the coefficient of that damping term in the differential equation. It’s all the stuff, from friction in the main bearing to friction between the tire and road, and even the air movement around the fairing. It all lumps into the word ‘impedance,’ so I don’t have to say every one of them individually. Clear now?”

“I think so. So, you’re a controls engineer.”

“Well, let’s say that I engineer a lot of control systems.”

“So, you’re not just a lowly technician.”

“I’m not a technician, but I wouldn’t use the term ‘lowly’ to describe a technician. Any development project – and that’s pretty much what my company does – any development project is a team effort, and the technicians generally know more about what’s going on than anybody else on the team.”

“I should think the designers would know the most.”

“Nope, they’re the experts on what’s *supposed* to go on. They put together the plan. The technicians, who actually stick their fingers into the equipment, are the only ones who really know how it’s actually working.”

“So, what does a research analyst do? If I’m to apply for a research analyst job, I ought to know.”

“Research analyst is a job title. What they do depends on the project. For my company, they mainly gather information that the engineers need to design something to reach the project’s objectives, package that information in a form that the engineers can use, and analyze results of tests.”

“Can you give me an example?”

“No. Everything we do is covered by non-disclosure agreements. Since you don’t have an NDA with the company, I couldn’t tell you anything that takes place beyond the receptionist’s desk.”

“I thought you’d been telling me quite a lot!”

“Everything I’ve told you so far could be said about every engineering company on the planet. It’s all public record.”

“What *can* you tell me about the company?”

“What’s on the sign over the front door, and the address on the door. I could tell you the receptionist’s name, too. She’s Phyllis.”

“Why all the secrecy?”

“You remember Pegleg Pete? He’s crew chief for one of the racing teams that use equipment we built for them. We also build similar equipment for other racing teams that compete with him. It’s based on a standard platform, but each team tweaks certain details to help them get an advantage over their competitors.”

“They need our expertise,” he continued, “to make their tweaks actually work the way they want them to, so they have to let us in on some of their secrets. They wouldn’t want us telling their competitors what they’re tweaking, or how, or anything else we might find out about what they’re doing, and why. In fact, we might be working on exactly the same thing with two competing teams, and wouldn’t even be able to tell them they’re trying the same thing, because that would change their competitive positions, favoring one over the other. In fact, we’d probably keep the projects separate, and assign different people to each team.”

“Pretty much all of our clients have the same issues,” he summarized. “Secrecy becomes a habit. Of course, anyone who can’t keep a secret doesn’t last long.”

“Oh. How do you know I can keep a secret?”

“When we first met, you were extremely upset, and under a lot of stress. Yet, you didn’t tell me anything I didn’t need to know to help you right then. You then fed information to me on an as-needed basis as things changed. I still don’t know anything you haven’t decided you needed to tell me, or that isn’t public record.”

“You’ve seen me naked!”

“Not quite, but that didn’t tell me anything that isn’t public information.”

“It’d tell you my bra-cup size!”

“I already knew that from the tank top you were wearing when I first saw you. You picked a bad example. People only *think* wearing clothes hides anything but scars and tattoos. When you put on clothes, you aren’t hiding, you’re covering up.”

“So, why do you think we do it?”

“There are two reasons, grasshopper, but to know them you have to think about what would happen if we didn’t.”

“Is this another koan, master?”

“Could be, but I’ll give you the answer, anyway. You’ve enough to think about. The first reason is that you’d freeze your lovely ... body in the wintertime, and be sunburned to death in the summer. You, my dear, would die of frecklitis. The second reason is that if you ran around naked, all the dumpy middle aged women trying to hold onto their husbands would find an excuse to burn you at the stake. It’s been done before.”

“The ancient Greeks didn’t have that problem. The Mycenaean women all ran around with their breasts

hanging out.”

“That’s right, *all* Mycenaean women ran around with their breasts hanging out. So, nobody cared. You knew the shapes of your neighbor’s breasts as well as you knew her face. There are cultures today that hide their womens’ faces just as we hide their breasts, and pretty much for the same reasons.”

“But, that’s sexist female repression!”

“Not in Saudi Arabia. If you ask most of the women there, they’d feel the same way about someone ripping off their veil that you felt when Dolores exposed your boobs in public. In fact, Dolores felt the same way about pulling down your top that you feel about wearing your short shorts by the side of the road. If you wore them anywhere in the United States before about nineteen twenty, you’d have been arrested. It’s all a matter of perspective, culture, and habits. Point of view. That’s why Zen sages tend to be very tolerant. Different strokes for different folks becomes a habit when you spend your life trying to put yourself in the other person’s shoes.”

“So what Dolores did was okay? Are you saying I was wrong to be upset?”

“What Dolores did was *not* okay. It was a serious mistake, which is why she apologized when she realized it. What was wrong was that she interfered with *your* desire to cover up. She didn’t check with you before doing it. It was a *faux pas*. You were right to be upset because your desire to cover up is part of what makes you you. You’d be wrong, on the other hand, to tell Dolores to put her shirt on if she wanted to take it off.”

“What about when Annie rubbed hers across your chest?”

“That’s more serious. Annie really is a nymphomaniac. She desperately needs the attention. If you took that away from her, it would cause her real emotional distress.”

“What if you were married, and she did it in front of your wife?”

“That would depend on the agreement between me, and my wife. I’ve known couples with so-called ‘open marriages’ who would not object. Usually, however, it would be a big problem. Annie knows this, and would only

act like that with people she knew wouldn't object. She is a predator, but only people who'd welcome her advances are her prey. She'd steer clear, for example, of couples walking hand in hand."

"Would you want to have an open marriage?"

"No, I don't see how that would work. Sex is the glue that binds marriages together. From what I've seen, people either want an exclusive relationship, or they don't. Those that do, try to pair up with others that do also. Those that don't, try to play the field."

"So, nymphomaniacs want to play the field."

"Not exactly. A lot of them really want an exclusive relationship. You know how much work goes into the ol' courtship dance. Think about having to go through that three, or four, or even five times a day to meet your obsession. For most of them, the dream is to find someone they can run around with all day, copulating whenever the fit hits them. It's impossible, however, because that leaves no time for little things like making a living to pay for rent on the love nest, and food to keep from starving."

"So, they all go into the porn industry."

"Well, no more than drug addicts all become pushers. Obsession interferes with business decisions. Very unprofessional. Basically, it's not a very satisfying life. That's why it's generally considered a mental illness. Hey, why are we talking about this?"

Red knew exactly why. She was jealous of Annie, and wanted to know where she stood with Doc. She didn't want Doc to know, though, so she said: "Just making conversation. I've seen hotties like Annie around school, but never gotten to know any. They didn't stay around long."

"Now you know why. Try carrying the workload of a full-time college student while fucking like a bunny several times a day."

"I do want to know one thing, though. How come you know so much about nymphos?"

“Well, like most guys, I used to think that unlimited sex would be heaven. Then, I met a girl like Annie, and found that I could keep up with her for a couple of days at least. Apparently, that’s more stamina than most guys have. Such girls tend to stick together because other women resent their trying to hog all the sex. So, I got to meet her friends, including Annie.”

“So, do you do that sort of thing often? Apparently you travel around a lot. Fuck buddy in every town?”

“Now you’re being crude!”

“Well, I’m getting annoyed.” Red almost admitted she wanted him for exclusive property, at least for a while, but she wasn’t ready to tell him. She clamped her teeth tight.

“We mustn’t annoy the nice boss,” he joked. He recognized what was going on. He’d been through this barn dance before, and knew better than Red just how eligible a batchelor he was. “I promise not to look up any old girlfriends while in your employ. Now, can we please change the subject.”

“Not until you answer my question. What were you doing with Annie?”

Doc did not point out that was not the question she’d asked because he knew it was the question she’d actually wanted to ask.

“I’ve known Annie a couple of years,” he replied soberly. “We usually get together sometime during bike week, but I don’t have time to shack up with her, and she knows it. We’d been together earlier, when I’d first arrived. In fact, I’d gotten her a pass to get her disruptive little ass into the public areas at the racetrack. I imagine she spent most of the time under the grandstands. Anyway, I didn’t see her again until she found you at the Iron Horse. When she saw I was still around, she hoped for a replay. Probably planning a three way with you, which she actually did suggest. She was disappointed when not only did I say ‘no,’ but spoiled her fun with you, too. Then she cut her losses, and went looking for someone else. I can almost guarantee her success. That’s what she was there for. Satisfied?”

“No, but it’ll have to do,” Red pouted.

Seeing that Red’s mood had advanced far beyond annoyance into truly pissed off territory, Doc did not advance another subject, but simply let the conversation drop. He did not let on how enormously pleased he was that she cared enough to get that angry. He felt no desire to look up old girlfriends, whatsoever.

13

We’ll keep this chapter short out of fear that the unluckiness associated with the number 13 might haunt our hero and heroine. Things have been going very well, and we wouldn’t want any untoward events to interfere.

After ruminating on their conversation, which had turned into an almost-argument, Red concluded that, all in all, it had gone off rather well. She’d disconfirmed any nagging doubt that Annie, and women like her, were any threat to the immediate plans she’d begun hatching for Doc. She wasn’t sure Doc would go along with her plans, but she didn’t intend to give him any choice. She just added a vow to make him enjoy their day off in Austin as much as she intended to enjoy it.

There was a shadow of a doubt in the back of her mind that she could pull that second part of her plan off. There had, after all, been failures before. Boys, and young men who she’d tried to like, but who’d slunk off with bruised egos after failing to measure up. They’d all wanted to be the big, strong man dominating all situations, and running the show. God knows, she’d tried to let them. But, when things started to get out of control, she’d had to step in, and bail them out.

Like Brad, the football linebacker. He’d taken her to a hockey game. She wasn’t terribly interested in hockey, but wanted Brad to like her, so she went, and tried to be enthusiastic. The thing she didn’t like was how the game was always being interrupted by stick fights. She didn’t see why professional athletes couldn’t keep their tempers under control. It was stupid, and wasted playing time. But, she kept her mouth shut.

Some boys in the crowd had started getting rowdy. Brad had wanted to protect her, but only made the

situation worse. They started ganging up on him, so she jumped in to even the odds. A few karate moves later, she and Brad emerged victorious.

Brad had seemed to like the outcome, smiling, and holding up her hand in his for a victory salute, but on the way home he'd seemed a little forelorn. When he kissed her good night, he didn't try to cop a feel. He never asked her out again. In fact, he avoided her after that.

Doc made Brad look like a baby by comparison. He wasn't any bigger, and didn't swagger at all. But he was way smarter, as well as more mature. Now that she thought about it, he'd protected Chopper Dan from serious injury as much as he'd protected her. She knew that if Dan's slap had landed, she'd have gone into overdrive, and simply taken him apart. She knew what she could do, and it wouldn't have been pretty. By stopping the fight before it started, Doc had kept them *both* from serious injury.

Experience, however, had taught her to be wary. She didn't know what might happen if things didn't go Doc's way. As he'd said, there was always someone bigger, tougher, or smarter. What if Doc met defeat when she was looking on. She'd seen that ruin things, too.

And, Doc was anything but predictable.

While experience had given her these nagging doubts, it had taught her that giving in to them was futile. She knew she had to pitch in again for one more try, otherwise failure was assured. Her athletic training wouldn't let her quit, either. It was what made her, although she would have been surprised to learn of it, a ballsy broad when she needed to be.

Besides, Doc wouldn't like a quitter.

Interestingly, a week ago it would have been her father's opinion that mattered.

14

It was late afternoon when they pulled up to the main entrance at the Driskill Hotel. The Driskill was built in 1886 as the showplace of a Texas cattle baron. Much shorter than its glass and chrome competitors, it nonetheless was one of the city's most distinctive landmarks because of its unique design. Its ornate exterior defied categorization, combining elements of gothic while presaging art deco ideas that wouldn't be current for another thirty years after it was built.

Doc pulled the motorcycle off the city street into a semicircular drive in a cavernous hollow behind the main facade. Pulling the beast most of the way along the drive to leave room for other guests to park in front of the entrance, he stopped to let Red step over the seat off the bike. The way her long legs defied the built up passenger seat's lofty height fascinated him.

Setting the kickstand on the tile pavement, he stripped off his leather jacket and helmet, and handed them to the bellman who had just wheeled a tall brass luggage cart next to the bike. Red followed suit. The bellman had recognized Doc's motorcycle from previous visits, and made a special point of being there to greet him. Doc was a good tipper, and always made a point of being pleasant and friendly, unlike some other regulars the bellman could mention.

Greeting the bellman by name, Doc promised to move the bike to the self-parking garage "... in a half hour or so. We want to get into our rooms, and out of these leathers." The bellman told him to take his time, he'd watch the bike. This was a ritual greeting they went through two or three times each year. Then, Doc opened the saddlebags to retrieve his and Red's saddlebag liners, and drop them onto the cart. Finally, Doc unloaded the tour pack liner onto the cart, and escorted Red through the heavy glass doors that another bellman opened for them.

Red had seen some four star hotels when traveling with her mother and step father, but the Driskill carried a level of ornamental exuberance not applied since the 1930s: marble floors, an inverted stained-glass dome like a Tiffany lampshade hung two-stories up and suspended from the stained glass ceiling, which was in turn supported

by rich, dark wooden beams held up by a small forest of columns. Antiques and original oil paintings gave the impression of a private art museum – which it was.

Red felt out of place in dusty motorcycle leathers, but seeing Doc stride in as if he owned the place, she lifted up her chin, wrapped her arms around Doc's left arm, and strode in as if he'd just given the hotel to her as a present. Her heels made a loud clop-clop on the pavement in time to the softer squeek-thump of Doc's rubber-soled motorcycle boots on the polished marble floors as they strode along the hundred-foot length of the lobby toward the flower-framed reception desk. Two bellmen and the concierge stood to greet them as they passed by.

Near the half way point, Red looked to her left to see an apse with the same architecture and furnishings, and nearly the same size as the lobby. A number of sofas, chairs, and rugs broke this huge room up into several surprisingly intimate seating areas. To the right was a wide marble staircase leading up to what, on first glance, appeared to be another wing of this private art museum. She saw the silhouette of a large, complex statue, but couldn't make out what it was.

By the time they reached the reception desk, Red felt like a queen ready to order things exactly to her liking, and expecting to get her way.

"Hello Dr. Manchek," the desk clerk said, "We're very pleased to see you again."

The "Dr. Manchek" momentarily threw Red. It dawned on her that she'd never heard his full name, and didn't know where the "Dr." came from. The few moments the desk clerk took to look up the reservation gave Red time to recover her poise.

"We have our Governors Suite ready for you," the clerk said to Doc while looking at Red as if he weren't sure who this woman hanging on Dr. Manchek's arm was, or how to address her.

"Yes, that would be perfect," Red interrupted before Doc had the opportunity to ask for a second room for her. Doc's head snapped around when she added: "Doc, and I have recently been married." Doc's jaw started to sag. "Hello, I'm Judith Manchek," Red continued without missing a beat, "but my friends call me 'Red.'"

Reaching over the counter to extend her hand to the clerk, who didn't know whether to shake it or kiss the back. He just touched the fingers noncommittally, and gave a dazed nod while Red concluded, flashing the clerk a dazzling smile: "I hope you will be one of my friends."

Doc just clamped his mouth shut, and handed his abused American Express card to the clerk. Then he said: "We'll be staying two nights this time. Will that be possible? I think the reservation was just for one."

"Yeasss," the clerk said, rechecking his computer monitor. Tapping a few keys, he got the answer he wanted and said: "That will be fine. I'll have the bellman bring up your bags immediately."

"I'll go up with him," Red put in, retaking control of the situation. "My husband has to run out to park our motorcycle before coming up." Turning to Doc, she dismissed him with a "Now, run along, and I'll meet you upstairs."

This completely flustered the clerk, who'd never heard anyone speak to Doc in anything but respectful tones. Respectful addressing of guests – no matter who they were or how they dressed – was standard operating procedure at the Driskill. With some guests it was difficult to maintain that respectful demeanor, but not Doc. It came naturally to address him with respect not just because of his lofty height and robust physique, but because he made it easy by his self-assuredness and good-natured politeness. Doc's motorcycle leathers didn't fool the clerk, either. He'd seen Doc look comfortable and natural wearing everything from those leathers to tuxedos costing thousands of dollars.

The clerk had never expected to see anything like this girl bossing him around with a "Be good, or mommy spank!" attitude.

Perhaps his initial impression, as she walked through the lobby, of a college girl caught completely out of her element, and hanging onto Doc for dear life, was wrong. Up close she had a supermodel's size, looks, and commanding presence, along with the same friendly politeness he saw in Doc. And, like Doc, she wore her road weary leathers like a queen. He could see her being just as natural in a formal gown worth thousands. He decided it

would be easy to give her respect, too.

Breaking into a grin, Doc turned and did as he was told, the grin almost breaking up into a loud snicker. By the way Red's hands had trembled as she clutched his arm walking through the lobby, Doc knew that this was a performance that she'd been planning in her head for some time, and had not been sure she could pull off. The lobby had been a surprise, which he hadn't prepared her for. He expected that hearing him called "Dr. Manchek" was unexpected, too. He didn't think she'd heard his formal name before, and certainly not the title. He found himself feeling proud of her for putting in a perfect performance despite the surprises.

Clearly, she was roping him into a tryst. When she'd cooked that up and why he didn't know – well, he knew why, just hadn't quite expected it. He'd been aching for her since he'd first set eyes on her, but figured making a pass would violate the terms of their relationship. One didn't make passes at one's employer, or an employee. Bad protocol, and bad management technique. She'd clearly decided to chuck that setup away, but he realized that she'd done it in a way that still left her in control.

Good girl!

It took Doc half an hour to collect the motorcycle, drive it to the self-parking lot, unhook the tank bag containing maps, etc., and find his way up to their suite. Opening the door with the key card he'd picked up from the registration desk on his way through the lobby, he found the familiar sitting room decorated in what he imagined would be the style favored by a rich cattle baron in the late 1800s: overstuffed leather chairs, a heavy oak desk, heavy drapes open to frame immense round-topped windows, sheer curtains allowing light to flood in while providing privacy from prying eyes in nearby taller and more modern buildings.

Directly across the room he saw Red striking an odalisque pose on a leather sofa. She was stark naked except for a roll of condoms that she'd pulled from their box, and wrapped around her neck like a scarf. Her pose clearly displayed her freshly shaved crotch.

"Hello, naked lady," he said, purposely answering the question posed by the title of an old *Hidden Camera*

compilation movie: *What Do You Say to a Naked Lady?* It was all he could think of.

“I got tired of jacking myself to sleep every night thinking of you,” she said in answer to the unasked question, “and decided to do something about it.”

“When ...?”

“When I woke up this morning. I got these at the pharmacy while you were off hunting newspapers,” she replied flipping the end of her condom-scarf. “Then you suggested coming here for a day off, and my plans just fell into place. You don’t mind do you? I took a chance that you’d want me.”

“It’s all right, then? You aren’t mad?” she added, trying to make sure.

After a moment, Doc replied: “I recall a line from a song: ‘She’s so fine there’s no telling where the money went.’ That, now that it’s out in the open, is how I feel about you. Whatever you want, just let me know. It’s yours.”

“Ohh, I like that. But, don’t break your budget. This place is expensive! Can you afford it?”

“It’s one of the indulgences the company allows me. I get to write it off. There won’t even be a problem with the second night.”

“Enough!” Red commanded in a mock dominatrix tone. “Mistress Judith demands obedience!”

With that, she grabbed him by the belt buckle, threw him down onto the sofa, and began stripping off his pants. Too excited to plan properly, she didn’t think to pull off his boots until she had his leather pants down around his knees. She had a bad moment when she couldn’t find the boot tops to undo the laces. Then, she found straps buckled around the tops and ankles. Trying to do it too fast, she ended up taking longer than necessary. Looking up, she saw Doc’s face carrying an amused smile, topped by a warm look in his eyes. Anything she did would be alright with him.

So, she concentrated on carefully removing every stitch of clothing he had. Not quite knowing what to do

next (it was the first time a boy ... man ... had let her control lovemaking so completely), she lay on top of him to mimic the kiss she'd seen Annie plant on him at the saloon, complete with breast rubbing. Feeling his erection against her belly, she moved down to stroke it between her breasts. Getting even more excited, she was inspired to slide further down to take his erection in her mouth. She'd never actually tried this. The boys she'd been with before had either not thought of it, or had not known how to ask. She hoped she could do it right.

Gagging a couple of times when she got it too far down her throat, she started sucking hard, and sliding it in and out of her mouth.

"Hey, not so hard! You don't have to pull a vacuum on it. Just let it slide in, and out gently. Think about where it's intended to go, and how to make your mouth feel the same way."

"Sorry," she mumbled with her mouth full, then relaxed her lips to let his penis slide effortlessly over her tongue. She found the sensation unexpectedly erotic. She'd thought women did this just to please the man. She hadn't expected to enjoy it so much, herself.

She surprised herself by exploding in a dripping orgasm.

"Oh, oops!" she said, getting up on her knees in embarrassment at the hot clam juice running down her inner thigh.

"We like that," Doc said, reaching down with his fingers to smear the dripping liquid over her thighs, labia, and clitoris. When that excited a second orgasm, he added her perineum, and mound of Venus to spread the liquid over a large enough area that it no longer dripped.

"We might want to put a towel down over the rug," he said.

Somewhat abashed, she went into the bathroom to get the largest and thickest bath towel she could find.

"Now, let's see if we can do that again," Doc suggested.

Taking the towel, he spread it out in the middle of the largest free area of the floor, and gently laid her down with her butt on it. Then he spread her legs, and, using his tongue to spread her labia, began rubbing its tip over her clitoris. Then he began sucking on her clit, and stretching it with his lips. She exploded with a third orgasm, which poured out, and soaked into the towel.

“Ohh, enough!” she said. “Mistress Judith wants you to fuck her brains out.”

Doc laughed subtly at the way she said it, as she pulled one of the condoms off the string, and inexpertly put it over his erection. He was surprised, however, when she lay back, put her legs together, and waited for him to mount her.

“You’ve done this before,” he said in a concerned voice, needing to ask, but not quite sure how to.

“Hey, I’m a twenty-two-year-old college girl living off campus,” she said in a hurt tone, lifting up on her elbows with a pouty expression. “You won’t be the first guy who’s been in there, you know.” Then her expression changed to a look of concern. She said: “You aren’t one of those Neanderthals who insists that his bride be a virgin, are you? I’d have trouble believing that.”

“No, just the opposite. I try to avoid de-flowering virgins. It’s messy, and there’s all that emotional upset, guilt, and so forth to deal with. There are guys who like that sort of thing, but I prefer experienced ladies.”

“Oh, good,” she said, then sat up to wrap her arms around him for another intense kiss, then pulled him down to lay on top of her.

He avoided telling her that the position she’d taken indicated to him that she’d never been fucked right. Instead, starting from that position, he reached with both arms behind her knees to lift her legs up so her feet pointed straight up in the air. That rolled her up so her weight rested on her upper back and shoulders. She looked up at him with surprise, but said nothing. Penetrating her, he pressed his weight down to force his penis as far into

her as it would go. When their pubi came together, he began rubbing with a circular motion. Then, he pulled back, and made a series of rapid thrusts. Then, pushed all the way in again to rub pubi.

“Oh, *shiiit!*” she cried, and shuddered with a string of multiple orgasms – an extended string of spurts with no pause between. They repeated the action several times before he, too, exploded with a pumping orgasm. As soon as he started, she climaxed again, and feeling his penis pumping semen deep into her vagina, kept climaxing with more multiple orgasms until he was spent. Then, he collapsed on top of her, and lay there, panting. She wrapped her legs around his buttocks, her arms around his neck, and breathed into his ear, then started kissing the side of his face and worked around to his mouth.

After they lay there for several minutes enjoying the feel of each other, Doc stirred himself, and said: “I guess we’d better get a mop, and clean this mess up.”

“Where’d you learn that one?” Red asked, impressed by the sexual position.

“Remember Annie?” Doc replied.

“Oh,” Red said, with a pang of jealousy.

“Actually, it was a girl like her that I knew several years ago, but it’s Annie’s second favorite position.”

“Hmm. What’s her favorite?” Red asked guardedly, wanting to know, but not liking the idea of Doc doing it with another woman. It was okay in the abstract, but not with someone she knew, and could put a face to. And, a body. And, a personality. In Red’s mind, Annie represented a lot of competition.

“She likes it on top. In fact, she likes to sit on top like Miss Muffet on a tuffet. That puts all her weight on the guy’s pelvis. It can hurt. She isn’t petite!”

“She taught you that?”

“That’s why I prefer experienced women. They have more tricks to share.”

Feeling outclassed, Red said: “Sorry I don’t have any tricks to share.”

“What do you mean? You did great! More importantly, you shared *you*, which is the most important thing. Tricks are just tricks to keep it from getting boring. If you want to learn more, buy a book.”

“You mean the *Kama Sutra*. I’ll borrow your copy.”

“Don’t have one. I never felt the need for a manual. I had too many good teachers available. Besides, there are a lot of other authors, too, such as Erica Jong, who write graphically about sex, and are more entertaining.”

“Anyway, it’s mostly a matter of staying open to new ideas. Imagine possibilities, then try ‘em out. If they work, add ‘em to the mix. If not, try variations. It’s all good, clean fun.”

15

As they talked, they sponged each other off in the bathroom, and disposed of the sodden towel by rinsing it out, and kicking it into a corner under the sink where housekeeping could find it. Adjourning to the sofa, they curled up together, still naked, talking about nothing in particular for a half hour before Doc said: “I could sit here curled up with you for the next thirty hours, but I’m getting hungry and there’s a great city out there to experience. I suggest that, since it’s already past dinnertime, we get dressed and go look for a club along Sixth Street where we can get some food and listen to music while getting gently swacked. Tomorrow, we can get breakfast downstairs, then do a walking tour. Maybe get in some shopping, if you’d like. There are a bunch of art galleries around here, as well.”

“What about calling for room service, and dining in the nude?”

“Trust me, we’ll be happier if we go out. If we wanted to spend all our time fooling around under the sheets, we could have done just as well in some flea bag off I-10.”

“Ugh. Fleas would make me itch.”

“And, I’d be happy to suck the itch out from all of your flea bites. I might create some bites myself, just to have more to suck on.”

“I think you’ve already found the best places to suck on, and don’t need an excuse, but I’m getting hungry, too. You’re right. You can work on sucking imaginary flea bites later.”

“Okay,” he said untangling himself from her limbs and standing up. “On that note, let’s get dressed, and skedaddle.” Looking around the room, however, he said with a frown: “You know, we probably should unpack and put our things away, since we’re going to be here for a couple of nights. I don’t want to leave my underwear in the middle of the floor to offend the maid.”

“Why would a maid come in here tonight?”

“Turn down service is complementary. When we get back, you’ll find the bed all ready to be slipped into. You *can* refuse it, but you have to be here to shoo her away.”

“What time do they show up?”

“About this time. In fact, we’ll probably see her lurking in the hallway or making up another room when we walk out the door.”

At Doc’s suggestion, they pooled their laundry into one pile, and stuffed it into one of the bags they found in the closet for the purpose. Red sorted through the items and made out the slip, requesting overnight service. In the meantime, Doc went into the suite’s main bedroom, and put his other clothing in two out of the six bureau drawers. Then, he started hanging all their leathers in the closet. “These drawers are mine,” he told Red when she came in. “I suggest keeping that bottom one for laundry.”

“Getting a little intimate here, aren’t we, employee? Mixing underwear in the same laundry bag.”

“I thought you’d want to continue the ‘Mrs. Manchek’ fantasy.”

“Fantasy my left cheek!” Red responded. “It saved a lot of questions, didn’t it?”

“Right.”

“Taking just one room saved you a ton of money, didn’t it?”

“Right.”

“It’s not a girly fantasy. Just expedient.”

“Right.”

“You aren’t buying it.”

“Not with that wedding-night scene, and the condom necklace, I’m not. Of course, I’m not complaining. I’m enjoying it, too. I’ll be happy to continue it as long as you want.”

“According to some social conventions, that could be taken as a marriage proposal.”

“You threw all social conventions right out the window when you hugged my arm walking through that lobby.”

“I threw them out first thing this morning, when I decided to buy said condoms,” Red responded. “Okay, fantasy it is.” Suddenly, Red clouded over: “I’m not in the market for marriage proposals, anyway. My life’s screwed up enough as it is.” Remembering what this trip was all about, she looked like she was going to start crying again, which she hadn’t done in a couple of days.

Taking her in his arms, Doc said soothingly: “Your life isn’t that bad. We’re going to sort it out, together.” Holding her out at arms’ length, he quipped: “That’s what you hired me for, isn’t it?”

Brushing away a tear, and trying to smile, she shook her head, yes. “Thank you,” she said. Then changing her expression by force of will, she asked: “What should I wear?”

Seeing she'd managed to recover at least some of her poise, Doc said: "Austin may be the most laid back city in North America. Just about anything legal would fit right in most places you could go. We might be underdressed in a tango ballroom, but it's not Saturday night."

"Saturday night?"

"Social dancing in the ballrooms. Tonight is reserved for lessons."

"What's the weather going to be like?"

"Today, or Saturday?"

"You know what I mean, tonight. Hot? Cold? Rainy? Oobleck?"

Seeing by the reference to Dr. Seuss' *Bartholomew and the Oobleck* that Red's good humor was back, Doc smiled, and said: "I don't know. Let's check. One of the wonderful things about the Driskill Hotel is that they always leave a little card in the room giving a complete weather report for the day."

"Let me see," he said looking around to spot the card, picking it up, and looking at it critically. "It says, 'Nice.'"

Looking up, he saw her standing, still naked, hip locked, and tapping her foot with a sardonic half smile and one raised eyebrow framed by tousled red hair hanging over her shoulders almost down to her elbows. She looked fantastic, and made him reconsider her suggestion of dinner in their room.

It took several seconds for him to pull his eyes away from her, and back to the card. "Ahem. It continues with more detail: 'Clear, with a high of 85, and a low of 68.' So, not too cool, but bring a jacket."

"Luckily, thanks to Danny, and the inimitable Dolores, I have such a jacket."

"Jeans, and boots, thanks to our friend in the tent outside Harriet's diner," Doc continued for her.

“And, I have a black sports bra that can double as an acceptable top.”

“And, just incidentally, shows off that fantastic belly button. Hmm, Doc like!”

Doc pulled on another black tee shirt from his seemingly endless supply, a pair of faded blue jeans, and a pair of beat-up, faded, and discolored suede boots that were so worn they couldn’t stand up by themselves. Grabbing his jacket, he stepped out into the living room, and flopped down in a chair to wait for Red to finish dressing.

When she stepped out of the bedroom, and posed for inspection, he said: “You’re a baaad girl!”

“I feel like a baaad girl!” Looking down at herself, she asked: “Do you think it’s too much?”

She had pulled her jeans up high, and cinched her belt tight so they’d stay there. That made the seam at the bottom of her zipper slide up, separating her labia and making it obvious she was wearing nothing under the jeans.

“I think you could avoid being arrested, but you might start a riot. You look like the math teacher all the teenage boys dream about. You sure that’s the impression you want to make?”

“I want to make sure all the ‘Annies’ out there know they’ve got competition.”

“You never have to worry about competition from Annie,” he said seriously.

“Do you mind it?” Red said, concerned that she’d gone too far.

“Nooo! It turns me on, and I don’t give a damn about anyone else. Besides, if it starts a riot, I’m sure you’ll protect me.”

This hit too close to her experience with Brad, which she didn’t think Doc knew anything about.

It showed in her face when she said: “You mean you’ll protect me, don’t you.”

Not knowing what caused the change of expression, Doc tried to laugh it off: “Hey, you’re the karate master.

Okay, if it happens, we'll work together. We'll divide up the room. You beat up the boys, and I'll kiss their girls."

When that just made Red's concerned look take on a tinge of fear, Doc impulsively stood up to take her in his arms. She shook him off instead, and stepped back with a look that was approaching panic.

"Hey, I don't know what I've said to upset you. I was joking. What's wrong."

Red decided to take a chance, and try to explain: "I lost a boyfriend once, when he got into a fight and I tried to help. He pretended he didn't mind, but he never came near me again."

"Sounds like he was a congenital idiot with an ego made of split-pea soup. You tried to accuse me of being a chauvinistic Neanderthal earlier. I'm not. I'm also not stupid enough to like women who pretend to be helpless. They cause more trouble than they're worth, quite frankly. I *like* that you feel you can take care of yourself. You need to, as what's-his-face demonstrated at Pinky's."

"You know how I feel about fighting," he continued, getting heated. "In most cases, a woman can defuse a situation like that by herself. Some lunkhead pushing in to be the big hero will just make matters worse. That gets everybody killed, as most morons looking for trouble will shy away from hitting a girl. It's bad for their image. But, they *love* having a guy to go after."

"I'll make you a deal. Whenever anything comes up, and it will, guaranteed, you get first crack at 'em. If you can stuff his head in a toilet, and flush, I'll lead the applause and buy you a congratulatory beer afterward. And, I promise to love you forever for doing it. If, on the other hand, it looks like you're getting into trouble, I'll be there to break his neck for you, and still love you forever. Deal?" he concluded, holding his hand out for her to shake.

"Deal!" she said, shaking his hand. Then, she reached over to hug him close. "Thank you," she whispered in his ear.

"Did you mean it?" she said, breaking the clinch. "About loving me forever?"

"I thought we'd established that."

“That was just fucking for fun.”

“There are women, like Annie, whom I fuck for fun. I even mean it when I tell them I love them. But, I don’t promise to love them forever, or to give them anything they want.”

“You mean, you actually love *me*, despite my faults?”

“I love your faults, too.”

“In that case, I’ll go put on some panties.”

“Oh, no. Don’t do that! Let’s take you out, and show you off. That *is* what you wanted to do, isn’t it?”

“You aren’t embarrassed?” she asked.

“You aren’t embarrassed?” he responded.

“No, in fact I’m getting to be quite the little exhibitionist!”

“Mmmm,” he said, smiling lecherously, “and I like to watch.”

Doc grabbed his jacket, and held the door while she sashayed out into the hall.

On the way to the elevator, they cheerily returned the “good evening” from the maid, whose eyes grew big as saucers when she saw Red’s cameltoe.

16

“You know, I think I’ll tone down the exhibitionist thing a bit,” Red said sitting across from Doc after dinner at Buffalo Billiard’s pool hall *cum* restaurant, which they’d decided on when Red’s head proved too tired to take loud music. “It was a lot of fun turning all those heads, but most of the people who noticed were more embarrassed than amused. It was fun for me, but not worth making half the city uncomfortable.”

“Good choice, grasshopper. You’ll always stand out, but no need to make them uncomfortable.”

“Although,” he continued after thinking about it for a moment, “you have my permission, and even enthusiastic support, to shock them out of their socks from time to time. To quote Jason Robards in *1,000 Clowns*, ‘Don’t be afraid to give the world a little goosing once in a while.’ Most of them need it most of the time.”

“As for me,” he concluded, “don’t ever be afraid of what I might think. Anyone with enough chutzpah to goose the world any way they can is all right in my book. Just do it with style and flair. Make ‘em wish that they dared to be daring, too!”

“Well,” Red concluded, reaching down to back her belt off a notch, then wiggling around in her seat to slide her jeans down to a normal position, “I think I’ve goosed the world enough for today.”

“To change the subject,” Red said, as prelude to changing the subject, “what was the desk clerk doing calling you ‘Dr. Manchek?’ I thought ‘Doc’ was just a nickname.”

“Well, it is.”

“A nickname for what? I don’t even know your first name.”

“Michael.”

“Doc is not a nickname for Michael. You said you just read a lot.”

“Well, I read a lot when I was in college, too.”

“What college?”

He hesitated, realizing that she was about to pry information out of him that he’d planned to keep hidden a little longer. There was little he could do at this point, though.

“Massachusetts Institute of Technology – M.I.T.”

“Did you graduate?” she asked deciding to play the game of prying it out of him, now that she’d found some purchase for a lever.

“Yes.”

“With what degree?”

“Well, I did get a Masters in Physics.”

“Now, we’re getting somewhere,” she said. Then, distrustingly, she asked: “Is that the highest degree you got?”

“Ah, no,” he said. “I did get a Ph.D., too.”

“Ohhh, *now* it comes out. You got a Ph.D. in what?”

“Well, I got one in aerospace engineering.” Then, sheepishly, he continued in a small voice: “And one in astrophysics.”

“You son of a bitch!” she yelled, drawing attention from everyone in the bar. “You lead me on thinking you’re some kind of motorcycle bum. Now, I find you have not one, but *two* Ph.D.s from one of the most prestigious engineering universities in the world!”

“I got ‘em at the same time,” he put in lamely, as if that made it less impressive, and thereby a less grievous deception.

“No wonder you knew what I was talking about when you were quizzing me about my courses. You probably could *teach* the damn courses!”

“I used to. My thesis advisor insisted. Said I needed to get over my shyness.”

“Shyness! You creep,” she said, kicking him under the table. “You sure got over *that*! Leading me on like

that. You should be ashamed of yourself. What were you thinking?”

“Hey, now, wait a minute,” Doc retorted, trying to defend himself. “If I told you I’d started college at the age of sixteen, and had earned two doctorates before I reached twenty, you wouldn’t have believed me. Nobody ever does. They think I’m bullshitting. You probably think that now.”

“No I don’t,” she said crossly. “I’ve seen you in action. All that malarky about not liking chess because you don’t like calculating moves that far ahead. You probably can’t find anyone to give you a challenge.”

“Not true!” he said, grasping at one thing that *wasn’t* true. “There are lots of chess players better than me.”

“Creep!”

“Does that mean you don’t love me anymore?”

Something in his voice made her look into his face. She was shocked to see he really was scared that she might not. She’d never seen him like that.

“No. I’m just mad at you for making me love you under false pretenses.”

Leaning over the table, she wagged her finger under his nose, and warned: “I forgive you this time. *But, don’t do it no more!*”

He looked relieved, but was still upset, afraid to look her in the eye. So, there *was* more.

She decided he’d had enough, though. Maybe he didn’t know, but she was already hooked on him. No, the metaphor was backwards, she thought. She hoped he was hooked, and she wasn’t going to take a chance on losing him by pushing too hard. Whatever he still hadn’t told her could wait. So far, the revelations had all been positive, so she’d bet on him one more time.

“C’mon lover. Mistress Judith wants you to take her home, ply her with brandy, and give her sloppy seconds.”

“It’s almost impossible to do sloppy seconds with only one guy,” Doc explained. “There’s a recovery period, during which time it’s likely to drip out.”

“Don’t get pedantic,” Red warned. “I’ll stay on my back ‘til you finish the job, if I have to.”

Mistress Judith did not make it directly to the room, however. Instead, Doc led Red across the lobby, and up marble stairs to the additional wing of the Driskill’s private art museum. That was the one with the unidentified statue she had noticed when first walking through the lobby. At the top of the stairs, Doc led her through a wide arched doorway past the statue, which proved to be a large Remingtonesque bronze of a cowboy on galloping horse chasing and aiming a rifle at a second galloping horse.

Even at one quarter scale, the bronze dominated one end of a room one half the size of the lobby. Red didn’t have time to really study it, and couldn’t quite figure out what was supposed to be going on, because Doc propelled her past it, past rich brown leather sofas and chairs, past a man playing a baby grand piano, and up to a circular bar tucked into a corner next to the hotel restaurant’s entrance.

Doc ignored Mistress Judith’s prior request for a brandy. Instead, he ordered two snifters of cognac, which he specified by brand. While they waited for the bartender to prepare the drinks, Red took note of the room layout.

It was like a long, wide corridor connecting the lobby to a street entrance near the restaurant. The circular bar had been tucked into a corner to allow guests to walk unimpeded – except for a detour around the horse statue – from the lobby to the street entrance. It seemed far more intimate, however, because of its relatively low ceiling. The room’s coziness made it hard to judge its size.

Taking note of the room’s contents, Red realized it must have covered the area of a medium sized ranch-style house. The horse statue, which Red made a mental note to study in detail later, was the biggest single object, with the circular bar running a close second. Next in size came the baby grand piano. Oil paintings depicting old west characters and scenes lined the mahogany walls. Memorabilia and lesser bronzes adorned console tables along the walls, and separate coffee tables at the focii of several seating areas defined by leather couches and easy chairs.

Groups of people, dressed in everything from sneakers and tee shirts to semi-formal gowns, created a muted hubbub of conversation, which the piano music supported rather than masked.

Hearing the bartender stirring close by, Red turned to find an enormous globe of paper-thin glass on the bar before her, with a half inch of hot, brown liquid in the bottom. She picked it up and was mentally calculating how far she'd have to tip her head back to take a sip, when Doc said: "Not yet. Swirl it around in the bottom like this to coat the sides, then breathe the fumes."

She did so, then said, "Holy ...!" as the alcohol rushed directly to the pleasure centers of her brain. She never got the second word out because her consciousness suddenly got too busy with internal sensations to care about communicating with the outside world. She hadn't felt anything like it since that pot party when someone got her to empty her lungs, then refill them with marijuana smoke and hold it in until she started to pass out from anoxia. Lights had exploded in her brain while euphoria gripped her soul, and her body took an elevator ride. This was as compelling, without the light-show hallucination.

"Ain't half bad, is it?" she heard Doc say.

She just smiled broadly, and said nothing, letting the sparkle in her eyes answer.

"Breathe a little to clear your head before taking another hit," he advised. "We don't want to cook any of those little brain cells, at least not too badly."

"Wow!" she gasped, when she caught her breath.

"Take another hit, and keep going until the cognac cools. Then you can sip what's left."

It took a few minutes for the cognac to cool enough that it no longer flash evaporated on the inside of the globe. The sensation subsided to just a warm, brown aroma tinged with alcohol. By that time "clear your head" had become an impossible dream.

She dreamily followed as Doc's arm around her waist steered her toward the horse statue. By the time they

reached it, the alcohol mist in her brain had parted enough for coherent perception to return. “Mmmm. That’s good,” she said, indicating the cognac, which she now had no trouble tipping into her lips because she no longer thought about it. She just did it.

Since sniffing the cognac instead of drinking it concentrated the alcohol where it would do the most good, she’d actually taken very little for the effect it had had. So, her bloodstream was quickly able to wash it away. Her consciousness returned to full sharpness, but her inhibitions washed away with the alcohol. She was able to move more gracefully, and unselfconsciously.

“I love this piece,” Doc said, indicating the statue.

“What’s supposed to be going on?” Red asked, still not able to fully comprehend it. The first impression was of life-and-death action being played out at breakneck pace in exquisite detail. It took her breath away, like that chariot-race scene in *Ben Hur*. But, it took a while to sort out the details, then put them in a coherent picture.

“Oh, my God!” she gasped, recognizing the figure of a second cowboy being dragged along the ground by the lead horse.

“How much of a horsewoman are you?” Doc inquired.

“None at all. That looks horrible. The poor man!”

“More likely ‘poor boy.’ Cowboys were mostly teenagers right off the farm. This was every cowboy’s worst nightmare: falling from a galloping horse, and being dragged to death. His buddy’s trying to shoot the horse to stop it before his friend on the ground is killed. Most likely, he’s already dead, but his buddy has to try.”

“His foot’s caught in the stirrup,” Red gasped.

“Imagine being dragged like that. Your feet are held up in the air, so you can’t lift your head off the ground. Your skull bangs off every stick, hillock, cactus, and rock at forty miles an hour, and there is absolutely nothing you can do about it. The only thing merciful about it is that it usually doesn’t last long. Your brains get dashed out

by the first rock with enough force to snap your neck, so if you should ever wake up, you'd wake up dead."

"Cowboy boots," he continued, "all have heavy, high heels specifically to prevent that very thing from happening. The idea is that the heel catches on the stirrup to prevent your foot from slipping through. It works most of the time, but not always. That's one reason they all carried guns in holsters easy to get at. They hoped that they could get their gun out, and shoot the horse themselves. See how his holster's empty? He tried it, but couldn't hold onto the gun. I can't imagine being able to make that shot, anyway, but it's one of those things you have to imagine you can try."

"Why would anyone ever take the chance of something like that happening," Red asked in shock, staring fascinated.

"Excitement, adventure, and really wild things," Doc responded, borrowing a quote from Douglas Adams' *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. "Today, we're taught that safety is the most important thing. Back then, they had a completely different concept. They knew that safety is an illusion. They couldn't escape danger. For them, courage in the face of danger was one of a person's most important qualities, man, or woman. They'd think that today we were all worthless cowards."

"But, to take a job where they could die horribly in the blink of an eye. What could they have been thinking?"

"I meant it when I said they couldn't escape danger. A farm boy could get skewered by a hay rake. A housewife cleaning out a disused room could breathe in hanta virus from a pack-rat's nest, and die bleeding from the eyes the next day. Much of the water was tainted with cholera. A lawyer in New York City could pick up a plague-carrying flea from a passing beggar. Every mosquito bite was an invitation to malaria, or yellow fever. Those kids didn't grow up sitting in the living room playing video games. Their parents kicked them outside to climb trees, build boats on the river, get beaten up by bullies, and be skewered by rusty nails. Any one of those could, and often did, kill them fast, or slow, or maim them for life."

“Come to think of it,” Red said, voicing a thought she’d never acknowledged before, “my father went exploring in the mountains, only to be swallowed up forever. He taught me to run around in the boonies all by myself, as well. And, the first thing he taught me about it was how to face danger.”

“Your father taught you a valuable lesson. It gives you a leg up on nearly every woman you meet, and a lot of the men.”

“It is exquisitely beautiful, though,” Red said, meaning the statue. “Look, you can even see the twisted fibers making up the ropes, and the expressions! That horse is running because it’s frightened to death, itself.”

“It would never purposely hurt its rider,” Doc commented. “It knows its rider is in trouble, and doesn’t know what to do. It wants guidance from the rider, but isn’t getting it, so it panics. It’s instinct is to run away, but that just makes things worse. The only one who knows what to do is the second rider, but he knows it’s probably already too late.”

“And, all we have to worry about is some vague threat from terrorists.”

“Not really,” Doc replied. “Easterners living in towns and cities might worry about such stuff, but Westerners, at least those that live outside the cities, still have to live with real nasties every day. If you have to check for ten-foot mohave greens before stepping out your door, and if you find black widow spiders hiding in the closet every week or so, and vacuum up scorpion corpses every time you clean the house, how frightening can a news story be about some homicidal maniac with a towel wrapped around his head? If they caught ‘em wandering around in the desert behind the house, they’d just shoot ‘em and leave ‘em for the ants. Oh, yeah. I forgot to mention the fire ants in *everybody’s* yard. Did I mention killer bees?”

“What’s a mohave green?”

“It’s the biggest friendly neighborhood rattlesnake we have in Arizona. Up to ten feet long. Head the size of your fist. Mean as a, well, a snake. Brain like a pea, so it’ll strike at anything that startles it. Most people kill ‘em on sight because they’re too dangerous to do anything else with. They even scare Hell out of me, and I’ve carried

boa constrictors wrapped around my neck.”

“You’ve carried snakes around your neck?”

“Sure. Most snakes love people, unless they think you’re out to kill them. People are soft, and warm, and snakes, being cold blooded, like to cuddle up. Things only go badly when either the snake, or the human, gets scared and panics. The snake’ll run away like lightning if they think they can. If they think they’re trapped, they’ll bite without hesitation, and they run on a much faster timescale than humans, so whatever they do is too quick to follow. That usually ends up badly for everyone, but most often for the human.”

“So, what do you do when you meet them?” Red was getting fascinated by this subject, now.

“That depends on the situation,” Doc replied. “If possible, the best thing to do is face them so they know that you see them, and back away so they see you’re not after them. They’ll watch you like a hawk until they think you’re far enough away so you can’t reach them, then turn and run. One moment, they’re staring you down. The next they’re a streak and a rustle through the grass.”

“Other times,” he continued, “you have to do other things. One morning, I found a baby mohave green sunning itself in the driveway. Cute little thing about a foot long with a little knob on its tail for a rattle. It was still too cold to be fully conscious, so I got a long-handled shovel and scooped it up. I carried it across the road, and out into the chaparral where it could find someplace healthier to spend the day.”

“Another time, I turned a corner in my car and saw what looked like a big piece of thick rope in the road, laying across my lane. Then the piece of rope woke up, and saw the car coming at it at about twenty miles an hour. All it could think of to do was to rear up, and strike at the front end. I had this momentary vision of what populates rat nightmares: huge triangular head, long dripping fangs, and a pink mouth. Then the car’s front end caught it about a foot below its throat, and it disappeared under the car. I looked back in the mirror to see it with a broken neck, dancing its death throes all over the road, spraying venom and striking at the air: insane with fear and pain. That was pretty horrible on a number of levels.”

“Some idiot was coming the other way when I hit the snake,” Doc continued, “and he stopped, which was smart. What was stupid is that he was actually getting out of his car to try to help. I stopped, and was about to back up to tell him to stay in his car, when he froze half way out of the car. I could see his wife in the passenger’s seat screaming at him to get back in. In the end, he didn’t try to go past until the snake stopped moving, so maybe he wasn’t so dumb after all.”

“Does that happen often?”

“Well, you meet snakes sunning themselves on the road several times a year. Usually, they wake up soon enough to scoot out of the way. They can feel the car coming a quarter mile away by vibrations through the ground. It’s big, and it’s fast, so they run away in a hurry as soon as they sense it. Once in a great while, they don’t wake up fast enough and get hit. I usually slow to a crawl before making a turn, especially on a bike, to give them a chance to get away. Snakes usually make the right choice if you don’t stampede them into a panic.”

17

Tired of listening to himself talk, Doc walked Red over to a nearby couch next to a small fireplace under the stuffed and mounted head of a longhorn steer. Red had seen pictures of longhorns, and even seen a few live ones at a distance from the highway, but never one so close. It was huge, with horns spanning seven or eight feet.

Doc plopped himself in the sofa’s corner at the end nearest the wall, so he could watch people walking by. He stretched his long legs out to prop his feet on the coffee table, but seeing that his boot heels might gouge the wooden surface, he folded his jacket with the zipper tucked inside and used it as a pad under his heels to protect the table top. Red sat down, pulled off her boots, and tucked her legs under her with her feet in the space between her and the armrest. Without thinking about it, she’d once again, Doc noticed, struck a casually sexy pose.

While they worked slowly on the remains of their drinks, Doc brought the conversation around to Red, and what she wanted to do once she graduated.

"I haven't graduated, yet," she reminded him. "And, it looks like that could be a problem. I don't know how long this trip is going to take, so I don't know what I'll be able to do when its over."

Before she could carry the thought any further, Doc stopped her with a wave of his hand while reaching over to put his snifter on the table.

"Forget about that for the moment," he said, waving his hands for emphasis. "Pretend that your fairy godmother has waved all that away. What would you *like* to do, if you could do anything you want?"

"Well, if we're fantasizing," she replied.

"Which we are," he interrupted.

"Since we're fantasizing, there's this new software system for simulating fluid flows. It came out of your *alma mater*, M.I.T., I think. It assumes wave solutions to the Navier-Stokes equation to model transient flows, instead of trying to solve the equation numerically. That simplifies things by separating viscous effects from non-viscous effects, because viscosity only supports shear waves, and non-viscous effects make pressure waves. The neat thing is that it works the same at subsonic and supersonic speeds. Are you familiar with it?"

"I have heard of it," Doc admitted, once again picking up his snifter to take a sip.

"Okay. They wrote it to model advanced wing designs for military aircraft, but I think it can be used for a lot of other problems. What I'd really like to do is play around with this software to see what kinds of problems it can solve. Try it out on different kinds of fluid flows, like tornados, ship wakes, and so forth."

"How would you go about it?"

"Well," Red said, warming to her subject because she'd never found anybody to listen to her idea who actually knew what she was talking about. The math professors she knew had their own interests, which didn't include software to solve engineering problems. To the physics professors, she was just some oversized female jock undergraduate.

“I’d start with the solver – the main calculation program that does all the math – and develop a set of front-end and back-end modules to make it easy for users to set up models for any arbitrary flow. If I did it right, they wouldn’t have to know much about fluid dynamics, just the geometry and parameters for their particular problem. So, maybe mechanical engineers might want to calculate the losses of air/fuel mixtures flowing through a diesel engine. That kind of thing. Basically, I’d invite the engineers and scientists who have the problems to solve to do it themselves.”

“Hmm, sounds interesting. But, if you want every Tom, Dick, and Harry engineer to use it, how would you distribute it?”

“That’s the great thing. I’d set it up as an Internet application. You know, set up a website that people could visit to set up their problems, then use cloud computing to create an *ad hoc* supercomputer to run the numbers. We could charge a rental or subscription fee to use the system. I’d keep the costs low, so anybody could use it. Maybe do cut-rate subscriptions for colleges and universities to get students used to using it.”

“How would you get a copy of the kernel to work with?”

“That’s a problem. It’s supposed to be open source, governed by the General Public License, and free for use by anyone, but I can’t find it on sourceforge.net. I don’t think they’ve released it.”

“If it’s the software I’m thinking of, they haven’t released it, yet. It is intended to be open source, but they’re still working on it. At this point, it’s too difficult to use, and they don’t want to wreck its reputation by releasing it with a crappy user interface.”

“How do you know this?”

“I am an aerospace engineer, and it was written to do aerospace problems. As I said, I read a lot. Are there any other things you’d like to get into?”

“Well, I’m also interested in studying chaos in complex systems. Almost everything we deal with is a

complex system, and complex systems tend to be chaotic. Yet, all our knowledge and all our mathematics was developed to deal with simple systems. Historically, they did that because they didn't have the tools to deal with anything bigger than extremely simple systems. The equations are typically nonlinear, and can't be solved in closed form. Real situations are generally too complex to solve numerically without very serious computing power."

"Take planetary motion, for instance," she continued, again warming to her subject. "Newton's laws work great for two-body problems, like one planet orbiting one star, or one satellite circling the Earth. But, our solar system consists of nine planets orbiting one star, plus hundreds of satellites and thousands, or millions of planetoids – small bodies floating around in space."

"It's eight planets. Pluto was demoted."

"Oh, yeah. But, that doesn't change the fact that the solar system has so many moving parts that it's no longer a simple system. It's complex, and likely to be chaotic."

"How do you draw the line between simple and complex systems?"

"You can't really draw a line. Some systems, like a ball rolling down a ramp, have only two or three moving parts. They're pretty obviously simple systems. Other systems, like the global economy, for instance, are made up of millions or billions of interacting moving parts. They are obviously complex. There's a huge area in the middle where we don't know."

"That sounds like a fuzzy logic statement."

"Well it is, but fuzzy logic isn't like what people call 'fuzzy thinking.' It's well defined, and has certain rules and methods of analysis."

"I know a bit about fuzzy logic. What I was working up to is asking whether you think system complexity is a two state or three state system."

"Oh," Red suddenly recalled that he might know a whole lot more about systems and fuzzy logic than she

did, and she became embarrassed about pontificating.

“Uh. I don’t know,” she said.

“Very good!”

“What?”

“You can’t learn anything new unless you first realize you don’t know it. They say the first step toward wisdom is finding out that you don’t know.”

“Who says it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is this more Zen stuff?”

“No, except that I approach everything from a Zen viewpoint. It’s how I think. But, we’re getting off the track. My question is a very simple one, with profound implications.”

“Yeah, but I’m not sure I understand it.”

“Okay, fuzzy logic works with small numbers of categories instead of precise measurements. For example, you’ve said that a system can be simple, or complex. That statement implies a two state system: given any particular system, it can either be simple, or complex. There’s no middle ground. It’s fuzzy because it’s hard to say which state a given system is in, so your logic has to deal with both possibilities simultaneously.”

“My question,” he continued, “asks whether there might be a third state: systems that are too complex to be simple, and too simple to be complex. In that case, it’s a tri-state system with three possible fuzzy-logic values: simple, intermediate, and complex. That changes how you analyze it.”

“You mean like, when aeronautical engineers first started breaking the sound barrier, they divided speeds

into subsonic, and supersonic, with the speed of sound providing a sharp dividing line. Then, they found there was a transonic regime that had to be analyzed differently. Is that it?”

“Exactly. Say, you know a lot about aerodynamics for an undergraduate math major.”

“It kinda fascinates me. I can’t really say why. Maybe I just like imagining the flows, like air moving across a boat’s sail, or water parting and rejoining as a boat hull moves through it.”

“I really think you should apply for that research analyst position at my company. They get into all that same stuff.”

“What’s the name of this company, anyway?”

Doc couldn’t see a way out of telling her, even though this was another bit of information he’d been hoping to save for later. Also, he couldn’t see how it would hurt to tell her.

“I’ll make you a deal,” he said. “I’ll tell you the name of the company, if you’ll promise to apply for the job.”

“What if I decide I don’t like the company, or the job?”

“It costs you nothing. Nobody’s saying that they’ll hire you, either. In that case, you’d be no worse off than you are right now.”

“Your logic’s slightly faulty,” Red responded, “but I promise to make out the application. Now, what’s the name of the company?”

“Scottsdale Systems Technology.”

“Well, that sure tells me a lot!” she said, sarcastically.

“It’s not supposed to tell you a lot. Remember, virtually everything we do is confidential. I can’t tell you

anything without an NDA, which you'll sign as part of the application process. If you look up our website, it won't tell you much more than how to contact us to sign an NDA."

"Will it tell me your job title?"

"No."

"Okay, Mister ... I mean Doctor ... Man of Mystery. I'll apply for a job at your company. Now, I've finished my drink, and it's been a long day. I want to go upstairs, and crawl into bed. Are you coming, or does Mistress Judith have to spank."

"Can I watch you walk on the way?" he asked, facetiously.

"Mistress Judith insists on it," she replied.

As they crossed the lobby to the elevators, Red added a little extra wiggle for Doc's entertainment, but she didn't keep it up long. She didn't have the energy. She'd hit her wall for the day and, by the time they reached the elevators, she was practically dragging her jacket instead of carrying it.

Even though it was still fairly early by the clock, Mistress Judith didn't get her wish for sloppy seconds because, when they crawled under the covers, neither had the energy to do more than cuddle up while watching television. They fell asleep with the lights on in the middle of a program that attempted to explain why some scientists thought birds evolved from dinosaurs, and others didn't. A half hour later, Doc woke up long enough to shut off the TV and the lights.

18

Red woke up the next morning alone in a bed that looked large enough to house a cocktail party, complete with wet bar. It was deathly quiet. Put more pleasantly, Red thought, it was so quiet you could hear a mouse get a hard on. Hmmm. Was she getting horny again? Where was Doc?

She crawled out of the bed head first, landing on the floor befuddled by sleep and confused by the distance from the mattress to the floor. Rising to her feet, she nearly lost her balance again by stretching a huge yawn. Bright sunlight streamed in through the sheer curtains. They'd been too tired last night to close the heavy drapes to keep out the city lights.

After blinking her eyes open, she tiptoed out of the bedroom to find out where Doc might have gotten to. She found him sitting in lotus position in the middle of the living room floor on a seat cushion he'd pulled off the sofa. He was wearing one of the white terry-cloth hotel bathrobes from the bathroom, which was arranged to cover his crossed legs. His arms were draped from his relaxed shoulders to his hands cupped loosely over the terry cloth covering his knees. The robe's front had been pulled out loosely so that it exposed his hairy chest. The pose gave him an air of solidity and stability without making any effort. It made him look like a Chinese buddha statue.

She suddenly realized what it was about those buddha statues that made them seem more than just depictions of fat old men. It reminded her of a little haiku Doc had seemingly pulled out of thin air for no apparent reason during one of their rambling conversations:

When hungry, I eat

When tired, I sleep.

When sitting, just sit.

Above all, don't wobble!

It hadn't made any sense at all to her at the time, but suddenly it flashed into focus. Here Doc was, just sitting. Not thinking, or doing, just sitting, and not wobbling.

When Red appeared in the doorway, Doc's eyes, which had been fixed straight ahead, expressionlessly, slowly rotated to look directly at her, still with no expression. Embarrassed, she didn't know whether to speak, or withdraw, or what.

Seeing her confusion, Doc pressed his finger to his lips to signal for her to not to speak. Then he pantomimed that she should take the other cushion from the sofa, and sit beside him.

She was familiar with meditation practice, as her martial arts instructor had always started every class with ten minutes of sitting meditation. She hadn't quite understood what it was for, but she had learned to sit quietly in a lotus position without fidgeting. In class, she would use the time to think about the moves she was about to practice. Getting into the lotus position was easy for her because her sports activities had kept her joints very flexible.

Now that there were no karate moves for her to think about. She found her mind rushing around from subject to subject with no coherent pattern.

After a few minutes, her thoughts found a fixed pattern: she had to pee.

Quietly, she stood up, and went to the bathroom to empty her bladder of the night's accumulation. After she wiped herself, the thought of sitting with her naked labia, so recently soaked with pee, pressed onto the furniture cushion seemed disgusting. She grabbed the second bathrobe from its shelf, and put it on.

Going back to the living room, she found Doc had taken a single candle from the display on the dining table, lit it, and placed it about four feet in front of his cushion. He'd moved her cushion so that it also faced the candle about the same distance away. He was now at the wall thermostat shutting off the air circulation. All this had been done without a sound.

He went back to his cushion and sat, rearranging his body and his robe as they had been before.

Without needing to be told, she knew she was expected to sit again. This she did, arranging the skirt of her robe the way Doc had because it seemed more comfortable for her legs and feet. She tried opening her robe the way Doc had, and found that it prevented the folds from pulling against the skin on her shoulders and back.

"Clear your mind," Doc said, quietly. "Don't think. Watch the candle to see what it does. Don't try to

imagine what it might do, just wait and see what it does.”

Red didn’t think the candle would do anything. It was just one of Doc’s mind games to keep her from thinking about the candle. She knew that sitting meditation in Zen had the goal of stopping your thoughts. It was what the Japanese called *satori*. She’d always thought that was so much bullshit, though. She knew that human minds constantly raced with a stream of conscious thought. How could you stop that and still be conscious?

Yet, not one of the things Doc had told her so far had been wrong. Like a judo fighter applying a force in one direction to cause a result in another direction, he’d often said or done something strange to cause her to think something else that ended up making sense, but he’d never bullshitted her. Whatever he wanted, she’d do as he directed.

As she sat, thoughts about sitting just to sit, and memories of sitting like this to think about karate moves, and finally wondering what the candle flame might do tumbled through her mind. She firmly brushed them away to watch intensely every movement the candle flame made. She didn’t want to let Doc down by missing something the candle did, even though she couldn’t imagine it doing anything.

At first, the flame danced, as candle flames always do, with the air currents still swirling in the room. Soon, the air currents quieted down, and the candle flame grew taller. Every time Red made a movement, no matter how slight, it would send a ripple of air to disrupt the candle flame, which would then shudder and shrink as if startled.

So, she resolved not to move at all. Since Doc was perfectly still, hardly breathing at all, only her movements affected the candle. Having that control, she forced herself to hold still, and saw that the candle flame grew taller still. The flame’s top took on a ribbon-like shape, stretching out like taffy pulled upward. It was now several inches tall, but every time she breathed out, the top shuddered and pulled back.

She figured out that by breathing slowly and rhythmically with her belly instead of her chest, she could practically stop her breath, spreading the ventilation through her lungs over as much time as possible.

The shuddering of the flame stopped. When that happened, the stretched out top began to grow even longer

into a ribbon of flame surmounted by a ribbon of black smoke. Soon, the smoke started quivering on its own, like a black flag rippling above the glowing flame's tip.

From her reading about advances in mathematics, she recognized this rippling as the onset of chaotic turbulence. That started her thinking about chaos, and what it could mean in terms of a mathematical model for the candle flame. Realizing that this was *not* what the exercise was all about, she shoved those thoughts aside, too.

After a while, even the smoke rippling ceased and the flame grew impossibly long. As long as the air surrounding it stayed still, it grew longer. The smoke had disappeared when the rippling had stopped and did not come back. Once in a while, the flame would make a slight movement, which would make it pull back, but over time it grew longer and longer, until Red could hardly believe the gas in the flame could stay hot long enough to reach the glowing top. The flame had long since passed one foot tall, and was now closer to two.

Red just stared at it in wonder. She'd never seen, or even imagined anything like it. She didn't know what to think of it, so she stopped thinking.

After what seemed like hours, Doc leaned over and blew the candle out, suddenly breaking the spell.

Red opened her mouth, wanting to chatter about what she'd just seen, but no words formed in her mind, and nothing came out. She thought to move, but her mind issued no orders to her muscles. She tried to think, but no thoughts arose. She just stared into Doc's face in surprise.

He stood up, put his right thumb and index finger together at his lips, and put a drop of saliva between them. He then reached out and pinched the still glowing, smoking spark at the tip of the candle wick. It went out with a clearly audible sizzle, which seemed to enhance the sense of silence in the room, and the hollow emptiness in her mind, but it showed that her ears could hear. Then, he picked up the candle and put it back on the dining room table.

Turning around, he saw that she was still sitting motionless with a blank expression in her eyes. "It's called *satori*," he said.

His voice again broke the spell, returning Red's ability to control her muscles. Inside her head, however, there were still no thoughts. She just experienced everything that was going on outside. In fact, everything outside filled her mind so completely that there was no room for a mind, just experience.

Doc started bustling about, turning on the air circulation, and picking up his cushion to put it away. Red knew it was time to stand up, and put her cushion away, too. Without thinking about it, she stood up, and put it away.

"I'm going to take a shower," Doc said. "Care to join me?"

For no reason she could think of (because thoughts still just weren't happening in her mind) she said "Yes" simply because she knew saying "Yes" was the thing she was going to do. She could have said "No," or "I'm famished, I think I'll call down for breakfast," instead. She didn't because saying "Yes" was the inevitable thing for her to do.

Saying "Yes" reminded her that she had a voice, and could talk. So, she asked: "How long does this last?"

"The rest of your life. You'll go back to using your mind just as you've always done, but you'll always know that satori is behind every thought you have. That's what's behind the curtain of maya. Your thoughts, feelings, and experiences are just things playing out in your consciousness. You can always sweep them away, and experience satori."

When he saw that she was still stupified, he said: "Remember the horse statue last night?"

She remembered, and that showed her that she still could remember. She no longer *had* to remember, but she could any time she wanted to.

"Oh," she said.

"What do you want to do next?" he asked.

A host of things they could do in the future flooded into her brain. She just had to choose. She imagined them all almost simultaneously. Saw many that were pretty unlikely, like running naked into the elevator, and ignored them. She didn't think whether she wanted to do them or not, just that it was highly unlikely that she'd do them. She felt no volition to do anything that she was unlikely to do.

Then she looked at the likely things, such as making the bed (her long habit of years living by herself), ordering room service, or following Doc into that shower. She realized that following Doc into that shower was the thing that would make her happiest, so she said: "Following you into that shower would be nice."

Seeing that she was back, fully engaged in the present, he smiled, opened her robe (he'd already shucked his to get ready for his shower), slid his arms inside and around her back, and pulled her close against his body. Then, he leaned down for a lingering kiss.

As an experiment, she tried pushing her thoughts and plans away, and experiencing the kiss in her new state of satori. She found she could do it easily. Everything went away, except the warm touch of his lips, the electric touch of his skin against hers, and the emotional conviction that everything was right with the world. Even the hunger of sexual desire disappeared. It would happen when it happened. It was in the future, and she was living *now*.

"Wow!" she said when they came up for air. "Will it always be like this from now on?"

"You're now a buddha," Doc replied. "You're in control. You can reach satori any time you want, or you can chuck it away and go back to the rat race. But, nobody ever wants to go back to the rat race. It seems such a stupid thing to do."

"You mean that's *it*?"

"Yup."

"What happened to twenty years apprenticeship, koans, sitting 'til your legs fall off, and all that stuff?"

“Mahayana Buddhism: the achieving of satori through skillful means. I told you, it happens in a flash. You’ve still got a lifetime of study, however: reading about the thoughts and experiences of other buddhas; practicing so that you can reach satori easily whenever you want; more practice so that satori becomes more familiar than your old ways; the disappointment of realizing that the world has scared you into falling back into your old ways; then renewing your practice to get satori back; then exploring new vistas in your mind to discover thoughts, and ideas you’ve never known, or even heard of before. All that lies in your future for the rest of your life. Happy enlightenment.”

“What about preparing the mind – all that frustration and confusion?”

“You’re quick. It took only two, no two and a half, days. You started formal training when Dolores reached into your bosom.”

“You mean that was planned?”

“No, like everything in the Universe, it wasn’t planned, it just happened. The Universe, which the Chinese call ‘the Tao,’ does not proceed according to some plan. It just happens. The world isn’t made, it just grows.”

“Sitting quietly, doing nothing

The wind blows, and the grass grows by itself.”

“Actually, your training started informally the first time your father or mother pointed something out that surprised and delighted you.”

“So, it really has been twenty years, hasn’t it,” Red said. “Who’d ‘a’ known?”

“Any Zen sage would know. But, enough of this for one day. Time’s a wastin’, and, if we don’t get into that shower, we’ll miss the fun part.”

“One last thing. Why does everyone think that monks are sober, serious, and kind of aloof?”

“Because they’ve never known a Zen monk. Mostly, they’re best described as ‘zany.’”

“Huh?”

“Sure. No desires, preconceptions, hopes, or fears to get in the way of whatever seems like a good idea at the time. Remember, the ultimate goal of Buddhism is eradication of suffering. Without suffering, nothing stands in the way of having a bang-up good time. Hell, we have all the resources in the Universe at our disposal. If you stop using them to make yourself miserable, you’re stuck with being happy.”

“Okay,” she said, pushing the robe off her shoulders, and grabbing his genitals, “let’s get on with having a good time.”

19

Doc set the shower head for a steady stream of needles spreading as wide as it would go, and set the water temperature for hot, but not burning. Then, he pulled her close, and kissed her while the water splashed all over them, cutting off sensations from outside. It felt like just the two of them together in a universe of splashing water.

When they were completely soaked head to toe, Doc broke the clinch and stepped out from under the stream. Retrieving a new bar of soap from the soap dish built into the shower’s tiled walls, he unwrapped it, crumpled the wrapping paper in his hand, and tossed the paper over the shower door so that it plopped wetly on the black-tiled bathroom floor outside.

Ignoring the face cloth Red offered him, Doc used the soap bar to work up a lather on his hairy chest. As the soap softened, and built more lather, Doc spread a thick layer of foam from his neck to his crotch, then pulled Red out from under the shower and washed her body with his, as if he was a soapy face cloth.

He first paid particular attention to her breasts, making sure to cover every square inch. Then, he leaned over her to reach her chest between her nipples and neck. That done, he moved down to work on her belly, lingering at her breasts again on the way down and using his collar bones to lift up her breasts to clean under them. He did not

fail to use the tip of his tongue to deep clean her nipples, or to spend plenty of time sucking off any imagined dirt that might have an unusually tenacious grip on them.

By this time, Red was shaking with almost continuous multiple orgasms, which calmed a little as Doc used his belly to wash her belly. The orgasms intensified again when he used his mop of pubic hair to wash her shaved mound, then used his now soap-covered erection to wash between her labia, then enter her vagina for a few strokes before pulling out.

“I forgot my condoms,” she said nervously, wondering about his intentions.

“I’m not going to come in there,” he reassured her. “I like you too much to take such chances.”

“What are you going to do?” she asked.

“Not worry about it now. That’s in the future. No need to rush.”

That reminded her to clear her mind in satori again, while Doc re-soaped his chest, then turned her around to do her back. Again, he started at the top, and carefully lathered her from top to bottom, not forgetting to turn her ninety degrees to either side to move his body up, and down along her sides. Finally, he used his bush and erection to clean her buttocks and anal crease.

Then, he took the soap bar and used it to soap up her mound, being sure to create as much lather as possible. He then proceeded to rub her clitoris, labia, and perineum with the fingers of his left hand, while doing her perineum, and anal crease with the fingers of his right. Note that he got her perineum twice: once with either hand. Must be thorough!

As he slid the fingers of his left hand in to wash inside her vagina, Red remembered that time Cheryl, her freshman-dorm roommate, had come back from a previous Spring Break bragging about having had anal sex. Cheryl talked about how much she’d enjoyed it, and how she’d done it. Red was inclined to believe it was all boastful exaggeration until Cheryl had demonstrated by masturbating to orgasm with a finger deep in her anus.

That had both embarrassed and excited Red, who responded by masturbating with her fingers in her vagina. They both enjoyed it so much that they kept up until they flopped, exhausted on their beds.

It had become a regular weekly ritual thereafter. Cheryl usually had a Friday night date, but they spent most Saturday evenings having a private masturbation party. They even started haunting the produce aisle at the local grocery store on Saturday afternoon, giggling together about what to buy for their evening soiree.

Despite Cheryl's bragging about how much she liked anal sex, Red noticed that she paid most attention to her vagina. Although, more than once Cheryl had fun parading around their dorm room with one object, such as a cucumber, in her vagina, and another in her anus. Red hadn't been ready to go that far, though.

Cheryl had taken the lead in these activities, while Red had followed at a safe distance. Specifically, she'd joined in the masturbation enthusiastically, but had kept her anus clear. She'd also disappointed Cheryl by refusing to share a zucchini with her. Cheryl had wanted them to each take one end at the same time. That was entirely too lesbian for Red's taste.

Feeling the middle finger of Doc's left hand in her vagina, while he stroked her anal crease with his right, Red decided this was a good time to find out what anal sex felt like. She reached down, and pushed the middle finger of Doc's right hand into her anus.

Not realizing that this was totally experimental on Red's part, Doc assumed Red was telling him she'd had experience with, and liked, anal sex. He'd been with more than one woman who'd shown a taste for it, including, not surprisingly, Annie, who enjoyed just about everything associated with sex, except stopping. So, Doc reached in a little deeper.

Red found it uncomfortable and clenched, which made it hurt. But, she gamely forced herself to move ahead with the experiment she'd started. As Doc's finger went in, she forced herself to relax. When she relaxed the pain stopped, and she realized that her anus shared some nerves with her perineum, and those nerves liked being stimulated. "What the heck," she thought, "might as well go all the way," and pushed Doc's finger all the way in.

Doc hesitated when he felt Red clench up, thinking (correctly) that he might have misinterpreted her initial move. But, her pushing his finger all the way in led him to believe that she wanted more, so he moved ahead. Stroking both Red's holes in unison, then alternately, elicited satisfying wriggles and moans, so he kept up, pushing in additional fingers and to greater depth as long as Red seemed to be enjoying it.

Red actually was enjoying it. Once she'd abandoned her misgivings and thoughts of propriety, and completely relaxed, she enjoyed it very much. Reaching around to find Doc's erection, she stroked it in time.

Feeling an orgasm starting to build, Doc backed away. They still had a great deal of washing up to do, and he wanted to enjoy it. He didn't want to take a chance on being flaccid and spent half way through. Instead, he went to work on Red's less erotic bits, such as arms, legs, and feet.

When Red was completely washed, and Doc sufficiently calmed, he turned her back to him and, holding her close, reached around to her front, and began soaping her chest, belly, and pubus so she could wash him. They both knew that he'd washed himself by washing her, but had not got everywhere, and that wasn't the point, anyway. They could have taken individual showers in half the total time, but where was the fun in that?

She started with his back, using her breasts as washcloths, and turning him to get at his sides, then under his armpits. He'd used his big shoulder knots to wash her pits, but she made him squat a little and raise his arms, so she could rub her soapy nipples deep into his pits.

When it came time to do his genitals, Red re-soaped her crotch, and rubbed his erection between her labia, then pushed it deep inside, stroking in, and out. Then she pulled off, and began soaping his testicles, and kneading them gently. Reaching further back, she scrubbed his perineum, and anal crease with her fingers. When she playfully tried to insert her middle finger into his rectum, he jumped as if, well, as if he'd been goosed.

Red laughed, and went back to cleaning his genitals thoroughly.

When finished, she turned her back on him, and began rubbing his soapy erection on her perineum, then pushed it into her anus, and began stroking. She leaned forward until her rectum was horizontal, and backed him

into the shower stall's wall. With his pelvis trapped against the wall by her buttocks, she began swaying her rear side to side, forcing his erection to move around in her rectum while pushing it hard as far in as it could go.

"Come in there," she said, leaning even further over so that her clitoris pressed against his testicles. She redoubled her side to side movements, adding a circular pattern for good measure, until he exploded in orgasm. Feeling him pumping into her rectum, she exploded in staccato multiple orgasms as well. She kept up the pressure, not letting him away from the wall, until he was completely spent.

"Uh, you're hurting me," he complained when the pain-dulling endorphins that the pleasure centers of his brain had been pumping into his blood began to clear. Without them, he could feel the pain of her athletic body crushing his pelvis into the wall.

She said nothing, but turned to smile broadly at him, her eyes sparkling. She reached out to press him back into the wall in a strong embrace, and lingering kiss. She was starting to push her tongue into his mouth when she found the downside of anal sex, which Cheryl had neglected to mention.

"I have to go to the bathroom," she said with a desperate look on her face. Jumping out of the shower, she ran, dripping wet, to the toilet, where she let go an explosive, messy bowel movement induced by the semen enema. Then, she moved over to the bidet to thoroughly clean out the stinging soap, which was no longer masked by her endorphins, from both her holes. She hadn't planned on this!

After cleaning herself up, she yanked open the shower door to see Doc, completely oblivious to her problem, shampooing his hair and beard. Stepping into the shower, she punched Doc hard in the upper arm.

"What was that for?" he yelped.

"You knew that would happen, didn't you!"

"I knew *what* would happen?"

"That ...," Red yelled, waving her finger in the general direction of the toilet without coming up with a

description she wanted to say out loud, “ ... It was a mess!”

“Oh?” Doc responded, confused, but beginning to comprehend. None of the women he’d had anal sex with before had responded like this.

“It hurt!”

Really distressed, Doc couldn’t think of anything to say except “Sorry. I thought you knew what you were doing.”

“Nobody warned me about this part. It made me shit my brains out! All that stuff came out at the same time. And, the soap stung like crazy.”

“I’m sorry. Nobody ever complained before. Annie always thought it was great fun.”

“Annie again! I’m gonna do something to that bitch!”

“I’m sorry. We shouldn’t do it again, if you don’t like it.”

Thinking about how much fun it had been up to the end, Red wasn’t sure she liked the sound of that. “Well, maybe we should be more careful with the soap.”

“Okay. Note to self: no shoving bars of soap in Red’s vagina. What about the anal? If you didn’t like that, tell me. It’s not exactly my favorite way to do it, either.”

“In that case, I’d rather not. My freshman roommate talked about it, so I thought I’d try it.”

“Hmmm. Sounds like you’ll be able to say: ‘Been there. Done that. Didn’t like it.’”

“I’ll say I’m sorry again,” Doc continued. “The way you acted, I thought you’d done it all before. Is there anything I can do?” he asked, deflated.

“Yeah, get out of there and let me wash my hair,” she said, crossly. “Maybe I’ll forgive you later.”

20

They say that humans don't remember pain. Who "they" are is unspecified. If we could remember who "they" were, we'd say: "Albert Krasnovich, Gladys Knoffel, and Sidney Bogdonovich say that humans don't remember pain." But, we don't, so we don't. We simply say: "They say that humans don't remember pain."

In any case, by the time she'd finished washing her hair, Red's memory of the stinging-soap pain was fading. The humiliation of being forced from the shower to the toilet, and her disgust at the result, were another matter. Those memories she carried undiminished. When she compared them to the exhilaration she felt getting into that situation, she wasn't sure whether it was worth it, or not. No, she concluded, it wasn't, because there were better ways to feel just as good.

She decided to forget the incident, and concentrate on getting back to satori. That part of the morning, at least, had worked out very well, thank you. If Buddhism's ultimate goal was to eliminate suffering, she ought to use what she'd learned to improve her emotional state.

A few minutes later, she exited the bathroom with her creamy, freckled skin dry, and buffed to a rosy glow, her hair wrapped in its towel turban, and not another stitch on. She found Doc fully dressed in his jeans, and those awful suede cowboy boots, but with a crisp yellow long-sleeved twill shirt – with a collar no less – instead of the usual black tee shirt. She liked the change.

He was sitting in the middle of the couch with his feet on the coffee table's marble top. This time, he'd used a magazine to protect the marble from his boot heels.

He was concentrating on the screen of a tablet computer he'd propped up in his lap. Red hadn't seen the computer before, or at least hadn't noticed it. Doc was reading something on the screen, using the tip of his right middle finger to push the text up and down on the screen, and to navigate through it.

Looking up, he smiled broadly to see Red once again in a good mood. "Forgive me?" he asked.

“Of course. It was my idea, anyway. And, once again, I learned something. I was mostly embarrassed, and mad at myself more than you.”

“I’m sorry. Give us a kiss to make up?”

“Stop apologizing.”

She sat on the sofa next to him, leaned over pressing her breasts against his chest, and kissed him thoroughly. Then, still hugging his arm, she sat back to see what he was doing, but he snapped the tablet display closed.

“Company confidential,” he said, “I could let you see, but then I’d have to kill you. I wouldn’t like that. You’re too much fun to nuzzle.”

He demonstrated by turning to kiss her again, and stroke the curve of her side from ribs to hip.

“Give me a few minutes to finish processing my email,” he said, “and we can go down to breakfast. They’ve got a really nice informal cafe off the lobby that does wonderful things with eggs.”

“I thought you were on vacation,” Red observed, tapping the top of the computer to indicate that she considered it an offending instrument. In the competition for his attention, she didn’t like losing out to a machine.

“Yeah, but email still piles up. I have to clear out the junk, and deal with anything urgent. Hopefully, it will take only a few minutes. The spam filter took care of most of the junk.”

Red left him alone to play email, and went into the bedroom to check the weather report. Housekeeping had left a new little white card when turning down the bed yesterday evening. On it, Red found, neatly printed in a flowing script, the date, and “Sunny and clear. High 75°F.” This she confirmed with the TV tuned to a local weather report. “Jeans, and a blouse, with my leather jacket ‘til the day warms up,” she said to herself.

Holding up her jeans for inspection, she growled in disgust, then stepped to the door leading to the living room.

“Sorry to interrupt, but can we go shopping today?”

“Its part of the plan. What do you need?”

“Well,” she began, feeling embarrassed, “last night walking around with these jeans hiked up, I got a little too excited.”

Remembering fondly, Doc smiled, and said: “I thought that was the idea. You did it very well, I thought.”

Blushing, she explained: “Yeah, but I leaked all over them.”

“How badly?” Doc asked without the smile fading one little bit.

“Well, you know me. When I leak, I don’t fool around.”

“Mmmm. Yes, it’s one of the many things I like about you.”

“There’s a big stain all over the crotch. I don’t want to wear them again ‘til they’re washed, but I think it’ll be too cold to wear shorts, and my leathers could stand to air out. I’d like to get another pair of jeans, or slacks.”

“How’s about you put on your leathers for now. After breakfast we can go get you a new outfit.”

“Thanks. Should I rinse these jeans out, and hang them to dry? Except for the stain, they’re not dirty.”

“Good idea. They should be dry by tomorrow morning when we have to leave.”

Red didn’t like being reminded that tomorrow morning they’d be leaving this place to continue their quest. Being here with Doc had been the first time, literally in years, that she’d been free of angst about her father, her grades, and what she had to do to keep her life moving forward. Maybe some of Doc’s Zen attitude was rubbing off on her. In any case, she’d stopped worrying.

No, it was that Doc seemed to have planning so well in hand that she’d taken a vacation from worry. Going back on the road meant going back to the stress. Well, she could do a lot of meditating sitting on the back of that

bike.

“If you want,” Doc continued, “we can scout up a western wear store, and you can get a second pair of jeans, a blouse, and a hat with a broad brim. Would you like that?”

“That’s what I had in mind. Then we can go play tourist. Tonight, I’d like to go back to that blues bar with the loud music, and this time dance our asses off.”

Red took the jeans into the bathroom, thoroughly rinsed them out, and hung them in the shower. Going back to the bedroom, she put on her leathers, and loosed her hair from the turban. It was still damp, but could air dry after she brushed it.

After brushing her hair, she added, on a whim, a pair of large silver hoop earrings that she’d been wearing that first day when Doc found her sitting by the side of the road. She’d changed them for gold studs so they wouldn’t get blown off when riding the bike, and stuffed them into her pocketbook along with a rhinestone-and-silver necklace that had been in there since the last time she’d been on a date back in Boston. She put the necklace on, too, and unzipped her jumpsuit half way down to show it (not to mention a little cleavage) off.

“Ohhh! Very nice!” Doc exclaimed when she entered the living room. “Very elegant.”

Pleased, and surprised, as she hadn’t been shooting for elegant, just trying to dress the leathers up a little, she blushed again, and smiled, then did a little curtsy.

“There’s a little too much road grime on these to be ‘elegant,’ though,” she admitted. “How could I get it off, or does it have to go to the cleaners?”

“That’ll just wipe off with a sponge, but it’s not really noticeable. If it really bothers you, I’ll take a damp face cloth, and wipe it down. It’ll be easier to do when your wearing it.”

Doc had finished processing his email, and was checking the business news on television. He’d also retrieved *The Wall Street Journal* that the hotel had left outside the door, but it was folded in his lap.

“If you would, thanks,” Red responded. “I can’t reach the back, where most of the dirt is.”

“It’ll take two minutes,” Doc concluded.

And, that’s all it took. Doc followed Red into the bathroom, where he pulled out the face cloth they hadn’t used in the shower. Red had started soaping it, and had not rinsed it, so all Doc needed to do was dampen it, work up a lather, and wipe the whole jumpsuit down thoroughly.

By the time he was done, the face cloth was black with grime. Doc rinsed it out thoroughly, then wiped the jump suit down again to remove the soap residue. When he was done, the leather looked like new. The face cloth looked gray, and joined the growing pile of towels under the sink.

On the way out of the suite, they grabbed their jackets, Red’s shoulder bag, and Doc’s newspaper. Since any ice between them had long since been thoroughly broken, Doc found it hard to keep his hands off Red, and she had no motivation to discourage him. So, it was easy for them to play out Red’s fiction of a recently married couple by literally hanging on each other all the way down to the lobby.

Despite Red’s protestation the previous evening that she wasn’t in the market for a husband, she’d decided that no matter what else happened, whatever the outcome of her quest, however her educational issues became resolved, and whatever happened to her career, she wasn’t going to let this one get away. Suggested by the cowboy theme of her surroundings, the phrase “hog tied” came to her mind.

So far, all the issues that had ruined her relationships with boys in the past had been like water off a duck’s back to Doc. Her height and athletic prowess were non-issues with him. Unlike the jocks she’d known, he actually *liked* that she was smart, independent, and could take care of herself.

He wasn’t intimidated or offended when she wanted to take charge. In fact, he rather welcomed it. He seemed relieved by not always having to run the show. Even when she’d resisted his idea of taking time at his apartment in Scottsdale to gather information before continuing on to Nevada, he hadn’t been offended. While he seemed mildly surprised that someone would question his judgement, he’d been quick to table the discussion

instead of insisting that he was right. In fact, he was constantly asking her opinion and making sure that she approved every step that they made.

She wasn't sure what his reaction to her telling the registration clerk they were married meant. It's possible that he'd had some similar idea, and she beat him to it. But, she thought not. Doc had always treated her too courteously to pull something like that without forewarning her. No, that would have been out of character. Yet, he barely batted an eye, and followed her lead. He even acted as if he enjoyed letting her boss him around.

In fact, the only times he'd insisted on his own way, he did so with an explanation that seemed to make sense.

He even turned her intellectual abilities, which had so often cost her the affections of a would-be lover whose ego couldn't take the competition, from a negative to a positive. Instead of wanting to show off how smart he was, he simply liked discussing subjects, such as differential equations and fluid-dynamics models, that most people never even heard of. Even more surprising to her, he took an interest in what *she* thought.

That's what it was! He was a math and science fan, just as she was. It was like two friends discussing a shared passion.

Yes, they'd become friends. It was Red who'd pushed over the line to start a sexual relationship. Now, they'd become what her ex-roommate Cheryl used to call "fuck buddies," as well. Cheryl had a lot of fuck buddies. They were boys who meant nothing to her except that she enjoyed having sex with them. Red sensed that having a fuck buddy who was also a real friend was a spectacularly good thing, to be held onto with talons of steel.

21

The 1886 Cafe & Bakery took up half of the southeast corner of the Driskill's ground floor. It shared the kitchen with the Driskill's other restaurant, the Driskill Grill, whose entrance Red had seen near the hotel bar the night before. The Grill was the more formal of the two restaurants, being open for dinner only. The 1886 Cafe &

Bakery was, well, a cafe and bakery. It wasn't, however, your local neighborhood cafe and bakery, unless you happen to live in an extraordinarily well-to-do neighborhood.

Yes, it had the usual roughly dozen individual tables, and walls lined with booths. It even had the obligatory diner's open kitchen to allow patrons to watch their food being prepared. Yet, there was a difference, and it wasn't a subtle difference. It was an in-your-face, don't-worry-you'll-notice difference. The message was, in the words of science-fiction author Douglas Adams: "Very little expense had been spared to give the impression that no expense had been spared."

No flimsy painted bent-wood chairs with masonite seats here. The chairs were solid, heavy affairs made of wood that suspiciously resembled mahogany. They'd been selected and finished specifically to match the tables, which were equally robust in design and execution. The tables, in their turn, matched the custom millwork accenting the white columns and arches maintaining the 30 foot separation between the lofty ceiling and the polished marble floor.

The booths, made of the same dark wood, had seat pads and button-tufted back pads finished in black leather, whose design owed less to ordinary cafe furniture than to a chesterfield sofa. Add in the arched stained glass windows, and the custom Texas-star-patterned stained-glass hanging light fixtures, and the impression was that of casual opulence.

Red was reminded of a painting she'd seen somewhere that showed a rodeo cowboy using a stick to clean horse poop off the soles of his python-skin boots. It was like, a rough-and-ready life equipped with nothing but the very best. She decided she could get very, very used to it.

She looked over at Doc, flopped in the corner of the booth, his long legs propped up on the black leather bench pad, boot heels hanging over the edge, and the nose on his tanned, leathery face poked into today's copy of *The Wall Street Journal* as he scanned the headlines for anything that could affect his investment portfolio. "Casual opulence" seemed to describe him as well. Even what she thought of as "those awful suede boots" were the thoroughly used remnants of custom hand-tooled footwear that had originally cost many hundreds of dollars.

Yes, she could get very used to this, and to sharing it with him. Hog tied was definitely what she had in mind for him.

“Another slow news day,” he announced, tossing the folded newspaper onto the table within her easy reach if she wanted to check it for herself.

Red picked it up, and scanned the left-hand column, which summarized what the editors thought were the day’s most important stories. “The market’s down,” she pointed out.

“Yeah, but it’s supposed to be.”

“It’s *supposed* to be? Supposed by whom?”

“By me. It’s in a narrow trading range – up a little, then down a little, then up again. The past two days have been slightly up, so today should be down. There’s no real direction, and very little opportunity to make any extra money. The best thing to do is nothing: let everything ride until it breaks out. If it breaks to the upside, which I think it will, the securities I already have will do well. Otherwise, I’ll dump ‘em. There’s nothing to do until then.”

“What about the Middle East situation? It looks like they might make some progress, finally.”

“Those people have been sacrificing each other on the altar of religion for 5,000 years. They aren’t going to suddenly change now. As with all their other moves since the end of World War I, they’ll lead western leaders on with promises of ‘real progress, this time,’ then pull the plug at the last minute. Who was it that said: ‘The more things change, the more they stay the same?’”

“We’re very cynical this morning, aren’t we!” Red observed.

“Not at all! This is a perfect vacation. Because the market’s just sliding sideways, I don’t have to think about it. That part of my life’s on autopilot for the next week at least. The rest of it’s on autopilot most of the time, anyway.”

“No,” he continued. “No news is good news because we can just kick back, and relax for the rest of the day. We’ll wolf down our breakfast, then cab it to Allens Boots just down Congress street. You should be able to get everything you want there. Then, we can come back here, dump off your leathers, and poke around the shops and art galleries near here. I’d like to work our way up to the Capitol building, too.”

“We’re not taking the bike?”

“We can, if you’d prefer. It’s just easier to snag a cab out front than to take the bike out of hock just to go down to Allens. We’ll be better off on foot the rest of the day. We’ve spent a lot of time on the bike, and will be spending more. So why not let it sit, and cool its tires?”

“Okay. Here comes our food.”

Red had gone for the steak and eggs. Doc had, per an earlier threat, opted for eggs Benedict. Both came with more food than either was ready to consume. “You can blow up to elephantine size on restaurant food,” Doc had pointed out ‘way back at Harriet’s Diner in Daytona, then reiterated it at the Mexican restaurant that evening.

Both had worked too hard to build athletic bodies to jeopardize them by overeating, so they generally ate only a third to a half of the food put in front of them. Having had the tutelage of professional coaches to help her maintain good eating habits, Red hadn’t needed Doc’s advice. In fact, she helped Doc control his eating by teaching him a simple trick her trainers taught her. Before taking the first bite, she divided her meal into what she’d eat, and what she wouldn’t.

Doc resisted it on the grounds that it seemed too much like “rules,” which he had a religious intolerance for, but she found an effective strategy to convince him: she pouted. She sensed that it wouldn’t always work, and certainly wouldn’t work when he had a good, solid reason for taking his position, but when he was unsure, or taking a position just to be recalcitrant, it was the charm.

It was really none of her business what Doc ate, but she’d seen what happened to athletes when they’d gotten out of training, and how hard it was for them to get back into shape once they’d gotten out. She’d cared

about him almost from the first, and wanted to be part of the solution, not the problem.

Besides, it was fun to mother him whenever she got the chance. She generally liked to mother people. She had a strong maternal instinct, which accounted for her yearning for a kids and puppies lifestyle. It also accounted for the newlywed fantasy she'd cooked up for the hotel staff, and was now thinking about making real.

Doc didn't mind Red's mothering, partly because he was paying attention to her diet, too. He liked her body, and knew how much work it took to maintain it. And, he'd spent years making a habit of trying to be part of the solution to every problem.

After both had finished as much as they intended to eat, and filled up on as much coffee as they could hold, Doc charged the bill to their room, and together they made their way to the main entrance.

The bellman who'd greeted them the evening before was not on duty, but those who were seemed to know Doc well enough to ask whether he needed a cab. Sometimes, Doc cabbied it around Austin. Other times, he walked. In fact, he walked more times than he took a taxi. In any case, it paid bellmen to ask every time.

"Will you be needing a cab this morning?" The nearest bellman asked, touching fingers to his cap in salute to Red. Word had gotten around that Doc was escorting a new wife, and that she was a true red-haired woman, capable of pulling on the family pants whenever she wanted. "You'll know her when you see her," was the description. "Keep her happy," was the advice.

"Yes," Doc replied, "we're going to do a little shopping. Allens still good for western wear?"

"Yes, sir!" the bellman responded, already signaling the front cab parked in line down the one-way street. "Allens has a good selection, and decent prices."

The bellman opened the rear door as the taxi pulled to a stop, touched his cap again to Red, accepted a tip from Doc, and told the cab driver where they wanted to go all in one practiced movement. He tapped his cap again to Red as he closed the door. Doc was amused to see that Red garnered the lion's share of deferential attention.

Far from the insecure, panicky girl he'd found by the side of the road two days ago, she'd opened up into a self confident woman with her wits about her. Doc figured this was probably her real nature. It just took a little encouragement to bring it out. She was going to be alright.

Turning out of the hotel's covered driveway, the cab driver merged with traffic moving up Brazos Street, and drove up two blocks, then turned left for another block, then left again to go downhill on Congress Street. Red stared, fascinated, out of the cab for the whole mile-and-a-half trip to Allens Boots. While she was used to eastern cities, she saw that southwestern cities, and especially Austin, have an entirely different feel. While there was just as much activity, the frenetic bustle was missing.

Partly, it was a more informal life style. Whereas everyone in her home city of Boston looked dressed for success, Austinites showed more individuality. Bostonians always seemed to be running late for an appointment, while Austinites seemed to have plenty of time to get where they intended to go.

Another part of the picture was the weather. It was quite warm compared to northern cities at this time of year. There were no grimy piles of last winter's snow melting in every available space. While it did snow from time to time in Austin, it was an unusual thing, and didn't stay on the ground long. Today, the air was warming up, the cab's windows were partly open, and spring fever seemed chronic.

Something entirely unexpected, however, was the relative cleanliness of western cities. Partly, it was because western cities were the newest. Las Vegas, for example, had still been a small desert community as late as the mid-twentieth century, and most other western cities were not much older. They weren't old enough to show much general decay and disrepair. Of course, no mayor wanted to be known as the one who let the city's infrastructure go to pot, so there was motivation to keep everything polished and mended. Perhaps one or two hundred years hence, western cities might look as dowdy as their eastern counterparts, but by then the eastern cities would have aged more, too.

Allens Boots was housed in a one-story structure built of white-washed adobe bricks right on the main drag. Congress Street was a four-lane boulevard, with an extra lane's worth of space on each side given over to curbside

diagonal parking. The cab driver dropped them off at the corner near a front door protected from the elements by a beat-up-looking awning surmounted by a seven-foot-high, bright red cowboy boot.

Inside, Allens devoted most of its approximately 2,000 square feet of floor space to rows upon rows of cowboy boots. In addition, there were lesser, but still quite adequate, displays of mens' and ladies' outerwear, hats, jeans and shirts, all featuring a western flair that is recognizable to shoppers the world over.

"Wow," Red exclaimed, "where to start?"

"Let's just wander the aisles for a while, 'til we have an idea what's available," Doc suggested.

And, that's just what they did. The first thing Red homed in on was a very large, very western-looking shawl that she just had to have to dress up her jumpsuit. She had it rolled, and tied around her waist almost immediately, with long tails hanging down the left side.

"Do you think I need another pair of boots?" she asked Doc.

"You can never have too many pairs of boots. I don't know what you have in your closet at home, but you probably won't be getting back there for a few weeks at least. However, you've already got a good pair of basic black boots that will go with just about anything, and fit in anywhere. And, you have your red ones. You could stand to have a brown pair as well, or you could look for a fancy pair of dress boots. Or, you could give it a pass for now. Next stop is Scottsdale, where you can find anything you want, even if you don't know enough to ask. My suggestion is to just look around. If something really strikes your fancy, snag it. If not, put on your black ones when you get back to the hotel."

"What about a hat?"

"A hat would be useful today, since we plan on walking around. We won't have room to pack it on the bike when we leave, but we can ship it home. Remember, they sell hats in Arizona, too."

"It want a cowgirl hat."

“Okay, but what do you need the most?”

“Jeans. I need a spare pair of jeans!”

Catching a salesman’s eye, Doc told him: “My little girl needs a pair of jeans.”

Whatever the salesman’s practiced response to this summons was, it flew right out of his mind upon hearing this amazon called “my little girl,” even by the towering monster standing with his arm around her waist. There was nothing about her that could be called little. While she was certainly young, she was a young woman who’d clearly left “little girl” in the dust long ago. The guy, as big and rugged as he looked, was way too young to be any kind of father figure to her, which was the only interpretation left. The poor salesman just didn’t know what to think, so he stood there with his mouth half open.

It hadn’t been hard for Doc to catch the salesman’s eye because the salesman had seen Red tying the shawl around her waist, and had been watching to make sure she didn’t try to make a getaway without paying for it. Realizing how it looked, Red asked him: “Is it okay to keep this on ‘til we get to the register? It’s so perfect for the outfit”

This changed the subject enough to get the salesman’s verbal faculties restarted. Assuming that, having pointed it out without prompting, she was not a shoplifter, the salesman relaxed a little. He finally got enough control of his voice to stammer: “Jeans are over here. Are you looking for anything specific?”

“We’re riding across country by motorcycle,” Red explained, wrapping her arms around the salesman’s left arm, and lead/following him in the direction he’d indicated, “and the only thing I have with me beside this jumpsuit is a pair of black jeans, which are a bit dirty right now. I’d like to pick up a nice pair that I could wear around town today. So, they’d have to be stone washed, or pre-shrunk. A medium blue would probably do the trick.”

Red, of course, was just playing with the poor salesman. She’d never been a flirty type, having been too insecure to do it right. Flirting is, as the word suggests, a risky game that must be played aggressively, or not at all.

Halfhearted flirting falls flat. In the past, Red had been too shy to pull out all the stops the way serious flirting requires.

Doc's encouragement and support had changed all that. She'd discovered flirting as another tool to help her manipulate situations, and was practicing with it.

She'd also discovered that it could be a lot of fun.

"I take a forty-inch inseam, and thirty-inch waist," she added, knowing that the information was necessary, and sensing that it would push the salesman a little further off balance.

The salesman mouthed the word "forty" with an almost panicky expression. He was used to getting this sort of treatment from teeny boppers, and knew how to deal with it. From an a woman who could dominate a room just by walking into it, it was another story. He was confronted with too many things beyond his experience, and was being pushed well out of his depth. "I'll see what we have in your size," he stammered aloud. "I'm afraid it may be difficult, though."

The store did, however, have a Big-and-Tall section, with an adequate stock of ladies jeans. Since what Red had specified was the most popular style, the salesman was able to find what she needed. The best he could do for size, however, were 38-30s, but they just showed more of her boot uppers than was the current style. In general, Red's appearance tended to be so startling that nobody'd notice a little extra boot upper, anyway.

"Blouses," Red announced as the next item on her shopping list. Doc, who had gone to scout up a cart at the first sign that Red was getting down to serious shopping, caught up with them as Red was staring unenthusiastically at a display of unspectacular plaid shirts.

He was pleased to see that Red had taken pity on the salesman, and dropped the flirty routine. Was he getting jealous? Probably, but he'd never liked seeing a woman using flirting as a manipulative tool. It was cheap, and showed disrespect for the person being manipulated. It could also backfire as often as it worked. It always struck him as a desperate trick employed by ladies who felt they had no other options. Red had lots of options, such as

friendliness, and her natural good sense, which she seemed to be leading with now.

“Always look for a little flash,” he commented, sneaking up from behind, and poking his nose into the conversation.

“What do you mean?” Red responded, turning to face him. For one so big, Doc could move awfully quietly. Red wasn’t sure whether she was annoyed at having been sneaked up on, or pleased to have Doc close by.

“Once, in MBA school,” Doc explained, “we had a discussion about how to live well. The idea of going for flashy things versus solid, but pedestrian, stuff came up. I made the comment: ‘I’ve lived with flash, and I’ve lived without flash. With flash is better.’ I still believe it.”

“Okay, with flash is better. What is flashy in western blouses?”

Percieving that these folks were not buying on price, the salesman jumped in to lead Red over to a different display, and then another, and yet another, again. Eventually, she picked out a white satin shirt with floral embroidery on dark-blue yokes in front, and back.

It had just the right fullness, so her breasts would be seen to move enticingly under the fabric. Taking a leaf from Annie’s book, she’d leave the top buttons open to show off her necklace – as well as her cleavage. The yokes’ dark color would contrast well with her light skin, making sure the impression she wanted to make got across. She meant to draw, and keep, Doc’s attention. He wanted flash? Well, she’d flash him, alright!

Doc’s comment about “when I was in MBA school” did not slip past Red unheeded. Did it mean that Doc had an Master’s in Business Administration stuck in there amidst the two Ph.D.s and who-knows-what else? Probably. She wouldn’t put it past him. Was this the missing information he was still hiding from her? Probably not. It didn’t seem important enough to warrant his reaction of last night. In any case, she didn’t think it was the right time to call him on it. She just filed it away as another piece in the Doc puzzle to be fitted in place later.

Next up was a hat. Red wanted a cowgirl hat. She wasn’t about to go parading around Austin, Texas in jeans,

boots, and an in-your-face western blouse without an in-your-face cowgirl hat.

“I didn’t realize they’d cost so much!” she exclaimed when she saw the tag on the style she picked out – a dove gray felt job with a wide brim, and rakish forward-sloping crease to the crown. “I thought they’d be twenty, or thirty dollars.”

The store clerk looked uncomfortable, and looked at Doc to see what the reaction would be. He’d realized, and confirmed by her yankee accent, that the woman didn’t really know squat about western wear, but the man, with his touch of an Arizona twang, well-worn cowboy boots, mother of pearl brass belt buckle, and the unusual handmade gold watchband – unusual because the high relief leaf-motif decoration was invariably executed in silver, while this one was gold, and included onyx in place of the more common turquoise – showed signs of having lived in the West long enough to know what he was looking at.

“You might spend twenty, or thirty dollars for tourist stuff,” Doc said, to the salesman’s relief. “The cheapest palm-leaf I have was a smokin’ deal at fifty. Proper felt hats start around ninety. You picked out one of the best – something to wear when dressed to impress. They cost more.”

“Too much?”

“Are you dressing to impress, or are you going out to plant tomatoes?”

“Isn’t there a middle ground?”

“No. It’s a two-state system. You either want to impress, or you don’t.”

The salesman didn’t know what a two-state system was, but Red did. The salesman just breathed a sigh of relief that the man knew the going prices for hats.

“It’s not too much, then, but I can’t really afford it.”

“I can,” Doc said flatly, ending the discussion.

That filled Red's "gotta have" list. They killed some time pleasantly by pushing the shopping cart up and down the aisles, and studying the selection of boots and other apparel. Red felt a little zing at the sight of several items, such as the viper-skin boots, an ostrich jacket with long, flowing fringes, and so forth. Noting the prices, however, and realizing that this morning was already setting Doc back a few hundred dollars, Red decided they could wait for a more opportune moment.

At the register, however, Doc noticed Red eyeing a large belt buckle made of silver, with a five-point Texas star picked out in gold in the center. There were also earrings, and a necklace to match. On impulse, he added them to the pile.

"That's too much," Red declared.

"No, it's not," Doc rebutted, cutting off any further protest with a full-wet kiss.

22

Stuffed in the cab with what turned out to be a serious pile of shopping loot, Red turned on Doc about spending money on her.

"I love this stuff, and I love that you're willing to buy it for me, but you're spending a lot of money. I don't know how to say this politely, but what do you expect in return?"

"Fair enough," Doc responded. "I've given this a lot of thought over the years. It's a serious issue between men and women that's misunderstood more often than not."

Taking a deep breath, he continued: "Cynics equate a man's impulse to give things to a woman as an attempt to buy sex. That assumption leads to the conclusion that accepting the gift somehow obligates the woman. That makes the whole thing a dirty transaction, where the woman is a prostitute, and the man's a slaveowner, or at least renter. While that does happen, it's a perversion of something entirely different that has developed over millions of years of evolution."

“When something is really, really important to a species’ evolutionary success, Mommy Nature hard wires it into the animals’ behavior. In evolutionary terms, one of the most important tasks humans have is mate selection. Humans are basically monogamous – with variations – and what they’re trying to do is pair up in such a way as to give their offspring the best possible chance of success.”

“I’ll buy that,” Red acceded.

“Whether you like the way labor is divided between men and women or not, the way evolution has organized it to give human babies their best chance of success is that men run around hunting down the stuff that’s hard to collect, such as woodland critters of various sizes, from rabbits to mammoths. Women stay closer to home in order to keep the kiddies safe and well fed. They generally go after the stuff, like nuts and berries, that is easier to catch because it doesn’t run away.”

“This has been going on long enough so that it has affected evolution of every human system, from how we process visual information to behavioral impulses. The most obvious result is that males tend to be significantly taller and more muscular than women, so that they can cover more ground and overpower critters that object to being eaten. For a less well known example, men look at outlines before details, because they’re easier to see at a distance. Women tend to be more interested in details because they provide better information when you get closer. Nearly every human attribute has been honed for this kind of lifestyle.”

“With this division of labor, the most natural action a man can perform is to spy something desireable, and bring it home to his woman. It’s the same whether it’s half a ton of mammoth meat, or a pretty pebble. Guys are wired up to do it. It’s as fundamental as walking upright. That’s why men want to give gifts to lovely ladies. It’s not a payoff, or a job offer. It’s just what men are wired up to do. *Not* doing it feels uncomfortable, and unnatural.”

“In mate selection, it becomes a way for a man to tell a woman that he likes being with her, and wants to keep it going. No woman would complain about a man saying ‘I love you,’ and buying stuff is a non-verbal way of saying the same thing. The thought process, whenever a man actually thinks about it, runs something like this: ‘I like this woman. Because I like her, I want to see her happy. Giving her this thing will make her happier than if she

didn't have it, so I'll give it to her. Making her that little bit happier will make me a little bit happier. Everybody wins.' Does that help?"

"Well, it makes sense the way you explain it," Red agreed. "I can think of a lot of people who'd give you an argument about it, though."

"Ah," Doc responded, "but would their argument make as much sense?"

"I can't think of one that would," Red admitted.

"This is all stuff," Doc said, indicating the shopping bags, "that I have reason to believe will make your life a little bit happier. Giving it to you makes me a little bit happier thinking it might make you happier. I don't expect anything in return. The only thing I'd hope for is that the gift actually does make you happier, which is the point of the exercise, and that you don't spit in my face for doing it."

The last phrase hit her like a slap. She realized that she really had figuratively spit in his face. Her face fell, but she didn't know what to say, or do. Not knowing what to do, she took a deep breath and asked: "What should I do?"

"Say thank you."

Realizing that it could be just that simple, she broke out in a smile, pulled him close, kissed him, and whispered: "Thank you. You have made me happy."

It was Doc's turn to not know what to say, so he kissed her neck, smiled to her, and let the subject drop.

Luckily, they were almost back at their hotel, or they'd have had to come up with another subject to talk about. As it was, between the scarf still wrapped around Red's waist, the cowgirl hat Red hadn't even thought of resisting putting on immediately, the hat box Doc had made sure was included with the hat as a future storage/shipping container, and the shopping bag full of jeans, blouse, and jewelry, there was enough to drag out of the cab's back seat to make a satisfactory show of loot from a successful shopping trip. Refusing help from a

bellman (“There isn’t *that* much.”), but giving him an appreciative smile for the offer, Red headed directly for the elevator, leaving Doc to catch up after paying the taxi driver and tipping the bellman for no other reason than that it seemed like a good idea at the time.

Doc reached the elevator just in time to hold it open for Red, who was holding the hatbox in one hand, and the shopping bag in the other. A touristy-looking couple with a ten-year old son getting on at the same time precluded displays of affection in the elevator, but Red stood close enough to Doc to make it clear that occasional contact between them was entirely not accidental.

The boy didn’t know which was more impressive, the huge, bearded, rugged-looking man, or the nearly as huge, but extremely sexy-looking woman with him. Ten year old boys don’t know much about sex, but they recognize it when they see it. He’d never seen a tall, beautiful, leather-clad red-haired woman like that, at least not close up, but he decided that when he grew up, he wanted to be that man, and have a woman like that for himself. Thus was born another generation of bikers.

The parents, already concerned about the experience’s possible affect on their son’s future, nodded polite greetings.

On the way down the hall, Red and Doc exchanged pleasantries with the housekeeper they’d seen in the hall the previous night. The housekeeper noted that the woman looked every bit as stunning, and much more impressive, without the erotic cameltoe. She definitely approved of the change, and expanded her smile from obsequious-polite to pleased-to-see-the-nice-people.

“Anything I can do to help?” Doc asked after unlocking the door to let them into the suite. Without waiting for an answer, he tossed his leather cap onto an end table, and flopped onto the sofa in front of the television.

“No,” Red called from the bedroom, “I’ll just need a minute to change.”

“Don’t change too much,” Doc responded, making a stupid joke, to which Red didn’t bother to respond.

Doc flipped on the television, figuring that Red would take much longer than one minute to change. He was wrong, however, about thinking she'd be away for a while. He'd barely focused on the stock-price ticker streaming across the bottom of the screen, when Red reappeared in the doorway wearing nothing but her new hat, the briefest of panties, and a pair of socks. She was holding her new belt buckle and the black belt she'd bought in Daytona as if trying to solve some puzzle involving them both.

"Oh, shit." Doc said flatly, instantly reminded what a sucker he was for that body. He knew what was going to happen next, and that he had no choice in the matter. Involuntarily, he stood up, walked around behind her, wrapped his arms around her waist, and started nuzzling her neck.

"Whoa, big fella," she said, but didn't try to get away. "How can I get my new buckle on this belt?"

"It's easy," he said, reaching out with his hands for the belt while using his elbows and upper arms to pull her closer.

Losing some of her focus on the belt puzzle, she pulled her arms together to make it easier for him to hold her a little tighter, and incidentally gently squeeze her breasts together. Then, she crossed her arms tightly across her chest, stimulating her nipples with her forearms while still holding the new buckle in her left hand. She arched her neck, ostensibly to loosen his hold, but actually presenting her neck for more nuzzling, which Doc extended to nibbles, then gentle ear nibbles, finally extending the tip of his tongue to caress the folds of her ear lobe.

"Hmm," she said, squirming languorously in his arms. "What about my belt?"

Without changing his hold, he turned the belt buckle up and inside-surface toward them. Silently, he pointed out two snaps holding a flap of leather over a metal loop in the belt-buckle base, and a third snap securing the leather loop. He unsnapped the single one, then dropped the leather loop down off the belt. Then, he unsnapped the other two, freeing the metal loop, and, thus, the buckle, which he tossed on a chair. With his left hand, he reached to retrieve the new buckle from her hand, managing to add an additional squeeze to her arm in the process. After retrieving the buckle, he threaded its loop under the leather flap, snapped the three snaps, and handed it to her, still

without loosening his clench.

“What about ...,” She asked while freeing her arms from his so that his arms ended up holding her by the hips. “... This?” she said while reaching directly down between her feet for the leather loop.

Reaching down without bending her knees brought her labia in line with the fly on Doc’s jeans.

“Nggh!” she said when Doc pulled her hips to him, pushing the fly on his jeans between her labia, and stimulating her clit through the fabric of her panties.

“It’s unimportant,” he said.

“Nggh!” she repeated, swaying her hips to brush his fly across her clit.

Her hand had reached the leather loop abandoned on the floor, but never picked it up. She dropped the belt to the floor as well, then stood up and turned around to open his fly. His erection was hard enough that she couldn’t pull it directly out through the fly, so she undid his belt and pulled his penis out over his underpants. She then took time to pull down her panties and kick them off.

Turning her back to him again, she laid his penis vertically into her anal crease, and rubbed her buttocks across his mound, stroking his erection with her anus in the process.

“Mmmm,” she said, pushing his penis down out of her anal crease and in between her labia, where its tension held it up against her clit. She then reached between her legs, and, holding his penis against her clit, swayed her hips forward and back to rub it up and down over her clit.

Climaxing, she let her orgasm flow over his penis, then spread it over her crotch with her fingers, then spread it the full length of his erection, from base to tip.

Leaning forward, she pressed his penis into her vagina, and, after a few strokes with her hips, leaned down ‘til her hands reached the floor. Wrapping her fingers around her ankles, she pressed back until her labia contacted

his scrotum.

Knowing exactly what was expected, Doc began stroking in and out of her vagina, using his hands on her hips to control the movement and stopping once in a while to pull her buttocks hard against him to push his penis as far as physically possible into her vagina. It was somewhere around there that her cowgirl hat fell off to lay, upside down and forgotten, on the rug.

Suddenly, Doc stopped and pulled out.

“Unngh! Can’t do that anymore without a rubber,” he announced.

“Ohh! Can’t stop!” she replied.

“Yes, you can. Go! Go!” Doc slapped her bottom gently for emphasis.

“Rrrr!” Red growled in frustration as she sprinted into the bedroom, where she’d strategically stored her condom supply in the nightstand drawer. Running back, she rushed through ripping one open and rolling it over his erection, taking three times as long as necessary through trying to go too fast, again. Standing up, she pressed her mouth over his, and stroked his penis back to maximum hardness with her hand. Then, pressing her breasts into his chest, she used his erection to stimulate her clitoris until she had another orgasm, and spread the juice over the condom to augment the manufacturer’s lubrication. It wasn’t necessary, but it sure was fun!

Turning around, she pushed his penis into her vagina again, then reached down to her ankles for more pounding. As they both became more and more excited, she began moving her vagina in little circles in time to his stroking. She was well into multiple orgasms when he exploded inside her. He spastically pulled her hips toward him, pushing his penis as far in as it would go.

When she felt his pumping inside her subside, she tried to stand up, only to have her knees buckle. She grabbed his hips for support, only to find his knees buckling, too. He had barely enough presence of mind to grab the TV stand as the only solid object within reach.

“I love you,” she mumbled, turning around to wrap her arms around him, and squeeze as if trying to push her body inside his.

“Love you, too,” he gasped, returning the embrace.

They stood there, leaning against each other for support for about thirty seconds, when Doc exclaimed: “Need a mop!”

Red looked down to see that Doc’s erection had disappeared, and the condom was sliding off, lubricated by a mixture of male, and female ejaculate. Doc was desperately trying to hold it on, and gather the semen that was threatening to drip everywhere.

By that time, his jeans were down around his ankles, and his underpants hobbled his knees, making walking difficult at best. Red said: “Wait right there. I’ll be right back,” and sprinted to the bathroom. Doc heard her yanking facial tissues out of the box.

When she got back, she saw Doc standing in a bowlegged pose, one hand clinging to the TV stand, while the other cupped the ooze-coated condom, which was threatening to slide completely off, and spill its contents. Stifling a laugh, she folded a wad of tissue over the condom, then gathered it, and most of the ooze, up. Seeing Doc’s penis continuing to drip, she handed him another wad of tissues, and helped pull his pants back up far enough so he could get to the bathroom under his own power.

When Doc finally got himself cleaned up and his clothing rearranged, he found Red still in the living room. She’d finished wiping herself with tissues from a second box in the bedroom, and was contentedly lounging on the leather sofa, massaging her breasts with one hand, while rubbing between her labia with the other.

“Not had enough, yet?” Doc asked.

“Just tapering off,” she replied. “That was great. Can’t stop thinking about it, but don’t have enough energy for any more.”

“I’ve also got that hollow feeling telling me to go find something else to do. So, it’s either get going, or take a nap.”

“We could crawl onto bed.”

“If we did that, I’d still be there clinging to you a week from next Thursday. No. Gotta get outa here! C’mon. *Vite, vite!*”

“What?”

“I hope it means ‘quickly, quickly’ in Italian. Or, is it French? I forget.”

“Now you’re a linguist?”

“Well, I know how to say a lotta things in a lotta languages, but putting together a sentence in any of them is another matter.”

23

After some coaxing and cajoling, Doc got Red onto her feet, and into the bedroom, and extracted from her a promise to get dressed right away. He was surprised at how quickly she was back out to get Doc to cut tags off with his Swiss Army knife. After obtaining a kiss on the lips, and a pat on her now nicely denim-upholstered bottom, she went back to touch up her makeup, accessorize her outfit by loading on all the jewelry she had with her, and fit her hat neatly on her head.

“How many ear piercings do you have?” Doc asked in surprise, seeing that she’d managed to make the Texas star earrings dangle in the centers of her large hoops.

“Just one, but you can put more than one hook through each hole, you know,” she replied, as if it should be obvious to anyone who’d ever worn a pierced earring.

Of course, since Doc had never worn a pierced earring, it was anything but obvious to him. He had to take a close look to verify it for himself.

“Son of a moose! I’ve never seen that before.”

“You probably weren’t paying enough attention to your girlfriends’ ears, then.”

“Doesn’t it hurt to stretch them, though?”

“No, it’s just skin with cartilage for support. It only hurts if you put too much weight on them, and leave it in too long. It has nothing to do with how many wires you include.”

“Looks fantastic!” Doc concluded. “Let me see.”

He stepped back to take an overall look. She had on the black cowboy boots, faded-blue jeans, her black leather belt with the oval Texas-star buckle, the white blouse unbuttoned to just below her breasts. She’d combined the rhinestone necklace, which had been designed to reach into her cleavage in the first place, with the Texas-star pendant, which she’d adjusted to hang between the top of the necklace and her collarbone. In her ears, she carried the doubled up earrings. Finally, she’d set the dove-gray cowboy hat slightly forward on her head so that she was looking out from just under the brim. A pair of dark sunglasses combined with the jewelry created a sophisticated counterpoint to the outfit’s overall informality that was very sexy.

“You know,” Doc said, stepping close again after taking it all in, “that makes me want to do this.” He reached in through the open blouse to fondle her breast with one hand, while putting the other arm around her waist from behind.

“That’s the idea,” she said, reaching up to kiss him on the lips, then slapping him playfully on the cheek. “Let’s get outa here,” she continued. “It’s almost lunchtime, and I’m starting to get hungry.”

As the day was sunny, and they were expecting to get plenty of exercise on their walk, they left their jackets in the hotel. After leaving the elevator, Doc led Red past the horses sculpture and the bar to the seventh-street exit,

which let them out on the north side of the Driskill block. Exiting, they walked left to the corner, then north up Congress street.

Doc and Red had gotten into the habit of taking just a light snack in the middle of the day while traveling by motorcycle, so he didn't take Red's complaint about feeling hungry too seriously. He thought they'd stop in at The Little City Espresso Bar & Cafe, a little over two blocks up on the other side of Congress Street. He'd been there more than once before, and knew that, in addition to more involved lunches, they served pastries, such as muffins and scones, which he figured would be just about right.

Red agreed, despite the fact that it was still a little early for lunch when they got there. She allowed that it made sense to fortify themselves before starting the long (at least it looks long on the way up) climb up the hill to the State Capitol Building. That way, they could take all the time they wanted to wander wherever they wilst.

The Bar & Cafe always struck Doc as a cozy little hole-in-the-wall tucked behind a narrow storefront. As appropriate for an espresso bar, the place exuded a bohemian atmosphere instead of the country-and-western theme Red had expected. Of course, both Red and Doc were a few generations too young to have had direct experience with the bohemian sub-culture of the early twentieth century. Having read Hemingway, Kerouac and Hunter Thompson, and seen the period portrayed in films and on TV, they had enough background to appreciate what they were experiencing, and even feel nostalgic for what seemed, from a vantage point over half a century removed from the fact, a period of innocent experimentation, and personal freedom.

Doc, at least, understood that personal freedom is something you make for yourself, and has little to do with calendars, or circumstances. Whereas Red had always at least tried to fit in with her contemporaries, Doc had never even considered it. Both had actually spent their entire lives feeling like outsiders watching what "conventional" people did. Neither had ever had any luck trying to be conventional, so the idea of an era when being unconventional was widely accepted, and even encouraged, seemed romantically attractive.

The fact that all through the bohemian, beatnik, and hippy eras, those groups never amounted to more than a few tens of thousands of individuals, and association with such groups made one nearly unemployable, certainly

unacceptable in polite society, and suspect by every policeman around, didn't intrude on their nostalgic fantasy. It's a lot easier to romanticize about life in the past than to struggle through it, oneself.

Anyway, they had themselves a pleasant half-hour break, thinking thoughts more aligned with Ferlingetti than Willie Nelson, while Doc wolfed down a blueberry muffin and wired himself up with a double espresso, and Red nibbled buttered scones and slurped cappuccino. With tummies pleased, they embarked on the serious business of hiking up Congress Street to the Capitol Building.

Austin sits on the slope separating the low bayou and gulf coast country to the south and east, from the Texas hill country to the north and west. If they'd visited one of the observation-deck restaurants in one of the high-rise hotels above the Driskill, they would have seen that much of Austin sits on a flattish plateau, which drops off to the south toward the river. The Capitol buildings were up on this plateau, along with the University of Texas campus a few blocks further north. The Driskill was half way down the slope toward the river. They hadn't really noticed the climb coming up from Allens Boots (down by the river) because the taxicab engine did all the work. Now that they had to make a similar hike under their own steam, it seemed a lot more daunting.

The state capitol building sits on park-like grounds at one of the city's highest points. Some seventeen monuments commemorating important elements of Texas history and culture, such as the Heroes of the Alamo (erected in 1891), and the Texas World War II Memorial (erected in 2007), provide points of interest. The Capitol Building itself is the largest in the U.S., next to the U.S. National Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. Startling to the unprepared, the building, and much of the surrounding architecture, exhibits a rosy glow due to the use of locally sourced "sunset red" granite.

As luck would have it, the legislature was not in session during their visit, so they were able to get up close with the antique furnishings gracing the House and Senate chambers. What they spent most of their time in the Capitol Building on, however, was the collection of portraits depicting Texas presidents and governors in order from the State's founding to the present.

They skipped going further north to visit the State History Museum, which they figured would take a day by

itself, and on to the University of Texas-Austin campus even farther north. Both having lived in Boston during their college years, they shared a love of browsing around in art museums. So, they headed back down Congress Street to browse the Austin Museum of Art, and a couple of galleries and shops before segueing into dinner and the evening.

24

Mandy caught up with Doc at the blues bar Red's headache had precluded their frequenting the previous night. Mandy worked as liason with certain select high-profile customers of an Austin-based developer of measurement and control technology, and just that afternoon had started working with a little startup robotics company who needed help introducing their first product.

As soon as she understood what these guys were doing, she realized they'd be perfect to partner with Scottsdale Systems Technology on some of the strange projects Doc Manchek was always getting into. She called Doc only to find he was off touring around the country on his motorcycle. He wouldn't be back until next week.

So, Mandy did the next best thing, she talked to her SST buddy, J.D. If anybody knew what upcoming projects the company had that might need the technology Robotics Concepts was developing, J.D. would.

J.D. had listened carefully, as he always did, then asked a bunch of excited questions. When the time came for him to respond, he grew more guarded than usual, however. J.D. never gave a straight answer to any question about what SST was doing. Nobody there ever did. Mandy was used to that, and understood why. It was a necessary part of their corporate culture based on the kinds of projects they did, and the kinds of clients they catered to. But J.D.'s more-than-usual reticence made her think something extra hush-hush was going on.

J.D. allowed that they were looking at some ideas that might make use of Robotics Concepts' autonomous "Worm" robots. He'd have more details next week, when Doc got back from vacation.

"You know," J.D. had said, "I think Doc might be in Austin today. Why don't you try to catch up with him,

and tell him what you've told me. I think he might like a heads up. He's staying at the Driskill."

When J.D. suggested trying to catch up with Doc on his vacation, it meant something was hot, and she'd better follow the lead with everything she had. All she could get from the Driskill front desk, however, was a vague "Dr. Manchek does not appear to be in his room. Perhaps you could leave a message for him." This she did. More than once. No luck.

By late afternoon, she felt she was running out of time. It was nearing quitting time, and Doc hadn't returned calls to his hotel. Nobody was willing to give her his cellphone number without his permission, so she couldn't call him directly, even if he had it on, which she thought was unlikely. She decided to go down to the Driskill after work, and camp out in the lobby in hopes of catching Doc walking through. Eventually, he'd *have* to show up!

Sitting in the lobby, 5:30 turned into 6:00, and then 6:30. Getting desperate, she decided to call J.D. before he went home. She mentally rechecked her time-zone calculation (allowing the extra hour for Arizona not going onto daylight saving time) to confirm that it was still 4:30 in Arizona, then made her call.

"Scottsdale Systems Technology, J.D. here," came his formal greeting through her cellphone.

"J.D., it's Mandy, again. I've been trying to get ahold of Doc all afternoon, but he hasn't called back. Nobody seems to know where he is. Can you help me?"

Mandy thought she detected a chuckle from J.D.'s end of the line just before he said: "I think he's been entertaining a client with a tour of Austin. I'll see if I can locate him, and call you back. Where are you now?"

"I'm camped out in the Driskill lobby, and starting to feel a little foolish."

"Don't feel foolish. Doc will want to hear what you have to say, and we want to connect you up before he leaves town in the morning."

Ten minutes later, Mandy had the name and address of the bar where Doc had gone for "dinner and dancing," along with a promise that he'd be there "at least an hour more. Probably 'til fairly late." It was only a

couple of blocks away on 6th Street.

From the noise of the band spilling out of the front door, Mandy didn't see how she'd get much information across, but she trusted Doc. The few times she'd talked with him, he'd always made her feel that what she had to say was the most important thing in the world. Distractions seemed to fade into the background. It was a knack he seemed to have that she wanted to cultivate, herself.

Inside, the room was rectangular, about twice as long as it was wide. The bandstand backed up against the wall to the right of the main entrance, accounting for the high music volume near the door. Patrons entered to the left of the stage, and walked past the dance floor to reach tables packed tightly between the dance floor, and the rectangular bar set out in the room, like at Pinky's. It was further toward the back of the bar than at Pinky's, though, leaving room for just a few tables in the back area.

Walking past the dance floor packed with gyrating bodies, her attention was caught by the tallest cowgirl she'd ever seen – and being a natural-born Texican, she'd seen her share of tall cowgirls. Wearing a big, grey, slope-front hat over her long mane of flaming red hair, she'd left her blouse open as far as possible while still containing her breasts. What everyone did see was a ton of loose jewelry that danced around to accentuate her vigorous dancing. And, her dancing was very vigorous, as if she was as intent on burning calories as on having fun. She seemed to have no obvious partner, although she seemed to be having a friendly competition with another nearly-as-tall cowgirl, with a prize for the one who could come up with the most provocative dance steps without actually getting lewd.

Searching the tables for Doc, she spied him waving to her from a small table tucked in a corner far from the entrance, but as near as possible to the band. She had to skirt the dance floor to make her way over to him. On the way, she was careful to avoid getting too close to the big redhead. Like all shorter-than-average people, she was acutely aware of taller-than-average people who might step on her without seeing her. She watched the fast-moving redhead like a hawk, while tiptoeing past.

“Mandy! It's good to see you,” Doc yelled barely loud enough to be heard over the music, while allowing

her to give him the obligatory polite hug that seemed to go in and out of fashion among his female business acquaintances. Doc always felt that the custom was daft – he’d never expect to hug another guy – but saw that hearty handshakes with women could be just as strange. The polite hug was generally the way he saw women friends greet each other, so extending it to men seemed to work. He didn’t give a dingo’s fart, anyway. As long as the people he dealt with were happy, he’d go along.

Pulling out a chair for Mandy, he said: “Are you in a rush to go somewhere, or can you stick around a while?”

“No, all I’ve got to do tonight is sit home watching television. This looks like fun.”

A waiter showed up just as Doc was regaining his seat. “Let’s start a new tab,” Doc said, taking charge, and dispensing with formalities. Indicating an almost empty glass in front of an unoccupied seat at the table, he said: “Red will have another Guinness. Mandy? What’s your poison?”

“I’d like a margarita, but I’m paying,” she replied. Since she had something to sell, business-entertaining etiquette required her to pay. Doc’s move to call for a new tab relieved her of having to pay for their dinner, too. This she noticed, jotting it down in her mental notebook for future use. She felt she was moving up fast in the marketing game, and hoped she’d need all the tricks she could learn.

“And, I’ll switch to ginger ale. I’m getting rather parched,” Doc finished up the order.

“Did J.D. tell you about Robotics Concepts?” Mandy asked when the waiter had run off.

“Just what you can put in a text message. Basically, we need enough information to factor into our planning session next Monday. It looks like this will be the best chance we get.

“Robotics Concepts is one of our alliance partners,” Mandy yelled, trying to get her message across over the music.

“We’ll talk when this set is over,” Doc assured her. “I want Red to hear what you have to say, so save it ‘til

then.”

“Red is your client?” Mandy asked.

“Yes. She’s also a very special friend. Among the Philistines she’s known as ‘Judith McKenna.’ J.D. says you’ve got your hands on some technology that can help solve a very big problem for her, so it’s important that she understand what you’re offering.”

Listening to the music while waiting for the drinks to arrive, Mandy realized that the band had gone into a resounding rendition of *Lady Marmalade*.

“I’m not sure this is a traditional blues number,” she said.

“I think it was a request,” Doc replied. “These guys have been playing straight Chicago style blues so far. I’d stick *Lady Marmalade* squarely in the “soul” category, but that’s not too far removed from blues. The crowd seems to be having fun with it, anyway.”

Eventually, the band turned it into a chanted repetition of the line: “*Voulez vous coucher avec moi, ce soir?*” About half the people in the bar took up the chant, delightedly yelling it at the tops of their lungs, while clapping their hands, and even jumping up and down.

The other half put on the bemused expressions of people who secretly know everyone else is determinedly making complete fools of themselves.

Actual dancing stopped, as the entire floor was given over to people clapping and chanting the line over and over, making it impossible to dance to. It didn’t even sound like a question, anymore. Just a series of sounds that were fun to chant to your neighbors.

Mandy noticed the tall redheaded cowgirl leaving the dance floor, clapping her hands over her head, and chanting with a huge grin on her face, her boobs swaying side-to-side with her hips, jewelry jangling all over as she walked directly up to Doc, straddled his chair, and sat in his lap facing him. Then, she wrapped her arms around his

neck, and stage whispered “*Voulez vous couche avec moi, ce soir?*”

“*Mais oui! Je t'aime toujours, mon bel amant,*” Doc replied, rubbing noses with her.

“What?” she responded, finding his reply beyond her competence with French.

“Oops, I thought you were just being catty. Do you know what you were chanting?”

“It means something like ‘Do you love me tonight,’ doesn’t it?”

“Not exactly. It literally means: ‘Would you like to fuck me tonight?’ It’s what a streetwalker yells to a passing john. The song is about a prostitute.”

“Oh. That means what we were all doing is....”

“Inviting each other to a cluster fuck – a gang bang.”

Red’s skin turned the color of her hair, but she had a good laugh about it, too. “So, what did you say to me in French?” she asked Doc.

As the band had taken the opportunity to end their first set, and the chanting had died down, Doc was able to really whisper in her ear: “Oh, yes. I love you forever, my beautiful lover.”

“Ohh, I like that!” Red responded, giving Doc a very wet French kiss, while running her fingers through his hair, and pushing his signature black leather cap awry.

All this time, Mandy just sat there, hands folded, not knowing what to say or do. Instinctively, she’d made the right choice – nothing. She felt she now knew what Doc meant when he said Red was “a very special friend.”

“And, who’s your new friend?” Red asked, turning to acknowledge Mandy for the first time.

“*Our* new friend is Mandy,” Doc said. “She works with one of my company’s solutions providers. She’s made a special trip to tell us about some technology that may help us when we reach the end of your quest.”

Mandy witnessed a sudden transformation. The College Girl Gone Wild disappeared in a flash, to be replaced by an intense, intelligent woman focused on hearing what Mandy had to tell. Carefree, slightly loopy eyes were replaced by laser beams probing Mandy's face for any scraps of information. The strong-willed, independent Judith McKenna was back, and hot on the trail of her quest.

Taken slightly aback, Mandy stammered her standard spiel about who she was, what her company did, and their relationship to Robotic Concepts. They supplied hardware, software, and some technical assistance, she explained, which RC incorporated into their semi-custom robots. These robots were different because they were made up of modular sections, each with a pair of legs for locomotion, and a microprocessor brain that would coordinate with the brains of other segments to produce purposeful motion. An additional section provided a central intelligence to process sensor inputs, and make navigation decisions. The complete assembly could go into cramped spaces, and explore them autonomously, reporting back what it discovered.

This was more what Mandy was used to. Explaining advanced technology to technical superbrains was what she did every day. Some of those superbrains were also packaged in shapely bodies, and looked out through beautiful faces, sometimes even bedecked with jewelry. In fact, Mandy had noticed that the most powerful female brains often came in the most attractive packages, just as was the case with males. The *really* smart ones used personal attractiveness as an asset, while those who purposefully made themselves unattractive came off as insecure second raters.

What Mandy was not used to was talking technical turkey with a woman sitting straddling a man's lap, with her arms wrapped affectionately around his neck. Their bodies were doing what bodies like to do when left on their own, while their brains were spinning with systems analytical algorithms.

These people were scary.

Mandy hoped they were on *her* side!

Doc broke the spell by waving over the table the hand least engaged in absently caressing Red's waist, and

saying: “These are those things that look like big centipedes, right? You clip modules together to make them as long as you want.” Here, Doc reached his other hand around Red so that he could use two hands to make a motion like pushing modules together. This had the unnerving effect of forcing Doc’s chest even harder against Red’s bosom, and twisting him around so that his beard brushed her cleavage. “They quickly self-learn what modules are in the assemblies,” he continued as if talking over a conference table at a business meeting, “and figure out how to coordinate their actions to obtain a desired result. They can assess chaotic environments, like wrecked buildings, and move through them on their own. They’re mainly used for 3-D mapping of unknown, dangerous spaces.”

“That’s right,” Mandy said, distracted by Red’s eyes intently following the conversation, rapidly snapping from Mandy’s face to Doc’s as each spoke. Yet, at this point, Red’s face was so close to Doc’s that she had to tip her neck back to focus on his eyes. Her arms, meanwhile, completely failed to loosen the redoubled clinch to make looking at his face easier.

“How do you get information back to the humans,” Red blurted out, finally loosening the clinch just enough to turn her shoulders in Mandy’s direction. “I assume someone needs to monitor the thing, and come to the rescue if it gets into trouble. How do you get the data out if the robot – you call it a ‘worm?’ – gets trapped, or lost?”

Mandy tried to ignore how excited her body was getting by the fact that Doc’s side was now buried deep in Red’s crotch and his shoulder was buried in her armpit up to his neck, and focus on the intellectual grilling she was getting. “They have three ways to monitor it in real time:” she said, “there’s a fiber-optic tether, which is the most reliable; three kinds of wireless communication; and finally the worm is programmed to return after a certain time, or when it judges its task to be complete.”

“That’s fantastic,” Red said, turning back to Doc. “I thought we’d end up sending people down into that hole. In fact, I thought it was going to have to be *me*. I have to admit that I was scared! Now we don’t have to.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” Doc cautioned. “We still don’t have all the specs. How strong is the thing? Is it limited to gathering information, or can it do some work, too? We need a lot more technical information.” Turning to Mandy, he asked, “Can you meet with us tomorrow morning? I think we need to sign some NDAs, and

get started on technical assessment.”

“Yeah,” Mandy said, surprised at how fast things were moving. Usually, it took hours to explain technology this complex, with all kinds of repetition, and diagrams with circles and arrows. These people seemed to understand it instantly, and be planning action items for a followup meeting before the band finished their break.

“I’ll have Pat email a standard NDA form,” Doc suggested. “We can print out copies, and sign them when we meet. Mandy, do you have technical information with you, or do you have to go back to your office?”

“I’ve most of it on my hard drive. I can email it to you, or burn a disk.”

“Email would be fine. You can send it to Pat, who can distribute it to our team. Hopefully, it’ll be enough to figure out what we can do, and get it ready for when we need it – if we need it. That’s not certain, yet. There may be nothing to explore. By the way, how long would it take to make one about so long,” Doc asked holding his hands about two feet apart, then spreading them to three feet, as an afterthought.

“Well, they’ve got some prototype parts on hand for experimenting and demonstrations. I don’t know how much, or how long it would take to make more.”

“I got the impression the modules were about four inches long, and six inches wide including the legs. Is that right?”

“About right. When would you need it?”

“Figure four weeks, minimum, before we could use it. There’s no limit on the other end. We’ll do what we can without it, then wait ‘til it’s available. The sooner the better, but ‘right’ is more important than ‘fast.’”

“You’re leaving tomorrow, I understand,” Mandy said. “What time do you want to meet?”

“We don’t have a bus to catch,” Doc replied, thinking out loud. “As it is, we won’t get back until late Friday, and we can’t do much then until Monday. Would it be helpful for you to go to your office first, then meet us at the

Driskill later?”

“Yes, I’d be happier using our NDA,” Mandy allowed. “and I could try to get the Robotics Concepts guys on a conference call, too.”

“That’d be worth while,” Doc agreed. “Okay, why don’t you give us a call as soon as you find out if the Robotics Concepts guys will be available. We’ll hang around the hotel, but call me on my cellphone. You have my number? Here’s my card, anyway. Try to call before ten o’clock so I can alert the hotel if we need to keep the room past checkout. Does all that work for you, Red?”

“Yeah, it’s fine. So, no early rising tomorrow?”

“Nope,” Doc said. “You can party all you want tonight. You don’t have to run off, do you, Mandy?”

“Well, I can’t stay too late,” she replied. She was definitely intimidated by Red, but felt it would be best to get to know her. It looked like she’d be doing business with her.

Percieving that the business part of the evening was finished, Red pulled a second metamorphosis that startled Mandy as much as the first. She suddenly turned into Mandy’s best buddy, moving from Doc’s lap to a chair next to Mandy’s, and chattering about her day in Austin, what she’d seen, and so forth. She asked Mandy all about where she went to school, what was her major, and what was it like living in Austin. The Dragon Lady, as Mandy had started mentally calling Red’s second personality, disappeared completely. Instead, here was a budding girlfriend about Mandy’s age. The intensely focused intellect morphed into ready wit. The commanding presence became maturity in a slightly younger woman with an independent mind. Mandy found that she liked this new Red, and hoped they could be friends.

Doc just sat back, alternately sipping the remains of his usual boilermaker, and his ginger ale. When the band returned from break, Red dragged Mandy off to the dance floor, leaving Doc to groove on Chicago Blues while thinking Zen-sage thoughts.

25

“Doc,” Red asked when the TV program they were watching cut to a commercial break, “is there something wrong with us?”

“Probably, but what did you specifically have in mind?”

“Well, we’re sitting here stark naked on the bed watching a Science Channel program about how stars form. We’ve made love three times already today, and a fourth late yesterday afternoon. You’re still leaking from the last time – I can feel it dripping down my side – and it’s turning me on again. That kind of behavior falls into the range you described the other day for nymphomaniacs. Am I turning into a slut?”

Doc was propped up against the headboard, with his legs spread apart. Red had slid her fanny in between them, and rested her shoulders on Doc’s chest. Twenty minutes earlier, they’d slipped into bed for some plain, honest, intense copulating, simply because it seemed like a good idea at the time. Doc believed firmly in always doing whatever made the best use of his time, and Red found no fault in that attitude.

“You said something about Annie’s favorite position,” Red had reminded him after enough foreplay to make her make a puddle on the sheets. “What is it?”

“It’s fairly athletic. Let’s start with her second favorite, which I believe is the all time favorite of women everywhere. Come here,” he had ordered, pulling her to him face-to-face, and chest-to-chest.

Positioning her legs on either side of him, he rolled onto his back with her on top, like Captain Ahab straddling Moby Dick, except she straddled Doc’s erection, rather than a whale’s backbone. Then, he pulled her legs into a kneeling position. Reaching between her legs with his right hand, he pushed his erection into her vagina. He started stroking by raising his hips to push his penis into her. He then used his elbows to drag his body a little farther forward with each stroke until she was sitting directly on his lower pelvis. Finally, he pushed her shoulders up until she was sitting upright on his pelvis.

Red could see why this position was popular with women. It gave her complete freedom to do whatever she wanted. She could put her weight on Doc's pelvis like sitting on a bicycle seat, or she could stroke by lifting her body up, and down with her legs. She could rub her clitoris on his bush back and forth, side to side, or in little circles just by moving her hips. She tried fondling, and squeezing her breasts, then rubbing her clit with one hand while squeezing her breasts with the other. By rocking backward a little, she found she could even push her fingers into her vagina alongside Doc's penis.

"Better get a condom," Doc warned her, interrupting her experimentation.

Doc rolled her back off him, ending up briefly in the missionary position before he pulled out, and rolled away from her.

"Spoilsport!" she taunted playfully, while being grateful he, at least, was keeping his wits about him.

Doc lay on his back spread eagled, while Red got the condom ready. Then, she stroked his erection back to full hardness with her hand, and, putting it into her mouth, stroked it in, and out until *she* came. Then, she carefully rolled the condom down over his shaft.

Standing up on the bed over him, she kneeled down until she could slip his erection into her vagina. It was easy, now that she knew exactly the position she wanted.

For his part, Doc thought this was a great position, too. In fact, it was his favorite, although he tended not to pick favorites for things, preferring variations to avoid monotony. In this position, he could relax completely, or be a more active participant, as it suited him. It also left his hands free to find interesting things to do.

In the end, with Red masturbating with four fingers inside her vagina alongside Doc's penis, and her other hand squeezing one of her nipples, while stroking her body up, and down on Doc's erection, Doc had come really hard inside her. Pulling down on her hips, he pushed as far in as possible while pumping semen.

Feeling him come, Red had grasped her pelvis from inside with the fingers in her vagina, crushing her clit

with the heel of her hand into her pubic arch, and pumped out her own hammering orgasms.

Now, Doc's flaccid penis lay between them at Red's waist level on the right hand side. Some residual semen had oozed out, become trapped between her right buttock and his inner thigh, and pooled there. It was now trying to find an outlet along her side.

"Whether you're turning into a slut remains to be seen," Doc responded to her question, "but I don't think so. I believe the word 'slut' is reserved for one who has sex indiscriminately with many partners. So far, you've had only one partner over three days, so that doesn't qualify as slutty. As for 'nymphomaniac,' that has more to do with a desperate need for sex. We've just been having good clean fun."

"I'm not complaining," she put in, "but isn't it supposed to get boring after a while?"

"Ahh! You're not accounting for what I call the 'honeymoon effect.'"

"What's that?"

"You and I have just taken on new lovers – each other. We're still learning about each other, and having a lot of fun doing so. At the same time, we've organized the Universe so that we have nothing better to do than play with each other. Basically, our libido is high, and there's little competition for our attention. So, we're fucking like minks. It's normal."

"If, two weeks from now," Doc added, "we find Mistress Judith dragging the good doctor into a broom closet for a quickie every two hours, we might reassess our conclusion."

"What about you?" Red questioned. "You're in this, too."

"There's no question in my mind," he answered. "I've always had a pretty robust libido in general, but it's never been out of control. Besides, I have an excuse. You keep waving that gorgeous, delectable body around in front of me. How can I resist?"

“Would you prefer that I put on a plaid flannel nightgown?”

“Oh, no! We *like* gorgeous and delectable. We never get tired of licking every inch of it.” He demonstrated by creating a large wet patch on the most sensitive part of her neck, while fondling her breasts from behind. “We hope we never have to stop, and promise to do our utmost to make love to it at every opportunity. We were, however, discussing mental illness. I can’t see either of us interrupting a business meeting for a gangbang on the boardroom table, which Annie, to name names, is quite capable of doing.”

“Well, what about all that cuddling in public while in a business meeting with Mandy?”

“You mean when Mandy’s business meeting interrupted our love making? That was like the telephone ringing when you’re in the shower. If you decide to take the call, you’ll do it dripping wet. I thought we handled it rather well, actually. We interrupted our regularly scheduled programming for the commercial message, then went back to the night’s entertainment. We accomplished everything with Mandy that we needed to do, which was to schedule a formal meeting for tomorrow morning.”

“But, what did Mandy think?”

“I think you scared Hell out of her.”

“Me? How?”

“Look, she’s known me for a couple of years, and I’ve done business with her company for a decade, so I’m a known quantity. She’s never seen me with a woman, but she was the one who interrupted our date.”

“You, on the other hand, weren’t a known quantity,” he continued. “You started off as a major party animal, then in a heartbeat switched to quizzing her on significant features of the technology she was peddling. Then, you switched to a ‘just us girls’ co-ed. On top of that, she saw the meeting as a an important stepping stone in her career, while you were taking it while straddling your boyfriend’s lap. Finally, you understood the technology she was describing, its ramifications, the opportunities it presents for your project, and the additional information you

need about it, faster than anyone she's ever seen, all while sexually aroused. How many people do you know who can do that?"

"I didn't think there was a contest," Red responded derisively. "You did it. I should think any engineer could have done it. And, what has sexual arousal got to do with it?"

"I'll take those in order: *Life's* a contest; I don't count, since I already knew something about the technology; Any engineer could understand the technology, but not necessarily make all the conceptual leaps, and not as fast; Sexual arousal is one of the most powerful distractions for the human mind – it divides your concentration and slows performance on all other tasks."

"Why do you keep saying I did it 'faster than anyone else?' It was all obvious."

"Obvious to you, but that's what was so scary. Anyone else would have needed longer to think out the connections, if they ever got them all. I know because it's the fastest *I've* ever seen, and I've seen a lot of top technical minds in action."

"This is just some line," Red said, feeling uncomfortable about the direction the conversation was moving. Nobody had ever talked to her like this. "You're just trying to get me into the sack."

"Hey, we're just having a conversation here. Besides, you're already in the sack, and you're not wearing any pants, so I'm not trying to get into them, either," he said, reaching down to stroke her clitoris with his finger for emphasis.

"Oh, shit. That did it," she said in mock distress, feeling his penis growing erect again, and feeling her own growing enthusiasm for another fuck. Doc, realizing his mistake too late, wasn't sure he was ready to take her on again, but he was willing to try.

"So, what's Annie's favorite position?" Red asked a few minutes later, making a smacking sound as she pulled Doc's erection out of her mouth, clam juice running down along her thigh to soak into the sheets.

“I don’t know if I can go all the way with that so soon. As I said, it’s very athletic for both of us,” Doc explained as Red applied a fresh condom.

“I’m game if you are,” Red retorted.

“Basically, it’s the same position that we just did, but with your legs out instead of under you. Essentially, you just sit with your full weight on my pelvis. It’s basically a contest to find out which is longer, my erection, or your vaginal cavity. There isn’t a lot of stroking possible, just grinding pubis to pubis.”

“Hmm. Could be fun.”

Doc lay back flat on the bed, while Red lowered herself onto his erection as before. Instead of rocking forward onto her knees, she rocked back to a sitting position.

She’d never had anything so far up her vagina in her life! Well, maybe that time with her freshman roommate Cheryl during one of their weekly masturbation parties. Cheryl had wanted them to share a long zucchini. Red had refused, feeling it was too lesbian for her taste, but had allowed Cheryl to push it into her. Cheryl had worked it in as far as she could before Red, not knowing how much her tissues could take, had made her stop. Red was older and tougher now, and had a better idea of how much she could stretch. This time, she abandoned caution in favor of enjoying extreme sex.

And, enjoy it she did. At first, she found it difficult to find purchase to make any movements beyond flexing her vaginal muscles. Lifting her knees somewhat, and planting her feet on either side of Doc’s torso, however, made it possible for her to make forward and back motions. Planting her feet closer so that she could get more of her weight on them, and leaning back slightly with her hands on Doc’s thighs, made it possible for her to lift herself off his erection, then lower herself again to slide it all the way back in.

It was at this point that Doc’s orgasm exploded inside her. She just let herself down on him, even leaning forward a little, to feel the maximum effect.

After his orgasm was spent, she leaned forward to kiss him, which he aided by propping himself up on his elbows. They remained like that until his erection had completely subsided.

“Ow! Ow! Ow! Get off!” Doc complained when clearing of endorphins from his bloodstream made it possible for him to feel the effect of Red’s weight pressing their pubic arches together.

“Aaah!” Red agreed, struggling to roll off, but hampered by the positions of her legs.

“Ooooh! Crushed pelvis!” Doc yelled.

“Oh, yeah?” Red one-upped him. “I’ve got that, a stretched vagina, and my crotch rubbed raw.”

“Mmm! That was fun,” he asserted.

“Is that what those maniacs mean by ‘Hurts so good’?” she wondered.

“Must be,” he surmised.

“Gotta do that again!” she challenged.

“No, No. Can’t! Load shot!” Doc cried, desperately, rolling over with her into a tangle of limbs, which ended up with her crotch straddling his knee. Which she clenched between her thighs, pushing his kneecap in between her already raw labia.

“No wonder that’s Annie’s favorite position. I *like* it!” she said.

“Methinks I’m in trouble, now,” Doc said with a grin, rubbing his flaccid penis on her thigh, which knocked the forgotten condom off, and spilled its contents on her leg. She felt it, and started smearing the semen over her inner thigh.

Doc remembered a story from Hebrew mythology in which Eve was actually Adam’s *second* wife. His first wife, named Lilith, was a tall, gorgeous redhead with libido to spare, just like Red. The marriage had broken up

when Lilith wanted to be on top during sex. Adam had insisted that he was the more important partner, and should always have the top position.

Doc concluded, first, that Adam was a pig-headed asshole who didn't know a good thing when he had it, as his exploits with that brunette apple-chewer, Eve, later demonstrated.

Second, he concluded that the only thing better than having a woman like Red, was having her again.

26

“So, what do you think about the Robotic Concepts technology?” Red asked at breakfast the next morning, while daintily unwinding the coils of a cheese danish with the tips of her fingers, and pulling off bite size bits that she then fed into her mouth between words.

She'd gotten up early, having slept the sleep of the just after her heavy bout of love making with Doc. Fully refreshed, she impishly decided to resurrect her suggestion of two days ago, to order room service, and dine *au naturel*. This would knock Doc's morning routine into a cocked hat, but what, she figured, were routines for, if not to be knocked into a cocked hat once in a while?

Before Doc had even stirred an eyelid, she'd ordered omelettes, with sausage and danish pastry on the side for both of them, along with orange juice and coffee. Still in her pixieish mood, she found that every time she thought about their lovemaking last night, her vagina started to drip. That led to putting her bathrobe on to protect the furniture, which effectively ended the *au naturel* part of her plan. By the time room service knocked on the door, her thoughts were concentrated on the coming meeting, and what it meant to her plans. By the time Doc stuck his head out of the bedroom to find out what the clatter was, thoughts of sex play were gone from her mind. Mistress Judith was back firmly in control.

Seeing Red sitting at the dining table with breakfast already laid out, Doc retrieved the second bathrobe, and sat down opposite her so they could discuss the coming day. In true Zen fashion, however, he concentrated on his

meal until what he'd planned on eating was gone. Conversation, he felt, was for between sips of coffee afterward.

When hungry, I eat ...

Red, who'd spent enough time with Doc to know that her question would be answered when the time for answering it arrived, ate her breakfast in silence, savoring every bite.

"I think Robotics Concepts' technology will be of immense use to Scottsdale Systems Technology over many years," he said, as if no pause in the conversation had occurred. "They can help us complete many tasks that were difficult or impossible before. We can help them by testing their prototypes, providing real-world challenges to drive developments, and, perhaps, technical assistance with hardware and software. If all goes well, it will be a fruitful partnership."

"As for your particular problem," he continued, "I see it potentially making the difference between succeeding in your quest, and failing at the last step."

"What do you think my problem is?"

"Well, knowing what I do about public safety types, especially in that part of Nevada, or in any remote area for that matter, I have trouble imagining them not having done everything possible to locate your father ten years ago, when he was first reported missing. I know what happens when people go missing in remote areas. *Everybody* turns out to search. They can all put themselves in the place of the missing person, perhaps lost, possibly injured or sick, and dying of exposure slowly unless help arrives out of the blue. They all know that exposure is probably the worst way to die possible. It takes days at minimum. I've known cases where it took months. With modern technology, it's not too hard to locate most people unless they're stupid enough to bury themselves out of sight of an air search. I take it your father wasn't stupid."

"No, he was not. But, my mother didn't make inquiries until he'd been gone without word for months."

"Which is why folks wandering in the wilderness keep in touch with civilization on a regular basis. If you

and I, for example, fell into an open manhole, how long do you think before folks started searching for us? It'd be less than 24 hours. Look how long it took Mandy to track us down. Just a few hours after starting to search, she was sitting across the table from us."

"But, my father was out exploring in wilderness on his own."

"Yes, but he had to get supplies. He couldn't spend months wandering around without food, for example. He'd have to make contact with people every few days. And, when people are few and far between, they remember everyone they meet. Somebody would have said: 'Hey, I haven't seen Jim McKenna around for a while. Have you? Oh, you saw him last week camped by such, and such river? I wonder if he's alright,' and so forth. You have to really go out of your way to disappear out there. So, why did the searchers give up?"

"Well," Red replied, "they said he probably met with an accident, and was killed someplace where he couldn't be found."

"And, where's the most likely place for a mine prospector to meet with a fatal accident?"

"In a mine, obviously."

"Did they check his prospect holes?"

"Yes, but they couldn't get into all of them because it was too dangerous."

"Bingo! Do you know the three criteria robotics engineers apply when judging whether a situation is a potential robot application?"

"Are you changing the subject? What's that got to do with my father?"

"No, and answer the question."

"No, I didn't know they thought about it. I thought they just put 'em in wherever they could."

“Robots cost tens, or hundreds, of thousands of dollars each to install. Nobody spends that kind of capital without knowing it’ll be worthwhile. The three criteria they look for are the three Ds: dull, dirty, or dangerous. If they get a hit on any one of those, there’s a good chance robotics will help.”

“So,” Red finished the syllogism, “the word ‘dangerous’ flags my problem as a candidate for Robotics Concepts’ stuff. I get it.”

“Your father was never found not because they ran out of places to look,” Doc expounded, “but because they ran out of places where they *could* look without getting themselves killed. Fast forward ten years, when Robotics Concepts has developed technology that may allow you to search those places they couldn’t get into. That, my dear, is why you’re here waiting for a call from Mandy.”

“You mean this was all planned?”

“No, the situation grew by itself. A bunch of threads have come together in this particular pattern. It’s called karma – the thing that drives the Wheel of Birth and Death. Just be glad that, at the moment, it’s working in your favor.”

“You’re getting mystical on me, again.”

“The only people who don’t take mysticism seriously are westerners who imagine that they already know everything. Everyone else – Buddhists, Easter Islanders, American Indians, Eskimos, and headhunters wandering the jungles of New Guinea – think non-mystics are the most amazing fools. Most of them can’t understand how westerners could become so powerful, when they act like they’re too stupid to live.”

“I’ll bite. What’s the secret to western society’s success?”

“Western society has placed it’s technical development in the hands of a few very smart mystics.”

“Oh, yeah? Everyone knows that scientists and engineers are about as far as you can get from mysticism.”

“You mean like Robert Oppenheimer, who’s most famous quote was cribbed from the Hindu Bible; Isaac Newton, who spent more time studying alchemy than physics; Albert Einstein, who said things like ‘God does not play dice?’ Engineers constantly talk about gremlins getting into their equipment. People who work at the edge of what we know and what we can do stare into the Great Void every moment of every day. If you want to see the real relationship between mysticism and science, read Fritz Capra’s *Tao of Physics*.”

“Are you saying you believe in magic?”

“Humans *are* magic! It’s what separates us from all the other animals. If you want proof, go flip a light switch. If you *really* want to see some in-your-face magic, learn to fly an ultralight airplane. Now *that’s* magic! Scares hell out of me every time I go up. I’m afraid of heights, and there are no strings holding it up.”

“But, we know how it works.”

“Does that stop it from being magic, just because somebody tells you how it works?”

“I think so.”

“Oh, yeah? How does an electromagnet pick up a car?”

“Circulating currents in the copper coils build a magnetic field in the space surrounding the coils, which induces a complementary field in the iron. Opposite poles attract, so the iron sticks to the magnet.”

“Listen to that. It’s a complex pile of mumbo-jumbo that has meaning only because you *believe* it has meaning. Why should a circulating current do anything like that? Why should there even *be* a circulating current? What is a ‘circulating current,’ anyway? We just know that when we do certain things – perform certain rituals – th’ dang car jumps into the air, an’ goes ‘clang’ against th’ magnet. You explain that to a dog, and he’s going to hope it means you’re about to toss him a bone. Do you know that physicists have absolutely no idea why matter has mass? It’s one of the great mysteries of the Universe. The only ones who don’t know that all this stuff is magic are people who have no clue about it, anyway. They call it ‘technology’ as if the word meant anything different than ‘magic.’

The headhunters in New Guinea know perfectly well that our success is a case of our magic being better than their magic.”

“I still don’t buy it.”

“Okay. Next time we get out on the highway on that motorcycle, pretend you don’t know anything about conservation of angular momentum, or gyroscopic precession, then look at what we’re doing. Until then, let’s table the discussion in favor of something more useful at the present time.”

“Like what?”

“Like what are you going to tell Mandy about what you’re doing here. Who are you, and what do you want to do with their technology?”

“Oh, I see your point. I sure don’t want to explain everything.”

“She has no need to know everything. What does she actually need to know?”

“Only that I need to explore some underground spaces that may be choked with unstable debris.”

“That works. Who are you?”

“I’m just someone who wants to explore those spaces for my own purposes, which she doesn’t need to know squat about.”

“That works, too. Your average person wouldn’t let it go at that, but Mandy, and hopefully the guys at Robotic Concepts, will understand that you need to protect your own intellectual property. Mandy certainly will, and if the Robotic Concepts guys can’t, they’ll be out of business by this afternoon, anyway.”

“So,” he said, “is there anything you have any intention of revealing that isn’t already public record, anyway?”

“I don’t think so,” Red concluded.

“I agree, so there’s no need for you to swear her to secrecy.”

“Right,” Red said cautiously.

“They, however, need to swear us to secrecy about their technology. So, they’re going to ask us to sign an NDA – a non-disclosure agreement – in which we promise not to tell anyone anything about what they tell us. You sign for yourself, and I sign one that will cover all of SST.”

“When you get the NDA form,” Doc concluded, “you’ll be asked to fill in your name, your company affiliation, and your job title. You *can* just put in ‘self’ as your company affiliation, but it would be better to use Scottsdale Systems Technology. It’ll be okay, and nobody will question it. For your job title, use ‘Project Principal.’ That’s with an ‘a-l,’ not ‘l-e.’”

“But I don’t work for Scottsdale Systems Technology.”

“That’s what the Project Principal bit is about. It’s something we use to protect our clients’ confidentiality. It means you’re working with us on this project as the representative of whoever the client is. Usually, it’s a company, but this time it’s an individual, but it’s none of their business. The NDA is a promise that you won’t spill the beans about what they tell you, and SST is taking responsibility to see that you don’t. I’ve already cleared it with management.”

“What happens if I do spill the beans?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never seen it happen. I don’t think it does, except in cases of out-and-out industrial espionage, and that’s illegal, so you go to jail. Industrial spies don’t sign NDAs, anyway.”

“What if I just mess up?”

Doc just looked at her hard, and said: “Don’t. If you do, you’ll never work again.”

“What? You mean, now my career’s on the line?”

“In a way. If you can’t keep your promises, you can’t hold a position of responsibility. If you want to have a professional career, you have to be willing to make promises, and you have to keep them. That’s part of what being a professional is all about.”

“Oh. Amateur night is over for Judith. This is the big time. I get it,” she said, looking concerned.

“Lighten up. I wouldn’t put you in this position if I weren’t sure you were ready for it. All you have to do is give them only what information you want them to have, and try to wheedle everything you can get out of them in return. Then, keep your mouth shut about what you learn. I’ll be here if you need any help, but you won’t.”

“Why are you doing this for me?”

“We need the information as much as you do.”

“Was that part of a plan? Am I a pawn in some bigger scheme?”

“Call it a ‘mystical convergence.’ If we were Mr. and Mrs. Joe Blow from Peoria coming back from vacation at Disney World with the kids, none of this would be happening. There’d be no convergence, they wouldn’t be talking to us, and we wouldn’t be talking to them, and nobody would be the wiser. We are who we are; things fell into place because of that; and we know it. We were the right people in the right place at the right time. That’s how it works.”

“You mean it’s all a matter of trying to be at the right place at the right time?”

“Oh, cripes!” Doc said in frustration. “Louis Pasteur once said: ‘Chance favors the prepared mind.’ Read the *I Ching*, Grasshopper, and come back in a month.”

Judith knew that meant she already had all the information she needed to figure it out for herself, and Doc would be disappointed if she didn’t.

27

“I’m Dr. Michael Manchek representing Scottsdale Systems Technology,” Doc said for the benefit of the Robotics Concepts folks attending the meeting by speakerphone. It was late morning, and Doc, Red, and Mandy were gathered around a telephone desk set placed near one end of the dining table in Red and Doc’s suite. They’d already taken care of formalities of non-disclosure agreements, and Mandy had kicked off the meeting by formally introducing herself, and asking everyone to introduce themselves so that the remote attendees, and anyone listening to the archived recording later, could associate names with voices to determine who said what.

“Our company,” Doc continued, “undertakes advanced research projects for various clients on a contract basis. We also commercialize certain specialized data acquisition system technology that is unavailable elsewhere. We’re here to learn about Robotic Concepts’ technology, and evaluate how it can be applied to our work in general. We specifically believe it might be useful for a project we are undertaking for a client whose identity will be kept confidential at their request.”

Doc nodded to Red to introduce herself.

“I’m Judith McKenna,” she said. “I’m the Project Principal representing the client.”

“As Project Principal, Ms. McKenna will be actively involved in all phases of this project,” Doc continued when Red ran out of things to say. “She will act as project leader. My role is to provide technical assistance, and to evaluate whether the technology might be useful for other projects SST undertakes for other clients.”

“This is Greg Michels,” came a disembodied voice from the speakerphone, “Chief Technology Officer for Robotics Concepts.”

“This is David Forster,” came a second male voice, “Chief Executive Officer at Robotics Concepts. I have to say that I’m a little uncomfortable about providing technical details to the representative of an anonymous company.”

“I understand your concern,” Doc responded, “but it cannot be helped. The identities of all our clients are kept confidential as a standard operating procedure, unless they specifically request publicity. Many, if not most, of our clients’ business activities would be compromised should anyone even know the nature of the research we do for them. We simply don’t divulge their identities except on a need to know basis.”

“So,” Forster’s voice said, “you’re saying it’s none of our business.”

“Well,” Doc responded, “I wouldn’t put it quite that bluntly, but yes, especially since the client has specifically requested anonymity. I am authorized to tell you that the client is not a possible or actual competitor of Robotics Concepts, nor is it anyone that might seek to benefit from the information outside this relationship with Robotics Concepts. Their representative is here only to determine whether you can help them accomplish their research goals. That’s all you need to know at this time. If we do work with you on this project, she’ll provide additional information as needed.”

“What do you think, Mandy,” Forster’s voice asked.

“Unfortunately, this is the basis on which Scottsdale Systems works with most their clients,” Mandy said. “We’ve worked with them for years, and found them to be very careful about other peoples’ intellectual property. I think it will be worth your while to work with them. You can trust Doc to protect your intellectual property, just as he is protecting his client’s.”

“Alright,” Forster said with little enthusiasm. “What do you need to know?”

“Mandy’s already given us a *precis* of your Worm product,” Doc explained, “but I’d like to hear it directly from you. I also know a little bit about it from the technical literature, but I’m sure Ms. McKenna would appreciate hearing the whole story. From our side, this is the most important thing we have to do today, so we’re willing to take as much time as you can give us. By the way, Ms. McKenna and I both have technical backgrounds, so please speak at any engineering level you’re comfortable with. We’ll ask if we have trouble following you.”

“Thanks,” came Michels’ voice. “That makes it easier.”

“As you know,” he continued, “robots can be either fixed, or mobile. Fixed systems, such as the SCARA robot arms used in, for example, automated assembly lines, are well developed. Mobile systems, such as automated fork lifts and material delivery carts, are now capable of safe operations even in proximity to humans.”

“The problem with all these systems, however, is that they are safe and effective only in highly structured situations, where they can be programmed for repetitive tasks. Where automated systems fail is in unstructured, unpredictable situations.”

“Even unmanned military vehicles, such as Predator drones, cannot be left entirely on their own. Most of them require constant supervision by human pilots. Even Mars rovers can’t be left entirely on their own. Earth-based engineers spend huge amounts of time evaluating possible routes and obstacles before uploading navigation programs.”

“Robotics Concepts has spent the past three years developing hardware and software with two goals in mind. First, we want to make the hardware compact and reconfigurable. Compact, so it can work itself through environments with small spaces that a person could not enter. Reconfigurable, so that it can quickly be modified to fit a particular situation.

“Second, we want the robot to have robust on-board intelligence, so that it can independently carry out its mission without human supervision. That requires lots of sensors to map an unknown environment, and machine intelligence to make independent decisions of how best to proceed to accomplish its mission objectives.”

“Our archetypical application would be to move through disaster wreckage looking for victims that might not even be conscious. The machine would need audio, visual, and tactile sensors to test and evaluate a jumbled three-dimensional environment. It would need to hear cries for help, see everything within range, and probe objects mechanically. For example, it would need to determine if what looks like a wall is the side of a concrete structure, or just a piece of tissue paper that it could easily brush aside.”

“A third capability would be the ability to communicate to base via multiple channels. For example, radio

might be the main link to the outside world, but it might need to use ultrasound when electromagnetic signals are blocked.”

“Our Worm fulfills these criteria. It’s modular, being made of highly compact self-propelled segments that can be quickly plugged together to form a long, highly mobile platform. We decided to use pairs of legs on each segment because they are more effective in rough terrain than wheels. We’re still experimenting with end effectors for the feet, but the current models have retractable claws – like on a cat’s toes – which allow it to hang upside down, and climb effectively, as well as walk upright. Having a long, segmented body allows it to move through small holes, while reaching over large gaps.”

“There are four kinds of segments, which can be combined in virtually any linear arrangement: locomotive segments, each carrying a pair of legs guided by a small independent processor that coordinates with processors of other segments; sensor segments that carry sensors, like tiny machine-vision cameras; control segments carrying multicore processing computers that allow the unit to process higher level information to make independent judgements; and communications modules. A typical Worm might have a sensor module at the front end, followed by a control module, then several locomotion modules, with a communication module bringing up the rear.”

Michels went on like that for about twenty minutes, adding detail after detail to the picture. Doc, and Red were able to follow the description, so they said little. When Michels completed the overview, Red asked: “How do you program a Worm in the first place. I mean, even if it’s smart enough to navigate a random environment, how do you tell it what you want it to accomplish? Suppose you want it to work it’s way to the bottom of a rubble pile, and report back the depth, how do you tell it in the first place?”

“We’ve a number of basic commands, which you type in through a PC, then download through whatever control link you’re using. Usually, you’ll start out by developing an instruction set on, say, a laptop, then download it to the Worm over a fiber-optic umbilical link. We’re also working on a voice-recognition system that will allow it to process verbal commands.”

“Can you monitor progress in real time?” she asked.

“Yes,” came the response. “Depending on the active sensors you’re using, you get a live display of all the information the Worm picks up, which you can display on the same PC you use to program the Worm. For example, there might be a window showing what each video camera sees. Other sensors collect less rapidly updated information, such as from temperature sensors and GPS position information, in other windows on the same display.”

“What if you see something interesting that you want the Worm to investigate on an *ad hoc* basis?”

“You can interrupt the Worm’s operation at any time on the fly, and add new instructions, which the Worm will carry out, and then go back to pick up the predetermined program where it was interrupted.”

“What happens if you lose the real-time link?”

“You can program the Worm to continue its pre-loaded program, or you can program it to immediately retrace its steps, and return to the surface. Or, you can program it to stop what it’s doing, and go dormant, or just about anything it’s capable of.”

This question-and-answer went on for nearly an hour. Doc let Red fish for the information she felt she needed for her purposes. Since she covered most of the ground he felt was important to SST, he said very little. Eventually, they had all the information they felt they needed.

“It looks like we have all we need right now,” Doc said. “We’ll be having project planning meetings at our offices in Arizona next week, and we may have additional questions for you at that time. As we told Mandy, the tentative project plan calls for a lengthy information-gathering phase, which we hope to complete in a few weeks. We’re thinking that we may need a Worm to support our field operations, which will begin soon after that.”

“What do you want the Worm to do for you?” Michels asked.

Red fielded the question: “We expect to have one or more underground spaces to explore. At this point, we don’t have any idea how big they might be, how many there might be, or where they are located, except that they’ll

all be in remote mountainous areas of the western U.S. Most importantly, we don't know what we will find when we get there, except that it is likely to be a three-dimensional maze. The Worm's task will be to explore and map the spaces, and identify whatever it finds. As we get additional information, we'll be able to give you more specific technical requirements."

Red didn't know how to respond when Michels said: "You haven't asked how much this equipment will cost. Don't you want to know?"

Doc jumped in: "We figure you can't tell us without more specific information. We'll be looking to purchase modules to make up one or more Worms, along with software, and hardware to operate them, and technical assistance as needed. Naturally, cost will be a factor in whether we actually deploy the technology, or seek an alternative means to reach our goals. We'll be prepared to pay a reasonable price considering the time and effort that you'll be putting into the project. We are quite familiar with building and deploying next-generation systems, so we should be able to come to a mutually agreeable figure. I assume Greg is the person we should contact when we're ready to put out a request for quote. He can help us put together the technical specifications, then your sales folks – which I assume starts with you, David – can put a price on it. Is that correct?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"We'll dicker about details at that time," Doc concluded. "Unless anyone has any more questions, I think we've covered everything for now. We have the information we need. The ball's in our court. You can expect us to get back to you late next week, or sometime the following week."

After goodbyes were said, equipment shut down, and Mandy left, Red turned to Doc with a concerned look on her face.

"I can't afford to pay for all this stuff," she said. "I was planning on just going to Nevada, finding a hole to look in, and climbing down to look. This is getting a lot more involved and expensive. I simply can't pay for it."

"You won't have to," Doc assured her. "Your little field trip has put in motion a lot more than you expected."

I can't explain it now, but please trust me. It'll all become clear next week, I promise."

28

They left Austin in the early afternoon, and spent the rest of the day traveling through the hill country of central Texas. Despite its reputation based on Hollywood misinformation, Texas is largely farm country, and the Texas hill country is the breadbasket of the state. A patchwork of tamed forest and well-kept fields, it was home to a diverse population descended from Anglo, Hispanic, and German settlers, all working together to forge communities based on hard work, plain dealing, and so forth.

Red hadn't believed anything like it still existed. It was about as far from the rip-roaring cowboy image, or the equally misleading oil-millionaire image, as could be. It was so nice, and pleasant that she couldn't imagine fitting in. Eastern city slickers like her need a lot more sharp edges and competitive tension to feel comfortable.

The next day, they reached the desert country of West Texas. Red had never seen a desert before. She'd heard of "Big Sky Country," but wasn't prepared for the immensity.

"Yeah," Doc said. "Easterners meeting the desert for the first time either love it, or hate it. If they love it, they never want to be anywhere else. But, for some people the immensity is too much. It makes them feel small and unimportant, and they go scurrying back to someplace where they feel less exposed."

"It's beautiful," Red said. "Look at those mountains! They're so far away they're blue."

"That's where the line about 'Purple mountains majesty' comes from in *America the Beautiful*. Wait 'til you see the deserts in New Mexico and Arizona farther west. As it dries out, the landscape becomes even more spectacular."

"Where does it end?"

"The Pacific Ocean. Actually, it stops at California's coastal mountains, but that's like fifty miles or less

from the ocean, out of well over a thousand between here and there. The coastal range makes a barrier keeping the moist air along the Pacific Coast from moving east into the deserts. Air moving east dumps all its moisture as rain while rising over the mountains. By the time it reaches the other side, it's bone dry, and can't pick up any moisture to speak of until it gets to central Texas, where it can pick some up from the Gulf of Mexico."

"These mountains are actually more like foothills for the Rocky Mountain cordillera, which we'll go through in New Mexico and Arizona. I think the Sonoran Desert in Arizona is the prettiest desert in North America, but the Mojave in California is the most spectacular. That's where you get peaks well over ten thousand feet next to holes below sea level."

They'd spent the rest of that day traveling through West Texas, crossing over the border to spend the night in Las Cruces, New Mexico. They'd ridden through New Mexico the next morning, grabbing lunch at Doc's favorite Mexican restaurant in Deming, a little family run place in a building that looked like it had originally been an ice-cream parlor in the latter half of the twentieth century. They reached the Arizona border in the afternoon, and pushed on to reach Doc's apartment in Scottsdale well after dark.

Doc's apartment was in a high rise near the center of town. By the time they reached the building, Red was cold, hungry, and tired, and in no mood for sightseeing as they wended their way through city streets. Dipping down a ramp to the underground parking garage, Doc waved a card at the RFID reader in front of a barrier, which lifted to let the motorcycle in.

Doc steered the bike around to a reserved parking area near an elevator, and parked it between a green late-model Jaguar convertible, and a smaller, more exotic looking yellow sports car. "Don't bother to unpack now," he said. "Just bring your pocket book."

It was just a few steps to the elevator, where Doc punched a PIN code into a keypad, then pushed the button for the top floor. When they reached the top, the door opened on a largish vestibule dominated by a round black laquered table with a large oriental vase in the center. The vase contained what looked like just a bunch of sticks poking out, but they were so artfully arranged that it looked beautiful. An overhead light immediately came on as a

young man of medium height dressed in a black tee shirt and black slacks came around the corner.

“Good evening Dr. Manchek, it’s good to have you home. Have you had dinner, yet?” he said.

“Sam, this is Red,” Doc said, making introductions. “Red, this is Sam. Sam keeps this place from falling apart. Sam, we have not had dinner. What’s in the pot?”

“Good evening Ms. McKenna,” Sam greeted Red. “May I suggest a nice steak with spaghetti in marinara sauce. Maybe some peas on the side. Or, I could put together a steak sandwich for each of you, again with the peas, and maybe ice cream for dessert.”

“Red?” Doc said, deferring to her to make the choice.

“Actually, the steak sandwich sounds good,” she responded, a little surprised. First, she hadn’t expected to be greeted by a houseman. Second, she *knew* Doc hadn’t introduced her by her real name, so Sam must to have been pre-briefed about her. Third, well, it was a really nice apartment! She had come to expect Doc would live well, but not *this* well.

Pulling off his jacket, Doc handed it to Sam along with his helmet, then said to Red: “While Sam is puttering in the kitchen, I’ll give you the grand tour.”

Handing Sam her jacket and helmet, too, Red followed Doc into the living area. The apartment was furnished in modern décor, with lots of glass and chrome, and rectangular edges on the furnishings. The main wall was glass, and looked out over the Phoenix skyline.

Arranged in an open plan, the main space was broken up into areas by the furniture. A pair of leather sofas arranged to form a V facing an entertainment center, for example, defined a TV area. A low, round table in a corner with a couple of club chairs provided a comfortable nook for reading or conversation. Over there, a long dining table with eight chairs signalled the place for meals. Beyond that, sliding glass doors gave access to a wide terrace that wrapped around the building. A wide arch provided communication between the dining area and the large

kitchen.

“I like to cook, when I’m able,” Doc said, leading Red into the kitchen and waving around. “So, there’s room enough for two to work without banging into each other. Most of the time when I’m cooking, however, Sam just sits around telling me that’s not the way he’d do it. I notice that he manages to eat the stuff, anyway, though.”

“This is my bedroom,” he said, opening a door off the main room, and flipping on a light switch. Its bathroom is over there. There’s another one near the entryway.” Moving to another door, and flipping on the light he said: “This is the spare bedroom, which you can use as your private domain. There’s a laptop on the desk, which is hooked directly into the SST intranet as well as the Internet. There’s a sheet there on the desk with login instructions, and your SST email address, as well as your PIN for the elevator, and an RFID card for the garage gate. There’s also a spare key to the Jag. I figure you’ll be here long enough to need a car. Phoenix is a driving city, not like Boston. I’ll use the Ferrari, or the bike.”

Noticing that Red had stopped listening, but was getting misty eyed, Doc interrupted his monologue to ask: “What’s wrong?”

Looking disappointedly toward the standard-size double bed in the room Doc had designated as hers, she couldn’t think of anything to say. Following her eyes, he realized what was bothering her. “This room is for you to have as a private work room,” he clarified, “and for whenever you want to get off by yourself. I hope you’ll join me in the more comfortable bed next door.”

She turned and threw her arms around his neck, and hugged him.

“I thought you were trying to get rid of me,” she said into his neck.

“Never,” Doc said. “On the other hand, I don’t want you to feel trapped either. It’s kind of the Johnathan Livingston Seagull theory. You’re with me only because you want to be, not because you’ve no place else to go. Okay?”

“Okay,” she smiled.

“My private workspace is in the library,” he said, leading her past the vestibule with the elevator, and opening a door to a room lined floor to ceiling with bookshelves. In the middle of the room was a long rectangular table with a marble top, and a chair at each end. A free-standing desk with a computer built into it dominated the far end of the room, and an easy chair with a footstool took up a corner near the door.

Red realized suddenly that the bookshelves were not lined up against the wall. They were free standing, and the glass wall continued around, forming two of the large room’s four walls. Remembering the amount of glass area in the living room and each of the bedrooms, her mind added two and two to come up with....

“You have the whole top floor of this building!”

“Uh, huh. Other people live on other floors.”

“How much does this set you back a month?”

“Well, nothing. I own it. This was an office building until I bought it a couple of years ago, and condo-converted it. I just kept the best pieces for myself.”

“Now, you’re rich, too?”

“Well, I do okay. Almost anything anybody does has the potential to make a profit. I just try to have a winning average.”

“You jerk,” she said, smiling, and punching his arm lightly. “No wonder you bought me all that stuff without blinking an eye. You’re rolling in it!”

Not knowing how to respond, Doc made the wise choice: he just shrugged, and clamped his mouth shut. It did, however, please him that she seemed pleased.

“Hey,” she said, turning on him. “You don’t happen to *own* that company you keep talking about, do you?”

“Uh, yes. But, as R&D companies go, it’s not really all that big. It’s just a little operation.”

“Okay. How many employees?” They were back to the old extracting-information-like-pulling-teeth game.

“About four hundred.”

“Annual sales?”

“A few hundred million.”

“Aw, shit, girl,” she said aloud to herself. “What have you gotten yourself into, now?”

She stood there, thinking for a minute. Then took a deep breath.

“Listen, buster,” she said to him. “I love you anyway. I don’t care if you *are* rich. I don’t care if you do own the damn company. I’m gonna take that job, even if it is a put-up job, and I’m gonna be the best employee you ever had. Anybody who says I got the job by fucking my way to the top is gonna have to eat their words.”

He broke out into a relieved smile, and said: “Thank you.”

“By the way,” he said seriously, “it is *not* a put-up job. The company needs you. I knew the company needed you before I mentioned the job to you, and I knew that you were the person the company needed. As far as your “fucking your way to the top,” I was trying *not* to fall in love with you, but failed miserably.”

She kept him standing in the library doorway, her mouth pressed to his, until Sam called them to dinner.