

# Through the Looking Glass

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!

*Through the Looking Glass*

Copyright © 2011, C.G. Masi, all rights reserved

*ISBN:*

*For Jessica*

“To crooked eyes, truth may wear a wry face.”  
– *J.R.R. Tolkien, The Two Towers*

## **Prologue**

It was hot. The bodies stank of feces and urine. The big man had been putting up with this for hours, and figured there would be hours more before he could be picked up.

As you'd expect, doing the deed was the easy part. The hard part was getting away with it.

Where were the damn sharks when you needed them? There wasn't much else he could do until the sharks came.

Killing the men had been easy. SCUBA diving to the bottom in the Straits of Florida, just West of the outer edge of the continental shelf, where the water was well over a hundred feet deep, they'd had no chance. They'd been so concentrated on digging that bell out of the sand, that they didn't notice he was no longer helping.

He backed away, and waited until they lined up side-by-side with their backs to him. A couple of cuts with his dive knife, and their air supply was history. By the time they realized they were even under attack, it was too late. There was no way they could live long enough to reach the surface.

Not when it was that deep.

He just swam a few tens of feet away, and watched them drown. When they stopped thrashing, they just settled slowly and peacefully to the bottom. By that time, the air in their tanks was exhausted, and the boiling rush of air escaping through their severed lines had slowed to nothing. It was all peaceful and quiet.

He'd have to work fast, though. Already, the bodies were beginning to drift with the current. Here, outside of the Gulf Stream proper and so close to the bottom, the current was pretty slow, but it was there.

He dragged the bodies individually over to the yellow line running from the mushroom anchor on the bottom up to the buoy dancing in the waves on the surface, and clipped their belts to it. At least he'd know where to find them.

Then, he swam back to police up the site. There wasn't much. They'd done all their survey work, sent off their data, and just came out for one last dive to pick up this bell. There was nothing like a great honking chunk of brass with a name on it to cement your claim to having found a Spanish treasure ship worth .... The big man didn't know how much, but it was more than he could spend in a few lifetimes.

At the last minute, the big man had offered to come along and help moose the bell out of the sand. It was now actually loose, just sitting in a depression on the bottom.

He'd pick it up later.

He didn't give a damn about salvage rights, or historical significance of the wreck. He wanted those silver ingots, and no questions asked. With the bell gone, the wreck would be a lot harder to identify if somebody else found it. He figured he'd have years to locate the holds, and pull ingots up one or a few at a time. It would be like his own private retirement fund.

He knew Wheeler. Wheeler would get so choked up about his post-doc students drowning that he'd probably never come back to the wreck. Nobody else would, either. It was a hundred-sixty feet down, well out of the range of amateur divers.

Wheeler would publish the location and identification – he had photos of the bell on the bottom with the ship's name clearly visible – so no other team of archeologists would try to excavate it without his permission.

It was safe from legal treasure hunters, too. You couldn't salvage the treasure without running crossways of the Federal Government, which actually owned all the unclaimed wrecks in U.S. territorial waters.

You could only do it illegally, and he would be first in *that* line. Come to think of it, he already was.

The only equipment left on the bottom was the air-powered dredge and the two air-lift bags the corpses had brought with them to help bring up the bell. They figured they'd need only one, but had brought two just in case.

That was lucky, because the big man could use those air lift bags to bring up the bodies. Getting them the last foot and a half over the gunwale into their launch would be the hard part.

He could handle it, though. He was strong from years of underwater salvage work. The kids had been tough and wiry, but not very heavy. As young, active marine archeologists, they weren't very big, and had no body fat to speak of. He'd strip off their equipment before hauling them aboard. They'd weigh practically nothing, then.

After retrieving the bodies and all of the equipment at the wreck site, the big man motored out in their launch past the continental shelf to where the bottom was several hundred feet down. He then made sure to vent all the divers' tanks, and bundle the equipment so it would all sink to the bottom *en masse*, and stay there. Then, he dumped the lot.

Human bodies, however, aren't so easy to dispose of. For that, he needed the sharks. He figured the best place to find them

would be right along the continental shelf, where upwelling currents would feed a vibrant marine community, which would attract the sharks.

He'd been waiting and waiting with nary a fin in view. It was time to dump the bodies and hope the smell diffusing through the water would attract the sharks.

An hour later with still no sharks, the big man was becoming desperate. He cut a long slice in the side of his hand, from his little finger practically to the heel, which bled profusely. He then hung it over the side to drip into the water.

That did the trick. Within ten minutes, two sharks – no, three sharks – showed up to see what was what. They quickly found the naked bodies floating in the water. Without questioning what two naked humans were doing floating in the Caribbean Sea, the sharks went to work cleaning up the mess. It was their job, and they did it as mechanically as a janitor mopping up a floor.

They didn't whistle a merry tune, as a janitor might, but it's hard to whistle when you're a shark.

The big man had bound his still-bleeding hand in a handkerchief as soon as he saw the sharks approaching. He wished he'd been faster because the two monsters glided right past his hull – right through the dilute cloud of blood in the water – before discovering the naked bodies. His heart rate did not get back to normal until he was sure the sharks had finished their work, and he'd skedaddled out of there.

The big man had barely enough fuel left to reach the rendezvous point to be picked up. He then pointed the launch's bow toward the middle of the Gulf Stream, and sent it off at idle. It would run out of fuel not far to the East, and then drift with the 'Stream.

# 1

It was late May.

Red (aka Judith McKenna) was settled into her life as a telecommuting computer jock. Every morning, she got up at seven o'clock in her Boston apartment, and worked out in her weight room for an hour. She was still keeping her six-foot, three-inch body in top form in hopes of making the Olympic tennis team next time around, instead of just being an alternate.

After her workout, she took a shower, then ate a light breakfast while her computer booted up. She then gave herself one half hour to scan the morning newspaper before jumping into email. She'd acquired Doc Manchek's *Wall Street Journal* habit, and had it delivered outside her door with a guarantee that it would be there before she woke up.

Morning chores done, she'd immerse herself in the nuances of Doc's Wavelet program, trying to understand what he'd designed it to do, and how. At noontime, weather permitting, she relaxed for a half hour sunbathing nude behind the ten-foot privacy fence on her roof.

Fixing a light lunch afterward, she'd spend the afternoon working on the Web interface she was developing as the front end for Wavelet. It was the job Doc's company, Scottsdale Systems Technology, had hired her to do – in between managing short-term development projects for various SST clients, such as the Department of Defense.

All the while, she tried not to think about her disappointing weekend in Santa Clara with Greg, or the fact that she hadn't a clue what to do for her Ph.D. thesis, despite her supervisor Patricia Dacy's daily telephone calls cajoling her to get off her freckled behind, and at least pick a school to apply to. Except for her weekly Saturday chores, she hadn't been out of the apartment for nearly two months.

After helping her solve the mystery of her father's disappearance, Doc had, true to his word, flown her home from SST headquarters in Scottsdale, Arizona to Boston in his new plane – an experimental two-place private jet he'd designed with state-of-the-art technology, such as thrust vectoring, not available on other private aircraft. He "forced" her to log flight time as pilot in command, while teaching her cross-country navigation skills. He had not had to tie her up to do it, but kiddingly asked her if she wanted him to.

She secretly enjoyed the notoriety of having – before ever taking her private pilot's written exam – logged more time as pilot in command of a high-performance, complex, *jet* aircraft than most private pilots log in their entire lives.

Pat had arranged for her to complete her undergraduate courses by passing final exams after studying the material on her own. Trying to get anything out of the last three weeks of her senior year as an applied-mathematics major at Harvard, after a month chasing ghosts around the southern tier of states plus a week's R&R on her stepfather's hundred-foot motoryacht in Florida, was useless.

She went home, pulled out her textbooks, threw some homework assignments in the mail, and aced the final exams. Done. Complete. End of story. She was officially a Harvard graduate.

She kinda liked that. It had a ring to it, but she promised herself to lose the accent.

Doc had done it, losing the distinctive, flat Eastern Massachusetts tones to come up with a nondescript mish-mash picked up from all over the country in his constantly wandering lifestyle, why couldn't she?

Anyway, every day Red stopped working on Wavelet promptly at five o'clock (except when she found herself making *really* good progress, which meant she was really having fun and kept going until way past her bedtime), and prepared a sumptuous dinner. As often as not, she called Doc's houseman, Sam, in Scottsdale to compare recipes, get cooking advice, or just chat.

Between phone calls to Sam, her mom, her friend and assistant Bonnie at SST's main office (ostensibly about progress on development of her deceased natural father's mine, but mostly to gossip about goings on among her friends at SST), and to her protege, Gwen Petersen (about Gwen's progress as a robot programmer; Doc wasn't working her too hard, was he?; how was Eve? Were they still passionately in love?), she felt no need for additional outside contact.

Every day or so, Doc found an excuse to call Red up. His usual excuse was to check on Wavelet progress, but he always spent most of the conversation on other things. Was she working out enough? He gently urged her to get out more. She needed to practice on the new red Triumph motorcycle she'd bought to match the leathers he'd bought her 'way back in Daytona, Florida, when she thought he was just some random motorcycle bum who'd stopped to help when her car broke down, instead of the multi-millionaire technical genius he turned out to be. That was before he'd completely changed her life.

Doc always ended by reminding her that she still had a desk at SST any time she wanted to move back to the Valley of the Sun. Red recognized it for what it was: a veiled renewal of his open invitation for her to marry him any time she chose to.

Instead, she treated him like an older brother, pestering him about what projects he was working on. How was the Worm-robot development project coming? And, she made sure to get the latest scuttlebutt about whom he was dating.

She liked to compare whom he was *actually* dating, which was mostly female Arizona State University physics and astronomy

grad students, to the litany of supermodels he was linked to in the supermarket tabloids. She'd glance at the tabloids every Saturday morning when she did her grocery shopping for the week. If there was a story about Doc, she'd bring a copy home. Doc did actually meet the supermodels, and actually escorted one or two to charity events that would have bored the ASU grad students to tears.

Red got a kick out of the occasional tabloid article speculating about where she'd disappeared to after making national headlines tracking down and capturing the serial killer who'd gotten his start ten years earlier by shooting her father, and why she was in seclusion. By holing up in her apartment, she'd tried to make herself uninteresting to paparazzi, but with only limited success.

Saturday was her day to go out. She did enough shopping Saturday morning to carry her through the week. Then, she'd drive her motorcycle to the airport for a couple of hours of flying lessons. She took these at a little rural airstrip well away from the congestion surrounding Boston's Logan International Airport.

Often, she'd end up at a biker bar she knew on the way back to Boston. It was mostly a Harley crowd, but nobody was going to harass the beautiful, tall redhead, who just wanted to dance and have fun. She always came alone, would dance with anyone, and left alone.

She studied for her Federal Aviation Administration written exam on Sunday. SST had supplied her with a set of CDs carrying a complete self-study course, which she enjoyed very much. She expected to take the test for her private pilot license in a couple of more weeks. Then, she'd start studying for the written test for her instrument rating, and then her commercial ticket. It would take longer to pass her flight tests, but she had time. Doc had made it quite clear that he planned to move her up the ladder at SST, and gaining experience as a test pilot was to be part of her training.

On the other hand, Red's stepfather, Mark Shipton, wanted her to eventually take over his privately held oil company. For now, what she learned at SST would help her run Gulf States Petroleum later, but everyone knew that Doc and Mark would eventually arm wrestle over her career track.

Red didn't care who won the arm-wrestling. *She'd* decide what she was going to do when the time came, anyway. But it gave her a warm, fuzzy feeling to know that her favorite stepfather and her *ersatz* big brother both wanted her by their sides enough to compete for her.

Life had settled into these greased grooves, when the doorbell rang at approximately quarter to ten on a Tuesday morning. It startled her because the doorbell hadn't rung since April, when Mark's security consultant had shown up to upgrade her system.

The doorbell rang a second time while Red tried to remember how to call up the feed from the video camera the security guy

had set up outside her door. She got it squared away just as the busty blonde wearing a black leather jacket and carrying a knapsack over her shoulder pressed the doorbell for the third time.

“Cheryl?” Red asked into the microphone, recognizing the face on the screen as that of her freshman roommate. Unlike a lot of college roommates, they’d actually been close friends.

Seeing Cheryl brought back memories of how much fun they’d had exploring the Boston area together. Red had grown up in Maryland, and Cheryl had lived in a small city on the Massachusetts North Shore, near the New Hampshire border. Rooming together in Cambridge had been the first time either had lived in a major city. At the time, they’d been practically inseparable.

Their friendship was neither strange, nor coincidental. They’d noticed each other while waiting in the long, interminable lines outside the registrar’s office on the first day of registration, when they had to do everything from getting their student ID cards to registering for their first classes.

It’s not surprising that they got together, since they were both unusually tall – for women – and both tended to be tomboys. In a world where tomboys are the exception rather than the rule, they gravitated together.

Red’s tomboyishness arose from spending so much time with her adventuresome father when she was little. Cheryl’s mentor had been her brother, who was seven years her senior. When Cheryl heard about Red’s father disappearing, they became instant soul sisters because Cheryl’s older brother had been lost while diving on a wreck off Florida. His body had never been found, either.

Unlike Red, who’d grown up missing her father, Cheryl’s grief was fresh. Her brother had disappeared only a year before. She still had crying fits when something reminded her of him.

Before the ink was dry on the dorm assignments, they’d insisted on being reassigned to share a room. They had, however, drifted apart when Red moved into her own apartment after their freshman year. Cheryl became immersed in her archeology major, and Red studied applied math, so they no longer had classes in common. Red hadn’t seen Cheryl in over a year.

“Yeah, Judy. Can I come in?” Cheryl was the only person in the Universe, beside her mom, that Red allowed to call her “Judy.”

“A woman named Pat Dacy at Scottsdale Systems Technology in Arizona said I should talk to you,” Cheryl continued. “She seems to think you have the answer to my research problem.”

“Sure,” Red replied. Rather than trying to figure out how to use the system to buzz Cheryl in, Red bounced over to the door, and pulled it open for her long-lost friend.

When Red appeared at the door, Cheryl's eyes popped. "Hey, girl. You grew *muscles*."

Surprised by the greeting, it took Red a couple of seconds to realize that she hadn't worn a stitch of clothing since Saturday, and she was still stark naked. It was warm, she lived alone, and felt more comfortable nude, anyway. Cheryl was studying every freckle covering every ripple of muscle.

It was too late to cover up, now, and there wasn't anything Cheryl hadn't seen before – except perhaps Red's more mature muscles. Red's freckles were the same, except no longer showing tan lines.

"I'll take that as a complement, I think," Red replied. She pulled Cheryl inside and closed the door quickly, even though she occupied the whole top floor, and so was unlikely to accidentally flash any of the neighbors.

"Sorry to be flashing you like this," Red apologized. "I live alone, and forgot to cover up before answering the door. If you'll wait a minute, I'll go put something on."

"Don't on my account. You know I prefer skin, too, but I share an apartment with a bunch of prudes, so I don't get to wear it, much."

"You used to be so skinny," Cheryl observed, inspecting Red like a side of beef. "You were like a toothpick with boobs. Actually, more like a shish-kabob skewer with boobs, you were always so tall. You've filled out nicely!"

"So, what've you been feeding this thing?" she asked, patting Red's fiery pubic bush familiarly.

It was the same old Cheryl: frankly and unashamedly raunchy. Red had always enjoyed that trait in Cheryl despite, or perhaps because, she tended to act more reserved, herself. Cheryl brought out a side of her that she enjoyed taking out of the closet, but seldom found the opportunity to. It was more fun when shared with friends. Come to think of it, it was the same side she liked exhibiting around Doc.

"Not much, recently," Red admitted. "I've had a couple of bad relationships, and not much since."

"We'll have to fix that!" Cheryl said emphatically. "But, not now."

"I assume you didn't come here just to inspect my freckles," Red opined. "What's this research problem you have? How did you end up talking to Pat, and why did she send you to me?"

"Well, I can see that I *should* have come here to inspect your freckles, and should have done it sooner, but you're right. I

started calling SST last week because I'd heard that they had a program that might help me map how currents affect underwater debris fields."

"Ahh! Wavelet! No wonder Pat sent you to me. My main job at SST is to find new and unusual applications for Wavelet in fields outside traditional fluid dynamics, and figure out how to make the software accessible to scientists and engineers outside the computational fluid dynamics discipline – CFD for short. 'So, that's why you came to Tuco!'"

"What?"

"It's a game I play with Doc Manchek, the guy who wrote Wavelet in the first place. We both like to play around with literary trivia. That one was from Sergio Leone's *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*."

"Oh, yeah. I saw that. You haven't changed much. You always were the smartest one in the room, even when the room was full of professors."

"Don't exaggerate. Besides, I'm not the smartest one in the room when Doc's around."

"Hey, you're in love with him! I can tell by the sparkle in your eye when you talk about him."

"No, we're more like big brother and little sister."

"Bullshit! I can see your nipples getting hard."

"Stop it, or I *will* get dressed."

"Okay. Just funnin'."

"So, what do you think you need Wavelet for?"

"Well, you remember that I got my degree in archeology, right?"

Red nodded.

"For my directed research class, I worked with this team that was doing underwater archeology. It's the same team that my brother was working with when he drowned. We go down and excavate sunken wrecks, cities that have been submerged by sea-level rise, and so forth."

Red nodded that she was still following.

“Well, after graduation, the professor offered me a research-assistant job. He suggested I do a Master’s thesis on how debris fields get to be the way they are.”

Red nodded again, waiting for the story to unfold.

“Most of the most interesting wrecks are ships that went down in storms. When ships go down in storms, however, their contents often end up getting spilled, then moved around by underwater turbulence on their way down. When that happens, we have thousands of bits scattered all over the bottom. What we’d like to do eventually is be able to start from the debris field, which we see empirically, assume a turbulence, and work back to where the bits were in the ship when it went down.”

“So, you need Tuco’s Wavelet program to solve the CFD problem to calculate the trajectories of all those little bits. What you may or may not know is that you also need Tuco’s ability to use fuzzy logic to deal with the chaotic turbulence field.”

“Fuzzy what?”

“Did you happen to discuss this problem with one Doctor Michael Always-Sticking-His-Nose-In Manchek at SST?”

“Yeah, he’s the one I started with. My professor had read about this Wavelet program, and said I should call him to find out if it could help us. Dr. Manchek passed me along to Pat, who asked me a bunch of weird questions, and said she’d get back to me. That was yesterday. This morning, she called back, and told me that the person who had the answer to my problem turned out to be my old fuck buddy, you! She said I should come over here to talk to you. It’s funny, though: she said I shouldn’t call ahead. She knew you’d be in, and I should just come over here and ring the doorbell. What’s that about?”

Red closed her eyes, and shook her head.

“It’s the kind of thing they’re always doing to me. I don’t know whether they do it to everyone else at SST, or whether they just like to pick on me. I know Doc likes to, and I’ll bet that ex-hippie grandma, Pat, gets a charge out of it, too.”

“Doc probably noticed that you were an archeologist from Harvard of approximately my age. He also noticed the fact that your problem seemed to require my particular talents to solve. So far, pretty straightforward.”

“But, this is where it starts to get thick,” Red warned. “Doc is a Zen sage who practices an obscure mental discipline that only a handful of people understand. Part of this discipline involves practicing the ability to see connections where other people just see

coincidences. Doc doesn't believe in coincidence."

"He could have just sent you directly to me, but probably sent you to Pat, who's his finder-of-all-information-about-people go-to gal, because he had a hunch about who you were. These hunches seem to just float down to him from some cosmic interaction pool."

"You make it sound like he's some *Star Wars* Jedi knight, using The Force!" Cheryl laughed.

"Yeah, well, it's really spooky to see him do it in front of you. It's a nice plot device in a movie, but to see him do it in real life makes the hair stand up on the back of your neck. You start looking for where he's hidden the mirrors!"

"Anyway," Red continued, "Pat used that – probably about twenty four hour – period between the time she first talked to you, and when she called you back this morning, to check you out. By this time, she knows the name of your first grade teacher, your bust size, and more about you than you remember, yourself. She for damn sure knows that you and I were friendly enough to put vegetables in our cunts, and dance naked around our room to Bon Jovi records. I know that because she told me that she knew it about me, and she's obviously made the connection to you."

"Wait a minute," Cheryl interrupted. "How'd you get all that out of the little I told you?"

"Because I practice the same Zen discipline Doc does," Red replied ominously.

"Now," Red continued, "we have to surmise what's going on in their diabolical minds that made her want you to come over here to see me without the courtesy of a phone call."

Red stopped a minute to let all those facts and inferences settle into a complete picture in her mind, with the gaps filled in by hypotheses marked in yellow highlighter. She stared at the floor with lips pursed, then suddenly nodded.

"There are two things those miscreants are trying to get me to do," she explained. "One is to get out more, and see more people. Another is to find a problem for my Ph.D. thesis. I'm thinking that they're thinking that they can kill two birds with one stone."

"They know that there's no way I could ignore your research problem. If I tried to do so, they'd simply point out that it is exactly the kind of thing they pay me to do, and order me to work with you on it. They don't think they'll need to because it's what I told Doc I wanted to do before I knew who he was."

“Hunh?”

“Don’t ask. It’s a long story that makes this one look straightforward. Some weekend, we’ll go down to Provincetown, lie out on the nude beach with a bottle of wine, and I’ll tell you the whole sordid tale.”

“Anyway. They knew that, one way or another, I’d put my heart and soul into your problem. They’re also thinking that you’ll drag me out of this apartment, and force me to meet people and have fun. They probably have a theory that your surprising me naked will make our renewing our friendship more likely. In fact, I’ll bet Doc is trying to push me into a full-blown lesbian relationship with you.”

“What? Why?”

“I’ll cut this short in the interest of actually accomplishing something on your project before next Thursday. I once told Doc that I wasn’t a lesbian. I don’t think he knew then about our private parties back in the Freshman dorm. I’ve never mentioned them to him, but I’m sure he’s got copies of the grocery receipts on file by now. Or, at least Pat does. Who knows what information he had then?”

“Anyway, I told Doc I was not a lesbian. I said I liked men, which I do. A lot. He said that one day I’d be able to say with equal certainty how I feel about women. He said I just hadn’t tried, yet, and until I did, I wouldn’t know.”

“He sounds like a very smart man.”

“He is. Infuriatingly so,” Red concluded.

“So,” Red continued, “he hopes that by pushing you at my bed, he’ll get me to check you out, and thereby find out about me.”

“Well, why make him wait?”

“Aw, shit! He’s doing it, again. Why can’t he ever be wrong? So, now it turns out that you’re lesbian, or bi, or whatever, and he knew about it before I did.”

“Hey, girl, maybe those sessions had nothing to do with girl sex to you, but they did to me. I’ve always loved sex play with you, and I’ve always wanted you to stop playing, and do it for real. So, if your boyfriend wants me to make a woman out of you. Why not now?”

“Shit! No. I don’t need this.”

“Why not? It’ll be fun!”

“He can’t always have it his way. Not on this,” Red said angrily, and stomped off to her bedroom.

Less than a minute later, she was back wearing a short wrap-around dress made of Chinese silk that came to just above her knees. It was probably the fastest thing to put on in Red’s closet, but Cheryl noticed that, although it would keep her from being arrested, it would still cause traffic accidents if she wore it walking down Charles Street.

“So, no playing. Judy’s turned over a new leaf,” Cheryl teased. She knew her friend too well to be more than slightly disappointed.

“Look,” Red pleaded, “I always liked playing with you, too, and after two months of nothing to love but my fist, I’m ready to fuck a chair. But, I’m at work right now. Maybe some other time.”

“By the way, Doc gave me a new nickname that I kinda like. I’d like you to use it, too. Please call me ‘Red.’”

“It suits you. Red. I like that.”

“Sometimes, though, I’m Mistress Judith.”

“Ohhh! Sounds kinky.”

“Right now, Mistress Judith insists that we tuck up our libidos, and think about the fuzzy logic of chaotic flow fields.”

“What?”

“See? You have much to learn, grasshopper.”

## 2

They spent the rest of the morning, all of an hour and a half, discussing flow fields, and how they might affect the kinds of debris particles Cheryl wanted to map. Red wanted more detail about the situations Cheryl wanted to model on the computer, and she wanted to teach Cheryl enough about flows to set realistic expectations.

“The essential limitation with turbulence,” Red explained, “and it’s a whopper, is that the flow is chaotic. It is simply not possible to predict what it will do for any length of time. Even if you know exactly the velocities of all the water droplets at one point in time, it’s virtually impossible to predict what the velocities of the droplets will be more than a few seconds later. In fact, it’s virtually impossible to define a water droplet as a unit, and follow it for any significant time, because shear forces stretch it completely out of shape. A cube of fluid one millimeter on a side could be stretched into a filament a meter long a few seconds later. Then, the filament could be wrapped into a whorl, and broken up a few seconds after that. The debris particles will just be carried along with it.”

“Are you telling me the problem is hopeless?”

“No, but we have to set realistic expectations. We’ll have to start by looking at time scales and length scales to see what will, and will not be possible. Then, we’ll set goals based on what *is* possible. In the end, we’ll use a supercomputer to run millions of simulations on which to base probability maps.”

“Where will we get a supercomputer?”

“We’ll use cloud computing technology to build a virtual supercomputer.”

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You will. We do it all the time. I’ll explain it as we go. How long do you have?”

“I’ve got all day. Nobody’s waiting on me.”

“No, silly. How long do you have on the project? When do you have to show results? Is this just a Master’s Thesis, or do you plan to take it out to a Ph.D.?”

“Oh, I thought you meant today. I dunno. I’m headed for a doctorate, like you are. My professor talked about using this for a

Master's. Will it work for a doctorate?"

"I've no idea about archeology. It should get me mine in applied math, but I guess you'll have to talk to your professor. I've got to discuss it with Doc. He'll know what to do next."

"I think I'm beginning to know something about this guy," Cheryl commented. "He'll make you figure it out for yourself. 'Go not to the elves for counsel, for they will say both yes and no.' I can do it, too."

"J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Fun, isn't it?"

"When do we call him?"

"Now is good. If I can figure out how to set up a video conference call on this thing."

It took ten minutes to set up the computer's Web camera to display both of them sitting in front of the monitor. Then, another five minutes, including a cellphone call to Josh, Red's mentor on all things Wavelet, to learn how to set up the video conference call. Then, a few minutes more to find that Doc was on a cross-country flight in his plane. They set a time to reconnect at four o'clock Boston time, which would be just after lunch in Scottsdale.

"I thought Arizona was on mountain time?" Cheryl asked, when they'd broken the connection.

"Yes, but they don't use daylight savings time. Doc says we're all ditherers who can't decide what time zone we want to be in, and the rest of the state seems to agree. They use standard time all year, so in the summer it's like Pacific time."

"So, we've got, like, four hours to kill. Let's do lunch!"

"Sure, what do you want? The 'fridge is stocked for the week."

"That's not what I mean. If I'm supposed to get you out of this apartment, that's just what I'll do. I mean to take you out to lunch. Put on a pair of heels. I want to see what that dress does to traffic on Charles Street."

"There's no way I'm going to hike a quarter mile down this hill on three-hundred-year-old cobblestone sidewalks in high heels! I'll pull out a pair of comfortable flats, then we can go. And, I'm going to pay! Remember, I'm now Miss Rich Bitch thanks to Mom marrying a billionaire, and you're a poor grad student on a stipend. Besides, I'll charge it off to SST, and let Doc pay for it. Fuck him!"

“That could be arranged!” Cheryl said, eagerly.

Red just shook her head, and tried not to think about it.

She turned, and walked to the bedroom, where she pulled out a pair of panties, which she put on to avoid providing accidental beaver shots to the other patrons at whatever restaurant they went to. She chose red ones to match the red on her dress, which had green and gold dragons embroidered on a red background. she picked out a pair of flat leather sandals for hiking the hill in what was becoming ninety-degree heat. The only incongruous note was her favorite black leather handbag with the western-motif red foliate design that Doc bought her months ago in Daytona Beach.

She stood up to go, then looked Cheryl in the eye, and a wicked grin crept onto her face. She turned back, and pulled the simple gold-ball studs she always wore around the apartment out of her ear holes. She replaced them with her largest gold hoops in the middle holes, pendants made of long, thin turquoise strips in the lower holes, and what looked to Cheryl like three carat diamond studs in the top holes.

Then, she added her turquoise squash blossom necklace. On her right wrist, she put a half dozen assorted metal-hoop bangle bracelets to counterbalance the ornate western-style gold watch band on her left.

The watch band featured large, spear-head-shaped leaves in high relief combined with turquoise rocks half an inch across having intricate gold veins criss-crossing their surfaces. It was a female equivalent of the thing Doc typically wore.

Then, she added a large, oval white-turquoise ring she’d found in Sedona, Arizona on her left ring finger. To be wicked, she put a silver death’s head ring she’d picked up from a vendor outside a biker bar in New Mexico on the middle finger of her right hand.

She flashed a truly wicked smile to Cheryl, and laughed.

“If you want me to stop traffic,” Red said, “I might as well blind ‘em, too.”

“How much are those things worth?” Cheryl asked, fixated by the diamond studs.

“They’re just CZ,” Red scoffed. “A few hundred. The necklace is worth a lot more. C’mon. This’ll be fun.”

Since the day had warmed up, Cheryl dropped her leather jacket on Red’s couch. That left her with a very revealing white tank top atop tight jeans cinched by a wide leather belt with a businesslike square brass buckle. She wore a pair of black western-style boots despite the warmth.

“Since you’re paying, and you can afford that jewelry, I know just where to go,” Cheryl announced.

She led the way south to Myrtle Street, then down the hill to where Myrtle turns a hard right onto Revere Street. She turned left on Revere to continue down the hill to Charles Street. She crossed Charles, and turned right to walk a half block to where several tables sat out on the sidewalk under an awning. Cheryl wanted to set Red out at one of those tables to show her off, but the Sun would have boiled them in their own juices. So, they went inside to take up one of the tables right by the window, and watch passersby while eating lunch in air-conditioned comfort.

“Red,” Cheryl whispered confidentially, “do you know who those two are? Tweedledum and Tweedledee, who just sat down at that table ‘way in the back?”

“Why?”

“Because they followed us all the way from your building. I saw them come out a minute after we did. Then I saw them again on Myrtle Street. Here they are again.”

“They’re my bodyguards,” Red explained. “I’ve already been kidnapped for ransom once, you know.”

Cheryl goggled. “I thought that was all a sting operation. You weren’t really kidnapped, were you?”

“Well, the guy’s up on federal kidnapping charges, as well as murder, theft, and violation of rights. Yes, it was a sting operation, but I really was kidnapped,” Red said. “The guy gave me a concussion taking me. I woke up chained to a wall. It scared the shit out of me! My head hurt so much I thought he’d blown half my brains out, like he did to my father. He’d just beamed me with a baseball, but that can do a lot of damage, too. The guy is horribly dangerous.”

“Holy shit! I thought it was all your idea.”

“It was, but part of it was that *he* had to do an actual kidnapping. Do you know how long it took to put the idea into his head? Four days, and that includes the time it took for him to plan it out, and set it up.”

“You know what the ransom was on my pink, freckled ass?” Red continued. “Fifteen million. How many people would be willing to kidnap me for fifteen million? The list is longer than the list of who *wouldn’t*. If those bodyguards weren’t around, it’d be an annual event, like the Superbowl. The FBI would charge us rent for the task force. Hell, bookies would be taking odds on it. News departments wouldn’t report it because it’d be part of the sports coverage. I can see the headlines: ‘Latest Red McKenna kidnapping lasts only fourteen days. Read all about it!’” she parodied.

“That’s Dave and Ralph,” she said, indicating the bodyguards with a discrete nod. “They live in the apartment downstairs. If you scream and break a lamp, they’ll be in the apartment with guns drawn within thirty seconds. Don’t do it, though. I don’t want to have to fix the door.”

“You know, you spotted them pretty fast,” Red noticed. “Maybe I should ask Mark to put you on the payroll. It’d be more than your stipend.”

“Yeah,” Cheryl picked up the ball, “then I’d have to stay close to you all the time. Sleep in your bed, follow you into the bathroom, cozy showers, and all.”

“Maybe I should shut my mouth.”

“What do you want for wine? Let me get you drunk,” Cheryl suggested.

“Oh, no. No drunk,” Red said. “The last time I got drunk, I ended up with a baby turning my nipples black and blue.”

“You had a baby?” Cheryl asked in disbelief.

“It’s not like that. It’s a long story, but, yeah, you’d like it, so I’ll tell it,” Red explained. “Doc’s ex-girlfriend, Eve Salazar, is a TV reporter in Phoenix. One day, he took her nightclubbing in Reno. To make a long story short, she fell in love with this stripper.”

Seeing the look of incredulity on Cheryl’s face, Red realized that Cheryl thought she was making the whole story up for fun.

“No lie! This really happened exactly the way I’m saying it.”

“So,” Red continued, “they take the stripper to a fancy hotel for the night. They get a really nice – I mean five hundred a night in Reno nice – suite, and both bang the Hell out of her. Next morning, Doc finds that the stripper – her name’s Gwen – has now fallen in love with Eve, too. They’ve become the perfect lesbian couple! It’s like they’re ready to fly out to Vegas for a quick wedding! Two white dresses, and the whole shebang.”

“Interesting that you pulled out that old term ‘shebang,’” Cheryl pointed out, “as in ‘she-bang?’”

“Oh,” Red got flustered by the interruption. “It was entirely unintentional.”

“I see,” Cheryl smiled. “No pun intended? Just pun made. Very Freudian.”

Red decided to ignore Cheryl’s needling. All the lesbian references today were rubbing her the wrong way.

That came out wrong.

“Now, Doc, the maniac,” Red pressed on with her story, “thinks they make a cute couple, and starts to play matchmaker. He knows that if Eve brings the girl back to Phoenix, the assholes she’s working for in Reno, who are connected to organized crime, will chase her down, probably arriving in Phoenix before the women do, and drag her sorry ass back. Eve would be heartbroken, and the big softy doesn’t want that, even if she is dumping him for another woman. Are you still with me?”

“Fascinated,” Cheryl said, leaning with her elbows on the table, eyes locked on Red’s, and taking in every word.

“This next part is pure Doc. It’s normal behavior for him, but would get anyone else locked in the loony bin. He starts studying the girl. He just talks to her, watches what she does, how she reacts to different things, and the questions she asks. The questions are the big thing, because they show how her mind works.”

“Anyway, about thirty hours later he’s decided to hire her for SST as a robotics-programmer trainee! By that time, he’s got me in cahoots with him. So, that night we take Eve and Gwen out to dinner, you know, to show support for them taking on a challenge by trying to be together, coming out of the closet, and all that. They show up with spectacular matching pink and blue outfits, for which Doc immediately dubs them the ‘anti-twins.’”

“In the middle of dinner, he springs the job offer on the girl. How do you think she reacts?”

“She’s scared to death of the thugs in Reno,” Cheryl surmised. “It’s all very nice to run off with a big city reporter for the weekend, but when offered the chance to make a whole new life, she pees her pants. I would, too.”

“Bingo! But, that doesn’t phase Doc. He’s always getting his way because he always knows how to do it. So, he’s already figured out what to do.”

“Anyway the girl wants to go for it. She’s had enough of wagging her clit in drunk’s faces, and peddling her ass to whoever has a couple of hundred bucks, and an itch. The idea of hanging around with nice, clean people, who smell nice, don’t drip, and don’t threaten her life every time she tries to take a coffee break, while making more money than she ever could as a hooker, because she won’t have to share it with anyone, all sounds really, really good.”

“All she has to do is be nice to Eve, who’s one of the nice, clean people, and adores her. She also has to work at her new job, which she already knows that she loves because Doc made sure it happened that way. He’d done a personality profile on her, and matched it with a job he invented for her. – This is the way that guy works! – So, she wants the job. ... I’m losing track.”

“The mafia guys,” Cheryl reminded her.

“Oh, yeah, the only thing stopping her is the mafia guys, who’ll chase her down, and so forth. So, what does Doc do?”

“He pays them off, of course,” Cheryl concluded.

“Not exactly. What he does is find out who *their* bosses are. Then, he pays *their* bosses to tell *her* bosses to let *him* bribe *them* to look the other way. God knows how much it cost Sir Galahad to save Gwendolyn from the clutches of the evil slavers, so he could deliver her safe and sound into the arms of her new girlfriend.”

“So, where does the baby come in?”

“Oh. I forgot where we were going. ... So, we’re having dinner. He offers the girl a job. She accepts, right? All very simple, except for the few details. So, we’re all happy, and to celebrate, Mister Egg-’Em-On-’Til-They-Fall-Over-The-Cliff has the waiter drag up huge bottles of hideously expensive wine, which he starts pouring into *us*. He sits there sipping cognac while we three women get brain-dead drunk.”

“Now, remember, Doc’s a power lifter. He’s way over six feet tall, and weighs about two-fifty. I’m over six feet, as well, and have to fight to keep my weight down to one-sixty-five. Eve’s no Tinkerbelle, and probably weighs one-twenty, or one-thirty. Poor Gwen is this little bit of a thing who can’t weigh over a hundred pounds soaking wet with all her clothes on. You get the picture?”

“Yeah, Gwen’s little. No capacity for alcohol.”

“Right. She’s a little slip of a thing, but she tries to keep up drinking with the rest of us, and we’re trying to keep up with Doc. Or, what we think Doc’s doing.”

“Uh, oh.”

“Exactly. I get thoroughly plastered. Eve’s nearly passed out, but Gwen’s at the door of acute alcohol poisoning. Now, you have to remember that Gwen’s a newbie ex-hooker. She drinks to help her fuck people. So, when alcohol robs her of little things like rational thought, memory, and situational awareness, she falls back on instinct.”

“Oh, no,” Cheryl roared, “she fucks everything she can find!”

“She started on Eve, who was barely conscious, herself. Sucked her clit purple – literally. We had to put ointment on it! When Eve couldn’t take it, anymore, she came to Doc and me for help. We were sitting in the living room watching television.”

“Oh, right!”

“Swear to god! We were watching television. Remember, Doc had just been in a threesome, and I was being true to my new guy (the creep).”

“I sense another story,” Cheryl observed.

“Yeah, and that one’s really right up your alley, literally, but we’re still on this one, so we’ll save it for another time. So, Doc and I are sitting in the middle of the couch minding our own business. Eve crawls up on Doc’s side of the couch for protection from Gwen’s alcoholic nymphomania. So, Gwen crawls up on the only available spot – next to me.”

“She must have mentally reverted to infancy because she curls up in a fetal position, and starts nursing on my boobs. I know that if I push her away, the only one left is Doc, and I hate to think what she would have done to him. So, I let her keep suckling. I kept switching her back and forth between nipples, but she must have been at it for hours before she finally passed out completely.”

“The next morning, she wakes up with this fantastic story about a dream in which she was a little baby, and I was her mother. Well, you know where that came from. She still has kind of a mamma fixation on me, and I actually kinda like it. I still watch out for her because she does need a mother – a woman she can talk to who isn’t trying to fuck her, like everybody else. Her own mother lives in Texas, and can’t talk to her without a Bible lecture. So, I kinda fill in.”

“Uh, huh,” Cheryl said in a non-committal way.

“Anyway, that’s the story of how I got drunk, and woke up with bruised nipples, and a baby girl.”

“And, how old is this baby girl?”

“Twenty one.”

“Jeez-louise, she’s almost our age!”

“And so?” Red asked defiantly.

Not being able to think why Gwen’s being only a year younger than Red would make any difference to anyone, she said: “I dunno. But, you make her sound so infantile. Is she an imbecile?”

“Of course not,” Red replied defensively, as if it were her actual daughter whose intelligence were being questioned. “Probably

average intelligence, or above. Most likely well above. If she were stupid, Doc would have her mopping floors, not be training her to program robots. I don't think he would ever set anybody up to fail. That wouldn't be like him."

"About those security people," Cheryl asked a little nervously, changing the subject. "Do they have cameras in your apartment?"

"Probably. I hope so. What if I choke on an olive? I'd hope they would know about it, somehow."

"Probably! You mean you figure they watch you prance around nude in there all day?"

"I don't think about it. If they do, I hope they enjoy it."

"And, they might be watching you masturbate?"

"Ditto."

"What if you've got a lover in there?"

"Ditto, also. Who cares?"

"What if that lover were me?"

"If I'm enjoying it, why can't they? If it happened, we'd never find out about it, anyway."

"What if they, like, made a videotape, and tried to blackmail you?"

"Who'd pay them? If they came to me, I'd complain to Mark, and he would find whoever recorded it, confiscate all copies for Doc to add to his collection, and bury whoever had done it somewhere in Borneo, probably in some headhunter's belly."

"If they went to Doc, he would pay them, but not much, and he'd insist on double prints. But, then he'd brag about it to Mark – they were boating buddies long before Doc ever saw my bony ass – and then it's off to Borneo again."

"Let's see," Red continued. "If they went to Mom, what would happen would depend on who the lover was."

"If it was Doc – no chance – she'd give three cheers (she's a Doc fan), and thank them for telling her. But, she'd tell Mark right away, even before starting to plan the wedding. Then, it would be off to Borneo, again, even before Doc got his double prints."

“If it were another guy, she’d want to know if I’d gotten pregnant. She wants a grand daughter to spoil.”

“If it were you, she’d scold me, and make me promise to find a guy to make her a granddaughter to spoil. We have this discussion on a weekly basis. But, then she’d complain to Mark, and it’d be off to Borneo again. Doc would still get double copies.”

“What if one of them got pissed off, made a video, and posted it on the Internet?”

“Not much different. Doc would download it, and probably send a link to Mark. Mom would still want to know if it meant she was getting a granddaughter. And, Mark would make sure they got to Borneo on the next flight.

“What if they sent it to the media? You know, the tabloids.”

“The Internet *is* the media, girl. Sheesh, upload to the nineties, will you?”

“It’s long past the nineties,” Cheryl observed.

“That’s the point.”

“In summary,” Red summarized, “making a videotape of me doing anything of interest – even if it was peeing on the floor – would be the stupidest thing any of them could do. There’s no upside, and it could get them a one-way ticket to Borneo. They’d have to be imbeciles, and Mark wouldn’t hire an imbecile to protect me. End of story.”

Then, Red added, tongue firmly in cheek: “If you want to search over my apartment for video cameras, feel free to. If you find one, go ahead, and use it to jack off with. Give ‘em a *real* internal cumshot! Just, please wipe it off, and put it back, so I don’t have to apologize to them. They’re really awfully nice to me. I’m pretty sure it was one of them who started me on karate. Sometimes Ralph takes the garbage out for me.”

“You really don’t mind if they spy on you, do you,” Cheryl concluded.

“Why should I? I know why I need the security. I know I’ll never really find out whether their peeping, or not, so it’ll never come back to bite me. What’s the fuss?”

“One more thing,” Red continued, “I was kidding about masturbating with the video camera. Don’t bother to try looking. The things they’d use are the size of a grain of sand. Their biggest problem keeping the system running is probably female black-widow spiders stealing the things to make porno/snuff films of their conquests: ‘See, Gladys, that’s my late husband Herbert. He was great! After I bit his head off, he about banged me into the fourth dimension.’ Get the idea?”

“I get the idea, but I’m not sure I could get used to it,” Cheryl admitted.

“If it helps, take a look at those two over there. They’re the ones who would look at the monitors. They’re clean, earnest, upstanding guys, who aren’t bad to look at, and they’re willing to put their lives on the line for me. I bet you, of all people, would enjoy letting them sit on the couch while you lie on the coffee table to jerk off, wouldn’t you?”

“Now that you put it that way, it sounds kinda kinky, and you know I *love* kinky!”

“Dammit,” Red said with a sigh, “now, you’ve got me turned on thinking about it.” She paused for a few seconds to finalize her decision, then said: “After we get done talking to Doc, let’s take my bike over to Little Italy in the North End for dinner, then stop at Haymarket to do a little produce shopping on the way home. Then, we’ll download some Bon Jovi, and give them a show like the old days.”

Cheryl’s pupils got big, her cheeks got red, and her lips got puffy. “Yeah,” she said, “I’d like that. Like the old days.”

### 3

“I think you’re right about the project getting you your doctorate in applied math,” Doc told Red on their conference call. “It might get Cheryl her master’s, but I think she’d have to use it in actual field work for her doctorate. She’ll have to discuss it with her professor, though. Don’t take my word for it because it’s out of my field.”

When Cheryl finally saw an image of Doc on the big screen, she understood why Red’s nipples got hard when she thought about him. She couldn’t judge size from the display, but believed Red’s “well over six feet” report. But, he was wide, too: shoulders and chest muscles bulging out of the light blue tee shirt, with upper arms that stretched the fabric of the sleeves. He had longish brown, wavy hair, and a full beard. Cheryl’s nipples got hard, too.

But it was the friendly, thoughtful, competent look in his brown eyes that arrested her. One look, and she wanted him to be her friend, too. She wanted to trust him with her life.

That was new territory for Cheryl, who expected to look out for herself, and, being uncommonly intelligent, was good at it. She liked men, but mainly thought of them as sex objects. The idea of wanting a man for anything else was new territory.

“Red, you have to find a professor to work with,” Doc continued. “I might be able to act as your advisor if you did it at ASU, or even at MIT. I’ve still got good connections there. But, it would be better if you could work with a regular faculty member.”

“In any case, remember that you’ve got your own funding. SST will fully fund your side of it. We could pay a research assistant, too, if you need one. I wouldn’t allow you to accept a stipend from the university if they offered it because we want SST to own all your research results. We might consider letting the university have a taste of the patent rights, but only a little one. Of course, all your tuition, books, and so forth would be paid for by SST in addition to your salary. It’s tax deductible for us. We’ll just make your research a sub-project under Wavelet development, and charge your tuition and books off to educational benefits. I think that’ll make the accountants happy, but who knows? They may have their own ideas, and I usually listen to them.”

“Cheryl, you’ll have to talk to Red about funds for your side of the project. It’s far enough outside our business mission that I can’t see funding it through SST. But don’t worry, she could buy SST with a month’s – no, a few day’s – receipts from her daddy’s oil company.”

“If you do your underwater stuff along the eastern seaboard, or in the Caribbean, Mark would likely loan you the *Mary*

*McKenna*, if you promise to wash her decks before you give her back. He'd probably let you take her up to the Great Lakes, too, which would be a happy hunting ground for you. You'd end up with great statistics with all the wrecks up there. The academic paper in *Journal of Archeological Science* would be a classic. It'd net you tenure before you even apply for the Harvard faculty."

"Think about using a small remotely operated sub. You should be able to find one to rent on the Internet. Again, it's pretty far afield for SST, although closer than funding archeological research. Your professor should be able to work that out, though. If you don't go apeshit on the archeology, a hundred footer, like Red's Dad's boat, should put you in good shape to fish a small ROV over the side and support the electronics you need. There'd be room to support a few divers, too."

"If you need it, SST could help you manage the data acquisition and processing. Obviously, we'd loan Red to you to crunch the numbers. Just make sure she's listed as an SST analyst on all the academic papers."

"Red, I encourage you to partially support Cheryl's research. Don't give her all of it, because she's got to learn to write grant proposals. You should learn that, too, so work on them together. Remember SST lives mostly on government research grants. If you're going to move up in this company, it's a critical skill."

"You will start, of course, by writing a grant proposal asking SST for money to cover Red's work. We'll grant it, and it'll be a very big feather in both your caps. I think you should both plan to beat the bushes for outside grant money, though, knowing that you'll be able to cover any shortfall yourselves. But, you want to lay down a track record of writing successful grant proposals."

"Red, you need to decide on a university. You girls both will have to take classes, so you'll each have to live near your university. You don't necessarily have to be near each other, though. I assume Cheryl's professor is at Harvard, so she'll be staying in the Boston area."

"You, though, have complete freedom. You could stay at Harvard. It might make sense to switch to MIT, in which case, you stay in Boston. Brown, down in Providence has a good computer science program, too, but that's too far to go for classes, so you'd have to move down there. Get a mansion down in Barrington. Get your chopper endorsement, and hop over Narragansett Bay to go to class. Then, on the other hand, there are good schools in the Chicago area, and in California."

"Of course, I'd love to have you come home with me, and go to ASU. Also, you could live up here, and take my plane down to the University of Arizona for classes, if that's what you want. We all miss you. But, that's your call."

"Anyway, shop around. Talk to some professors, and decide what you want to do. We'll help you make it happen."

"On a separate subject, I'm supposed to remind you of the big user conference in Austin in August. Bonnie can give you the

dates. Everybody – all the engineers and developers – here will be going. We expect you to go for the full week. Have Bonnie make the arrangements. Most will be staying at the Hyatt, where the conference headquarters are, but I can't pass up the Driskill. You can stay there, if you're addicted like me, or you can stay at the Hyatt where most of the action is."

"Does that help?"

"Yeah," Cheryl said. It was more than she'd expected.

"So, you think it will work?" Red asked. "I mean, using Wavelet to do what Cheryl wants to do."

"Can't be sure," Doc admitted, "but I sent her to you because I thought the odds were good. Don't get me wrong, it'll be a challenge, but if it wasn't, you couldn't get a doctorate out of it. You should know in a few months, then you'll come to me with celebration bells on, or you'll come to me with a sad kind of look to pull the plug."

"The only thing you haven't told us is what to do next," Red said.

"What are you going to do next, Grasshopper?"

Red smiled acknowledgement to Cheryl for having predicted Doc would throw it back to them. Doc saw it, and immediately realized what it meant, but said nothing.

"Cheryl, and I should immediately fly down to see Mark. Is he still in Florida?"

"As far as I know."

"Okay, I need to ask him for money, and he needs to meet Cheryl, so he knows who the money is for. We need to spend at least a day outlining what we're going to do. We need to be able to describe it clearly, or he'll think his daughter has turned into a moron. What do I tell him about Cheryl? He doesn't know her from Adam – or Eve."

"Tell him the truth, or as much of the truth as he needs to know. You don't have to tell him about your Saturday night sex parties when you were freshmen. He probably won't want to know. The same goes for Mary. I don't know what she'd think about it, if you told her. I see no need to, unless she asks."

"She'd probably think it was normal late-teen sexploration," Doc continued, "which it was. At worst, it'd just make her worry that you two were going to get married, and she'd never get her granddaughter. By the way, I've told her not to worry. I assured her you'll come through for her."

Red decided she didn't want to hear any more about that, so she deflected the subject.

"How much money should I ask for?"

"You need to estimate maximum, most likely, and minimum costs to complete the archeology. Don't forget Cheryl's stipend, and money for anyone else you think you'll need. Then, set realistic goals for what you can wheedle out of which funding agencies. You might call someone at Wood's Hole who's mounted this kind of expedition before."

"Don't forget to include the Discovery Channel in your grant proposals. Red, they really like you after the McKenna-mystery program. Call up Tamara. Get yourselves famous for being more than rich and cute. You don't have to do it before you talk to Mark, though."

Tamara Jones was the documentary producer who'd made a program about Red's search for her father. Doc had fronted the money to do it, and sold it to the Discovery Channel, where it aired to rave reviews.

"In the end," Doc continued, "I'd be amazed if you didn't end up needing at least a hundred grand from Mark, but you'd be a disappointment if your shortfall was more than half a mil. But, you need to justify your numbers. I'm just telling you what I think he'll expect."

"Thanks," Red said. "Waddaya think? Two days to write it all up, then fly down to Miami? Spend the weekend on the boat?"

"Good idea," Doc responded. "Let me know for sure when you've got it set up. I'd like to sit in on your dog-and-pony show, too."

"Doc," Cheryl asked with a concerned voice, "what's Red's Dad going to think about her dropping by to ask for half a million dollars? Is there a chance we'll get it?"

"Cheryl, it happens to rich people all the time. Red gets three or four proposals like this a day. They come to us because we've made sure nobody knows how to contact her. It drives our receptionist nuts. She keeps threatening to add Red to the automated phone system: 'For Sales, press three. For Red McKenna, press one six three two five nine seven,' and say it really fast, so they can't write it down or remember it. Or, make it easy, and send it to a dead-end voice mailbox that automatically erases after five minutes. You two would really have to come off looking like idiots to blow it. If you can't use your money to help your only daughter get her Ph.D., what's the shit good for? Red's kids will do it to her, too."

"But, the money's really for me."

“No, Cheryl, the money’s for Red to give to you. The dog-and-pony show is to show how much she’s learned, and to give Mark something to brag about to his friends. He’ll talk about this over drinks until his friends don’t want to listen anymore. Make sure you give him something to say about how smart Red’s friend is. In fact, give him a lot to say about you.”

“Okay, thanks,” Cheryl said, stunned with gratitude.

After they’d broken the connection, Cheryl asked Red: “Are you gonna accept?”

“Accept the money? Of course.”

“No, dummy, his proposal.”

“What proposal?” Red asked, as if she didn’t know.

“Doc asked you to marry him. What do you think ‘I’d love to have you come home with me’ means?”

Red wished he hadn’t done it in front of Cheryl. It made things more awkward. Maybe that was the idea.

“No, I’m not going to accept,” Red announced, defiantly. “I’ve been down this road with him, before. I want him as a friend, not a husband. And, that’s final. In fact, I plan to stay right here.”

“You’re fuckin’ nuts! Hey, if you don’t want him, can I put in my bid?”

“Knock yourself out. Now, it’s time to call Mom and Mark. But, this I’ll do by plain old telephone. I’ve had enough of this teleconferencing thing.”

Red pulled out her cellphone, and speed dialed Mark’s office number.

“Hello, Irene. This is Red, is Mark available? ... I want to come for a visit. I’ve a favor to ask him. It’s a big favor, and deserves a face-to-face. Plus, I want to wheedle a boat trip out of him. ... Will he be back by Friday? ... It’ll take about an hour to really explain what I’m on about. I think I’ve found a thesis project. I want to explain it to him, and, frankly, I want to ask him for some money. ... I don’t know how much, yet. We’ve still got to rough out a budget. We’ll have it in a couple of days, and I’d like to talk to him Friday, or over the weekend. ... If possible, I’d like to fly down Thursday, and stay through Sunday, then fly back Monday. It’ll be me, and my research partner. ... It just came up today. She’s an old friend of mine from school. We were roommates in freshman year. ... It’s a long, involved story, but she looked up Doc Manchek about his software, and he sent her to me. Doc’s already promised to throw in some grant money. I was hoping Mark would help out, too. ... Doc’s covering my side of the project, so he can

own the rights to anything I do, but I was hoping Mark would promise me enough to cover any shortfall in her grant money. ... I can't do the project without her. ... She's a marine archeologist, and wants me to adapt Doc's Wavelet program to calculate what happens to shipwrecks in a storm. ... Well, I explained it to Doc a few minutes ago, and he said he'd cover my side of it. ... Yeah, Mark would be giving it to me, so I could cover any shortfall in her grants. ... Three o'clock Eastern on Friday? That would be perfect. You're sure it won't screw things up for him? ... Thanks. Can you patch me through to Mom? ... Thanks."

"So far so good," she said to Cheryl. "We've got a meeting with Mark on Friday at three o'clock."

"Hello, Mom? It's Judy. ... It looks like I'll get to come down this weekend, if you've got room for two. ... I think I've found a project for my doctorate. ... I told Doc about it, and he seems to think it's a winner. ... We've set a meet with Mark Friday afternoon to ask him to throw in some money for the project. ... Well, it depends on what you call a lot. For Cheryl, my research partner, it's a lot. For us, it's probably going to be pocket change. ... She's coming, too. We're going to explain the whole thing to Mark on Friday, and she's an important part of it. ... Of course we'll stay on the boat. We plan to fly down Thursday, and stay through the weekend, if you'll have us. Doc's coming, too, but I'm sure he'll stay on his boat. ... A party Saturday night? Sounds like a blast. Do you think we'll have time to go shopping down there, or should we bring dresses? ... Okay. I'll coordinate travel arrangements with Irene. ... It'll be Thursday afternoon, probably mid-afternoon. ... Sure, lunch would be great! I think it'll be about a three hour flight, and we'll leave whenever we want. I'll have to check with the charter service, but we should be able to get there by noon. ... Great! I'll call you when we get things set. ... I'll book everything through SST because tightwad Manchek has loosened his purse strings for it, so I might not have final plans until tomorrow. ... I want to get back here before rush hour on Monday, so we should probably take off before noon. ... I'll let you know. ... We've got plans to celebrate tonight, so he probably won't be able to get through. He could try my cellphone, or call me in the morning. We'll be here working on our project plans. ... Okay. Love you too, Mom. See you Thursday."

"Have you got a bikini?" she asked Cheryl.

"I've a two-piece swimsuit, if that's what you mean."

"No, I mean three postage stamps and some string. You're going boating in Miami Beach this weekend – with Doc. It's over a hundred degrees, and the supermodels will be dropping their tops like, like, I don't know – bird shit from sea gulls. Better get up on the roof, and fill in those tan lines, girl."

"On the roof?" Cheryl asked. Things were starting to move too fast for her, and she was having trouble keeping up.

"You haven't seen my little rooftop spa! Hot tub, wet bar, chaise lounge, and a ten-foot privacy fence. Just what we need for

relaxing under the stars, and getting rid of tan lines under the sun. Why don't you check it out while I call Bonnie to make travel arrangements. What's your address – for the limo Thursday morning?"

"Girl, I'm staying here Wednesday night. It'll be that much less confusion."

"Cheryl, I've only got the one bed," Red explained.

"We'll work something out," Cheryl said. "I'll sleep on your front stoop if I have to, but I'm not going all the way to Chelsea, then get limoed all the way right past here on the way to the airport. There'll be enough trouble as it is."

"No trouble. Why would there be trouble?"

"I don't know what airline you'll use, but we'll have to get to Logan a couple of hours early to make it through security. I think you're awfully ambitious to think we could get to Miami by noon."

"We aren't flying commercial. Didn't you hear me mention the charter service?"

"Yeah. I didn't understand that."

"Cheryl, Doc would not *allow* me to fly on a commercial airline! We will get up at around six o'clock, brush our teeth, wash our behinds, and take a ten minute limo ride to whatever executive charter service Bonnie chooses, *not* the commercial terminal."

"It'll take us five minutes to get through security, and that's if it's a bad day. Then, we'll be whisked out to our jet by the pilots, who will carry our bags for us. When we get onboard the plane, which we'll have all to ourselves, a flight attendant will serve us a fabulous breakfast."

"Approximately three hours later, we'll arrive at some airport near Miami, probably Miami International, but maybe not. We will most definitely *not* pull up to the airline terminal. It will be a small, private terminal serving corporate jets. We'll pull up right near the fence. The pilots will unload our bags, while we meet my mother."

"Darrell will pick up our bags, and throw them into the trunk for us. Then, he will take us to whatever restaurant Mom picks for a fabulous lunch. I plan to do significant damage to a club sandwich, but we'll see when we get there. Then, Mom will take us on a shopping spree to get party dresses for Saturday night, and whatever else we need, such as your string bikini."

"Okay, who's Darrell?"

“Our chauffeur, and Mom’s outside bodyguard. He’s also my pal. Taught me all I know about classic cars.”

“And what’s on Saturday night?”

“The Yacht Club’s having a soiree. Lots of rich, eligible guys for us to play with. Buy a sexy party dress.”

“I plan to be playing with Doc by then, with your permission, of course.”

“Yes, you have my permission,” Red said. She felt a little twinge, but refused to acknowledge it. “I recommend buying a dress that makes it easy for you to rub your boobs on his chest. I’ve done it. It’s very gratifying.”

“Don’t grind your teeth when you talk about him like that,” Cheryl advised. “You’ll wear them flat.”

“I did not grind my teeth!”

“Did so!”

To avoid getting into an infantile contest, Red broke off the exchange: “The only other piece of information I need from you right now is, what do you want for breakfast on the plane?”

“What do they have?”

“They’ll have whatever you order. That’s why I want to know now, so they can go shopping for it.”

“Is this, like, first class?” Cheryl asked, beginning to get the idea.

“This makes first class look like a dog kennel. What do you want?”

“I dunno. Bacon, and eggs?”

“What about steak, and eggs? Doc’s paying for it. I’ve become addicted to eggs Benedict, myself.”

“Steak, and eggs it is.”

“Whole wheat toast? I’d skip the potatoes,” Red suggested, looking at Cheryl’s waistline above her jeans. Sexy-flat, but not exactly six-pack abs.

Cheryl noticed Red’s eye line, and asked: “Do you think I’m fat?”

“No, but if you want to catch Doc’s eye, you’ll be competing with supermodels down there.”

“What do I do?”

“Don’t worry about it. You’re in way better shape than anyone down there, except the supermodels, and my mom. But, if you’re going to hang out with me, you’re going to spend some time in the gym,” she said, pointing to the door behind which sat her equipment. “A bunch of situps, and some weight training will tighten all that up, fast. Go light on the pasta, tonight. We’ll put you on high-protein tomorrow.”

“Thanks, I think,” Cheryl said.

“Now, go check out my little spa upstairs while I call Scottsdale. Then, we’ll go get your last pasta meal for a while.”

## 4

Hours later, Red and Cheryl got back to the apartment with full bellies, and a load of groceries from the produce stand. To avoid wind tangles, Cheryl had plaited her hair into one long braid that hung half way down her back. When Red bought the motorcycle, she took Doc's advice, and bought a spare helmet in case she ever wanted to bring a passenger. It had sat on the top shelf in her front closet for weeks, but came in handy, now.

"Thank you, Doc," Red had said into the sky, as if her words would merge with the Universal Tao, and somehow float down to Doc like one of his mystical hunches. For all she knew, it would. She had no idea what this strange form of Zen that Doc had introduced her to was capable of.

Mark had called on her cellphone in the middle of their meal. The restaurant was crowded and noisy, but Red had taken the phone outside to talk.

There wasn't much to say that Irene hadn't already told Mark. It was more a way to make a father-daughter connection. He said he was pleased she'd found a doctoral thesis project. Of course he'd give her anything she wanted, and he was looking forward to meeting Cheryl, and hearing all about it. He wouldn't get back until Friday morning, but that would give Red a chance to have a just-us-girls day with her mother.

He was glad Doc would be there, too. He could help her a lot with all aspects of the project. Mark suggested Red twist Doc's arm to take them out on his boat. "You'd be amazed how fast that thing can get to the Bahamas!"

Back at her apartment, Red put the earrings she'd worn to lunch back in. She'd switched back to the gold studs to avoid tangling them in her helmet on the motorcycle. Her "date," after all, was really a close female friend. She wasn't trying to be especially attractive. Their after-dinner plans were, she told herself, more a fun frolic to thank her watchers for their vigilance. She wasn't really *attracted* to Cheryl. Not in a sexual way. Certainly not, she told herself.

Walking back to the living room, where she assumed the security cameras were most likely to be, she said to the air: "Dave, and Ralph, I hope you're listening, and can watch, because this is for you guys to thank you for taking good care of me."

She stood in the middle of the room next to Cheryl, with her left arm locked into Cheryl's left, so they stood side-by-side, but facing opposite directions. She had the zipper on her red leather jumpsuit pulled all the way up, which hid her squashblossom

necklace. Cheryl had her leather jacket on and zipped to the top, too. It was the classic double-breasted Eisenhower style, with the zipper crossing her chest from lower left to upper right. Cheryl usually wore her jacket zipped half way up, with collar up in the back, and the wings folded down to form lapels with the top part of the jacket flaps. Zipping it all the way up covered her front completely while allowing the collar to stand up in its usual way.

They'd put on some soft slow-dance music instead of the Bon Jovi Red initially suggested. This allowed them to do a slow strip.

"I'd like to introduce you to Cheryl," Red said to the air. "She was my roommate during my freshman year. We'd like to show you what we used to do on Saturday nights, when nobody was around." As she made her speech, the two women moved around counterclockwise so that the presumed watchers could see what they were doing, no matter where the presumed hidden cameras were.

Cheryl stepped away to sit on the couch, while Red began dancing seductively. She slowly slid the zipper on her jumpsuit down to her navel to display the squash blossom necklace hanging between the twin curves of her breasts. She opened the collar wide to show the full effect, and made a couple of slow turns.

Satisfied that any watchers had gotten a good look, she reached with crossed arms in through the zipper to cup each breast with a gloved hand, and began massaging them. She continued until she, herself, was thoroughly excited, then sat down on the couch to give Cheryl a turn.

Cheryl then slow danced for a few turns, then began unzipping the front of her jacket. As the zipper reached half way, the lapels fell open to show that she had nothing on under it, except a liquid silver necklace that she'd borrowed from Red hanging over her ample breasts with her tight cleavage centered in the oval formed by the necklace.

After dancing a few turns to show off her cleavage, she lowered the zipper all the way to the belt closing the jacket's hem. This allowed her cleavage to open so that the necklace fell in between her breasts, and for the first time revealed a silver navel ring in her pierced navel. She massaged her breasts with her bare hands over the jacket for a few turns.

Now, Cheryl reached in on each side with bare hands to massage her breasts. After a few turns, she undid the belt, and leaned slightly forward to show her breasts hanging free under the jacket while she massaged them. When she, too, was excited, and near orgasm, she traded places with Red again.

Red started where she'd left off, with both hands massaging her breasts. At first, she massaged them with her hands, now sans gloves, outside the leather. Then, crossing her arms, she reached inside.

After a few slow turns, she zipped her jumpsuit down all the way, which exposed the top of her fiery red pubic hair. This allowed her to open her jumpsuit front to completely expose her breasts, which she resumed massaging, paying special attention to her now highly erect nipples, which she excited further by brushing the tips with the palms of her hands, fingers outstretched.

When Red judged her purported audience had gotten their fill of seeing her massage her breasts, she reached into the jumpsuit with the fingers of her right hand, to massage her clitoris. Whoever designed the jumpsuit had planned for just this activity, putting the zipper's tail low enough to provide easy access for anyone who would care to massage the wearer's genitalia.

She massaged her clitoris for several minutes, then curved her hand, and pushed her middle finger deep into her vagina. As she massaged inside, her hand was hidden up to the wrist by the red leather, but it was clear to see by the movement of the bulges her knuckles made in the material what she was doing. When she started to climax, she pulled her fingers out, and went over to sit on the couch.

Cheryl had already stripped off her jeans. Anyone paying attention to her on the couch, instead of Red's dance, would have seen that Cheryl was not wearing panties under the jeans. So, when she stood up, she wore only the jacket, and a pair of black high heels, which she'd brought in her knapsack for no apparent reason.

She began massaging her breasts with her hands inside her jacket again, and brought them out to show that she was specifically rolling, and stretching the nipples to maximum erection. Then, she pushed her left breast up to point the nipple toward her mouth, and stuck out a surprisingly long tongue to lick it several times. Then, she did the same with the right.

Going back, and forth several times, she started to kiss one nipple, then the other. Finally, she sucked the right nipple deep into her mouth, and held it there, flicking it inside her mouth with her tongue. When she released it, it was visibly engorged and rubbery, sticking out over an inch beyond her breast.

Then, she did the same with her left nipple.

She went back and forth a few times, until both nipples were almost purple, and she was ready for an orgasm. This, she induced by rubbing her middle finger rapidly over her clitoris. The orgasm splattered all over Red's hardwood floor.

Momentarily spent, Cheryl sat down on a towel she'd placed on Red's leather couch cushions. She'd seen Red have orgasms before.

Red stood up, and went back to massaging her nipples, exposed through the open front of her jumpsuit. She figured there was no way she could get one into her mouth, but she made a major effort to reach them, one by one, with the tip of her tongue.

Cheryl was surprised at how long and nimble Red's tongue was, and made a mental note to discover how that had happened. Perhaps her friend wasn't as naïve about women as she let on.

Now thoroughly excited, Red pushed the jumpsuit back off her shoulders, so that it slid down her back exposing her upper arms to the elbows. The tight arm zippers kept the sleeves from sliding down past her wrists, leaving her hands unencumbered, but the collar now hung down to the small of Red's back. This provided enough slack to allow Red to push the garment's torso down until she was exposed in front, nearly to her knees.

Squatting to spread her knees, she began massaging her clitoris furiously until she exploded in one of her patented Niagara Falls orgasms, which poured out, wetting the jumpsuit crotch hanging between her knees and adding to what Cheryl had already spattered on the floor.

In case the boys that they assumed were looking didn't have a good angle on that performance, she stood up, turned one-hundred-eighty degrees, squatted down, and did it again. But, this time, when she started to climax, she pushed three fingers into her vagina so that the juice flowed down her fingers, and filled her cupped palm. When it stopped, she brought her cupped palm up to her mouth, and slurped her own orgasm out.

She'd never even considered doing anything like that before, but the idea just came to her. She was sure her assumed audience would have loved it. It was kinda fun, in an extremely naughty way, which was the whole idea of the evening, anyway. It didn't taste half bad.

Finally, she lapped her wet palm, and pushed the three wet fingers as deep as she could down her throat. Then, she began stroking them in and out of her throat, while walking in a circle so cameras anywhere in the room could see what she was doing.

"I want some of that," Cheryl cried, and, shucking her jacket, pranced out to where Red stood in the middle of the floor. First, she amazed Red by kneeling down, and lapping the orgasmic juices off the inside of Red's leathers. Then she reached into Red's crotch, and started rubbing her clit. Red reached out to Cheryl's shoulder for balance, and began squirming in ecstasy. When Red came, Cheryl caught the juice as Red had, slurped it, and lapped her palm.

Instead of sucking her fingers, though, she reached up and slid them into Red's mouth, then stroked them in and out of her throat. That brought Red to another, smaller orgasm. Red just dripped a little more into her leathers.

Letting Red rest, Cheryl started prancing around in a circle, stimulating her clit with her fingers. When she started climaxing, she attempted to keep moving in the circle. Instead of prancing, however, she could only manage kind of a spastic lurch, while

splattering orgasm over her hand, and the floor.

When she stopped, she wiped her orgasm-washed hand over her face, then performed fallacio on her fingers. Then, she stood in the middle of the floor, legs squatting slightly to spread her knees, and began masturbating again. Red, having taken the opportunity to step out of her jumpsuit, and put her high heels back on, backed against Cheryl's back so that they supported each other, and began masturbating as well. Because Red was a head taller than Cheryl, the latter could exaggerate her squat a little, and bring Red's buttocks into the small of her back. Thus, they could each feel the other's squirming and shuddering movements, which excited them more.

So, the two of them stood, pressing back to back, in the middle of Red's floor, vigorously rubbing their clits, and splashing repeated multiple orgasms on the floor. After a few minutes of this, they were exhausted, and dropped to the floor in the middle of the puddle.

"We never got to the produce," Red observed.

"Another time," Cheryl responded. "But, do you have just a leetle bit more for me?"

"I suppose I could try. What do you have in mind?"

"There's one thing you absolutely refused to do when we were at the dorm, which I would dearly love to do with you."

Red had an idea, but asked innocently: "What's that."

"Let me show you," Cheryl said, standing up, and walking toward the couch to rummage in her knapsack. She returned with a two-headed blue plastic dildo about eighteen inches long.

"Please?" she begged, displaying the thing to Red.

Red still felt pretty horny – she hadn't been kidding about feeling ready to fuck a chair – and by now, she was about ready for anything, so, she reached up, and pulled Cheryl down to her on the floor.

Red felt the plastic and found it to be glassy smooth, but in need of lubricating. Knowing that they, themselves, needed no lubrication, Red simply rolled the thing around in the puddle on the floor, then carefully wiped it off with her wet fingers to remove any bits of dirt or debris that might have been picked up. She knew her floors were clean, so she wasn't worried about picking up anything actually nasty.

Positioning themselves with legs forked, Red handed one end to Cheryl, and watched what she did, intending to copy her. Cheryl put her end just an inch inside her vaginal opening. Red put her end an inch inside her vaginal opening. Cheryl held the thing in the middle to stabilize it. Red held the thing in the middle to stabilize it. Cheryl hiked herself along the floor to get closer. Red hiked herself along the floor to get closer. They sucked in their breaths simultaneously. They hiked themselves closer simultaneously. They let out a “Woof!” of excitement simultaneously. Each grabbed the other’s hips and pulled. As their labia came together, they let out simultaneous cries of “Ohh!” and began barely voluntary coordinated pounding movements. At the “apo-” extreme, when their genitals were farthest apart, they felt the dildo nearly slipping out. At the “peri-” extreme, each one’s clit tapped lightly on the other’s labia, sending little electric shocks up their spinal columns to the pleasure centers of their brains.

Soon, their coordination became better with practice, while their consciousness became dimmer. They exploded in orgasm together as their genitalia came together. Their consciousness momentarily disappeared as a wave of orgasm overloaded their brains. They held each other tight as they pressed the dildo hard between them, pushing it hard against their cervixes.

After four repeats, they collapsed where they were, dildo still connecting them, hands still clasped to pull their crotches together. The difference was that they were now completely relaxed.

Red waved to the ceiling, and said, groggily: “Shows over, boys. Hope you had fun. We sure did.”

## 5

Ten minutes later, after what amounted to a short nap, the two women stirred themselves. After a friendly parting thrust, each slid her end of the dildo out of her vagina, and stood up. Taking the dildo from Cheryl's hand, Red threw it into the puddle disgustedly, and said: "Leave it! Now, I see why Doc has a live-in houseman. I don't want to even *think* of cleaning this up right now. Grab the wine and the glasses, I'll get some towels, and we'll go clean up in the hot tub on the roof. Last one in is a Slick Suzy."

They'd opened the wine to get brazen enough for their uninhibited performance. Now, they needed it as an anesthetic for abused muscles, and to help relax their over-excited minds.

Neither woman bothered to take off her jewelry, slip off her high heels, or wrap anything around her nakedness. Nobody had any business being on the top floor landing, anyway. They'd just treated the boys behind the cameras to a two-hour show, and didn't care what else they might see. The stairs to the roof opened strategically behind the privacy fence, so they just trudged up, slipped out of their shoes, and sank into the warm, chlorinated water.

Cheryl went up first, and when Red got there with the towels, was sunk up to her ears blowing bubbles through her nose. When she saw Red climbing into the tub, she spluttered up for air.

"That was fun, Baby," she smiled to Red. "You're still the best fuck buddy I've ever had."

"I hope that's a complement to me, not an insult to the others," Red replied.

"I had fun, too, Buddy," she continued, warmly.

Standing in the midriff-deep water at the tub's center, Red folded up her legs to sink rapidly to the bottom, then bobbed back up, with water cascading from her hair.

"I liked it a lot," Red repeated. "You're one of my best, too."

"But not *the* best?" Cheryl asked, slightly disappointed.

"Doc's cock is bigger," Red explained, "and you can get lost in the hair on his chest. You try it, and we'll compare notes. If you still think I'm the best I'll eat – something."

“If you don’t, I will,” Cheryl joked, grabbing Red between the legs.

“Stop it!” Red yelped. “I’m drained. I feel like a bathtub that’s had its plug pulled. I didn’t think a human body could produce so much cum!”

“Neither did I,” Cheryl agreed in amazement. “You are the world champion, babe.”

“Say,” she continued, “how’d you get that tongue so nimble? You can stretch it out farther than than most who don’t have a regular diet of pussy.”

“How did you do it?” Red countered. “I don’t ever remember seeing one as long as yours.”

“Practice, practice, practice! Remember, I’m bi, shading slightly toward girls. But, you’re supposed to be straight.”

“I think you’d have trouble convincing Dave and Ralph of that, now. But, you’re right. Except for our playing around, and a couple of close encounters of the distaff kind, I’ve avoided romantic entanglements with women.”

Remembering Doc’s warning, and Eve’s quick and complete conversion, Red added: “So far.”

“So, what’s with the tongue?”

“Remember, I said I’d had a couple of unsatisfactory affairs recently?” Red began. “The second was Greg. One of the things he really liked was to have his asshole tongued.”

Cheryl gave her a mildly surprised look.

“Don’t look at me like that! He loved it, and he kept it clean, so what the Hell? His tongue was pretty nimble, too, so who am I to complain.”

“Does Doc go in for that sort of thing?”

“Not that I know of. More likely if you surprised him with it, he’d bounce off the ceiling. It wouldn’t be his style. He’s actually pretty straight, for someone who’ll do just about anything a woman asks for. I asked to try anal sex with him, and he didn’t blink, just banged away like it was the most natural thing in the world.”

“Who says it isn’t?”

“Five thousand years of Judeo-Christian tradition,” Red pointed out.

“Our species reaches back over ten times that far. What do they know?” Cheryl pouted.

Seeing her reaction, Red realized that Cheryl took the entire history of the taboo against sodomy as a personal affront. Was there some personal history there? Back in the dorm, Cheryl had initiated their Saturday evening masturbation sessions when she came home bragging about having discovered anal sex, and wanted to demonstrate it. A lot of things could have happened to a free spirit like Cheryl in the three years since. Some of them can leave scars.

“Natural, or unnatural, Doc is rather protective of his asshole. I tried to stick my finger in it once, and he jumped about a foot. I think he’s about as queer as a twenty dollar bill.”

“Twenty dollar bills aren’t queer.”

“My point.”

“Is he uptight about it?” Cheryl asked, gathering information for future reference.

“Not really. He doesn’t like gays acting stupid. You know, playing at flitting around on little fairy wings, but he just thinks they’re being silly. It doesn’t bother him any more than watching a bad comedian tell poor self-deprecating jokes.”

“He has lots of gay friends of both sexes,” she continued, “and treats them as just people. He thinks lesbians show exceptionally good taste, and thinks anyone attracted to men – that’s you, and me, Bud – shows amazingly poor taste. He doesn’t like movies like *The Birdcage* because he thinks they make homosexuals appear queer. On the other hand, he thinks *Victor Victoria* is a stand-out classic. You can’t tell the characters’ sexual orientations until they *tell* you – like in real life. Actually, I think he’s more level-headed about it than anyone else I know.”

“Even though he tells you that you have poor taste because you like men?”

“Well, he’s right,” Red said, defending Doc’s opinion. “Think about it: women are sleek, soft, sinuously curvy, have beautiful faces, and so forth; whereas men are big, blocky, hard, and hairy. Take for example, body fat percentage. Your ideal bodybuilder with six-pack abs can have less than ten percent body fat. If a woman gets below fifteen percent body fat, it screws up her hormones. She risks losing her period until she packs on some flab.”

“That’s just to have kids,” Cheryl pointed out.

“Yeah, but that’s what our whole bodies are designed for. If you don’t keep the reproductive systems in good condition, your whole body falls apart. Look at all the problems women have after menopause. Believe me, no matter what militant feminists want to believe, you can’t escape Mommy Nature. If you try to be a man, Mommy Nature spank!”

“And, your point?”

“My point is that the whole sexual dimorphism thing means that men must be, relative to women, big, ugly brutes, while women are God’s gift to baroque artists and aesthetes everywhere. Yet, women like you and me are wired up to go out and drive ourselves nuts wagging our tails at men, just to be crushed under two-hundred-fifty pounds of bone, muscle, and sinew – and we love it!”

“Look what happened when you thought you might be a little too pudgie for Doc’s taste?,” Red reminded Cheryl. “You didn’t say: ‘Screw him, he’s an ugly brute, anyway.’ You said, and I quote: ‘What can I do?’ unquote. From any rational, aesthetic standpoint, that’s nuts. By sniffing around yummy men, we show extraordinarily bad taste.”

“But, the species would die out if we didn’t,” Cheryl complained.

“Of course. You know it. I know it. Doc knows it. Believe me, he’s very much in favor of the arrangement. He loves women, and is grateful when they love him. He just thinks they show poor taste in sex partners when they do. It just goes to prove his theory that most human behavior is totally irrational. We only *pretend* that it isn’t. When push comes to shove, humans chuck rationality right out the window and do exactly as Mommy Nature, in her infinite wisdom, programmed us to do.”

“So, why do I like women just that little bit better than men?”

“As Morgan Freeman said in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*: ‘Because Allah loves wondrous varieties.’ Mommy Nature programmed you with the ability to act on your good taste. Don’t worry, though. Doc would be perfectly happy to go girl-hunting with you. Look what happened when Eve Salazar wanted to go see strippers.”

“Yeah, he lost his girlfriend.”

“And, gained what he thinks is going to be a star employee. He is perfectly satisfied. He believes that we’re all going to do what we’re going to do, and anyone who complains is just asking for trouble. It’s his interpretation of ‘being in accord with the Tao,’ literally going with the flow.”

“Do you always believe what he says?”

“No, but unfortunately every time I don’t, I screw up. I haven’t yet caught him being wrong. I keep trying, though.”

Both women sat sipping their wine in silence for a while.

Red looked furtively at Cheryl, and said: “Cheryl, I want to try something.”

She took Cheryl’s glass, and put it on the hot tub’s wide edge, and put her own glass beside it. Then, she reached around Cheryl’s back with one arm, and around the other side with the other. Turning Cheryl to face her, she closed her eyes, and planted a soft, lingering kiss directly on Cheryl’s mouth.

Cheryl helped.

“Dammit! He was right again,” Red said, coming up for air. “Women’s lips don’t feel much different than men’s. Even the tits don’t feel much different than a man’s pects, just bigger.”

“I could have told you that,” Cheryl said.

“But, I wouldn’t have believed you. I would have imagined that it was some weird bisexual phenomenon that didn’t work for ‘straight’ women. I had to feel it for myself. Doc says that what matters is how you feel *about* the other person, not how the other person feels to you.”

“How do you feel about me?”

“I like you. I trust you. You’re pretty, and you’re smart, and obviously I like playing sex with you. I just don’t know about real sex with a woman.”

“Baby, there’s no ‘play’ sex, and ‘real’ sex. It’s all just sex. Face it, you and I just spent two hours fucking, and you loved every minute of it. What we did three years ago? Same thing.”

“Doc called that normal late-teen experimentation.”

“He was easing your feelings. From what I’ve heard, he’s way too smart to not know that the first time, it’s an experiment. If you come back for more, it’s plain old garden variety lust. You may not be a lesbian, but you sure like having sex with women.”

“So, I’ve really been a lesbian all along?”

“What would Doc say? I’ll bet he’s said something on the subject.”

“He doesn’t like words like, ‘lesbian,’ ‘bisexual,’ or ‘gay,’ when applied to a person. He says men are men, and women are women, no matter what their orientation. He’d say sex is between two people, and has nothing to do with labels. So, if a woman loves another woman, for example, it doesn’t really mean that the woman loves ‘women’ in general. It just means that she loves that particular woman. Next week, she might lose interest, and fall in love with that particular man, which wouldn’t mean she loved men in general, either. Am I making sense?”

“Yeah,” Cheryl agreed, “I hadn’t actually thought of it that way, but he’s absolutely right. Some women are beautiful, and some are homely. Some men are hot, while others are kinda scummy. If I like women a bit more than men, it’s not really because I like women more than men in general, but that there are more women I like than there are men. I’ll let you work out the math.”

“To Hell with the math,” Red said, “To Hell with lesbians, and straights, and all the rest, too. Cheryl, I think I love *you*.”

“Thanks,” Cheryl replied. “I know I’ve loved *you* for years.”

“Damn Doc!” Red said, pulling Cheryl close for another long, lingering kiss, which was cut short when they slipped off the edge of the bench, and sank to the bottom.

Spluttering up to the surface, they both laughed as they pushed wet hair out of their faces.

“Is that a message from Mommy Nature?” Cheryl wondered.

“Yeah,” Red replied sagely, “be careful you don’t slip off the edge of your seat in the hot tub. Bruised ribs can be the result. Ow!”

“Nothing about making out with your girlfriend being naughty? Anything like that?”

“No, I’ve done it reaching for a sandwich. My clit tells me that Mommy Nature approves of my making out with my girlfriend, ol’ fuck buddy.”

## 6

“Bud, is my daughter a lesbian?” Mary Shipton asked. “Be honest with me. I’ve seen the way you two look at each other, as if you share some intimate secret, and I think it’s that you’re lovers. Is that why she has so much trouble finding a man?”

Red had gone to the ladies room after eating more of her club sandwich than she’d intended – it was sooo good! And her mom took advantage of her absence to probe the woman she suspected of being her daughter’s girlfriend.

“I also know what her pet nickname for you means. Doc explained it to me after I dragged it out of him. It’s not just short for ‘Buddy,’ meaning ‘friend.’ It’s short for ‘Fuck Buddy,’ which means, obviously, lover. So, I know about it. I want to hear your side of it.”

“What does Doc say?” Bud, nee Cheryl, asked. “He probably knows more about her than anybody living. He watches her like a hawk. I wish somebody would look after me the way he looks after her.”

“He won’t use the L word,” Mary admitted, “and tells me not to worry.”

“I’d listen to him, but ask him why he doesn’t like the word. It sure changed the way I look at things.”

“But, what’s wrong with my daughter?”

“Actually, not very much. Generally, she’s a wonderful person, but right now, your daughter is a very confused young lady. She really wants to settle down, get married, and raise kids, and dogs, and the whole nine yards. And, she’ll do it.”

“The reason she can’t find a man is because she’s already found him: Doc. For some stupid-assed – pardon me – stupid reason, she’s rejected him as husband material. He asked her – probably for the four-hundred-fifty-seventh time – on Monday to marry him, and she wouldn’t even answer him. Just ignored it. I was there, and I saw the whole thing. I asked her afterwards, and she just said something like, ‘No, I want him as a friend, not a husband.’ It was the most ridiculous thing I ever heard, and I told her she was nuts.”

“Now, she’s in a double bind because every guy she meets has the same problem: he’s not Doc. So, she rejects them. Meanwhile, she’s totally ga-ga over Doc, can’t stop talking about him, and wants to be with him all the time. She just refuses to marry him. Frankly, I think she needs a good shrink.”

“She’s got one: Pat Dacy. I think you know her. She’s a behavioral psychologist, and apparently pays attention to every move Judy makes.”

“I’ve talked to her on the phone,” Bud said. “In fact, she’s the one who pushed me back into Red’s life. What does she say?”

“Basically what you’ve said. Judy is a very confused young woman, but don’t worry, she’ll work it all out. What’s your role in all this? What are your intentions?”

“If you’re asking if my intentions are honorable, they most certainly are not. I like sex, and Red’s the best sex I’ve ever had. While she works out her hangups, I plan to get as much of it as I can. At the same time, she’s stupidly hung a ‘Free to a Good Home’ sign on Doc, so I plan to get me some of that, too. When she figures out how much she really wants to marry Doc, I’ll arm wrestle her for him. But, I’ll lose. He’s no more serious about other women than I am about Red.”

“I’m getting confused. If you like Judy so much, why aren’t you serious about her?”

“She wouldn’t have me any more than any of the guys she’s already rejected. I have the same problem: I’m not Doc, either. Right now, she’s just noticed that sex with a woman isn’t half bad. It’s not icky, or gross, the way straight women try to tell themselves. So, she’s just come out of the closet, and is playing with a whole new set of toys. Pretty soon, she’ll lose interest, and I’ll just become another ‘bad experience.’”

“You know what I think?” Bud speculated. “I think this Pat woman expects me to do exactly what I’m doing: go after Doc while fucking – I mean, making love – with your daughter. I figure she figures that’ll jolt Red out of her stupidity. I think she’s right, which is why I’ve no qualms about doing it. You see, I was Red’s best friend long before we started playing ‘Hide the Cucumber’ in the dorm.”

Bud let Mary sit in stunned silence until she had time for all this to sink in. Then, she reinforced it by saying: “You see, you, and I are on the same team. We both want Red to get up off her pink, freckled ass, and start making you a granddaughter with Doc. The difference is that I’m in a position to have one helluva good time doing something about it.”

“Isn’t that a dangerous game?” Mary asked, still not sure she approved.

“It is for Red. If she’s stupid enough to let me win, I’ll be the one making babies with Doc. You see, the kids and puppies lifestyle is starting to look good to me, too. But, that won’t happen. My best friend, Red, has a whole lot more on the ball than to wreck this setup.”

“So, what should I do?”

“Turn a blind eye. Pretend you don’t see a thing. Above all, don’t pester her about marrying Doc. She gets that too much. I think that’s half of her problem. Every conversation with any of her friends seems to end with ‘Why won’t you marry Doc?’ I think she’s digging her heels in against the pressure. You know, maybe we should try to fix her up with somebody else?”

“Maybe,” Mary agreed. “It shouldn’t be hard. This is what they call a ‘target-rich environment’ for eligible bachelors, and Judy’s turned out to be as attractive as they come.”

“It’s in the genes. You aren’t so bad, yourself. If you ever want to try the other side of the street, let me know.”

Blushing, and a little nervous, Mary said in measured tones: “You’re a very pretty girl, but you’re not my type.”

“Oh, who is?”

“My husband.”

Grinning, Bud concluded: “Then it’s okay! Oh, here comes Red.”

“What have you been talking about behind my back? I saw that wicked grin of yours, Bud. And, Mom, you look pretty pleased with yourself, too.”

“We’ve been plotting how to get you laid this weekend,” Bud said, not entirely truthfully.

Red was a little unhappy about this. Here was her new lover talking about getting her laid – presumably with a man. What could that mean?

Seeing the look on Red’s face, Bud backpedaled. “Hey, lover, it’s not like that.”

Seeing Red start, and look guiltily at her mother, Bud did some more shuffling: “Don’t worry, she knows about us. She figured it out in the first thirty seconds. She’s cool with it, as long as I help find you somebody to give her a granddaughter.”

The clouds gathering around Red’s head looked a little less ominous. They lightened from imminent rain to uncertain.

“Or, are you planning to renege on your offer to let me make a run at Doc this weekend? I won’t do it, and leave my best friend sitting like a wallflower. Or, are you thinking of making it a threesome? I’m sure Doc wouldn’t mind.”

Red glanced quickly at her mother's face, afraid of what she might think. She was surprised to read encouragement there. What Red didn't know is that Mary was thinking that it might prove a shortcut to her ultimate goal. Being a very practical woman, she had no compunction against throwing convention to the wind, if it was sufficiently in her interest to do so.

Red's clouds turned to the fair-weather type, and her nipples grew erect at the thought of some spectacularly naughty sex play, with the added bonus of very naughty approval from her mother.

"Okay, but no three way with Doc. I draw the line at incest!"

Confused, and shocked, Mary wondered what the incest crack was all about.

"Oh, Mary," Bud explained, laughingly, "Red has this big-brother, little-sister fantasy going with Doc. Maybe you haven't seen them at it. I think it's kinda cute."

With a change of tone, she added: "It's harmless." Meaning that it was harmless to Mary's and Bud's strategic goal. Mary should just stay out of it.

"I haven't seen them together since ... You know, I don't think I've ever seen them together."

"We'll change that," Bud said in a prophetic tone. By way of explanation, she added: "Doc's supposed to show up either tonight, or tomorrow morning. He's flying his plane in from Arizona, right, Red?"

"Yes. Unless something happens to mess up his plans, he'll arrive around dark," Red informed them. "From the way the weather looks, that won't be a problem. Maybe after we're done here, we should open the boat up for him."

"That'd be fun," Bud offered. "We'll sit out in deck chairs getting swacked while waiting for him. What say? Have a warm cognac waiting for him when he arrives?"

"After a ten-hour flight, more like a boilermaker," Red responded. "Mom, how's Mark's liquor cabinet stocked for Bass ale? Or, maybe we should pick up a six pack. There's probably Jack Daniels on the boat already."

Mary wasn't quite sure what these girls planned, and whether she'd be a third – no, fourth – wheel.

"Mom," Red said, "you come, too. It'll be a girls' party until Doc comes, then we can slip away when Bud completes her forward pass."

“You mean ‘if.’ You’ll be there for moral support if I fumble,” Bud cautioned.

“I’ll be there, but for Doc’s moral support,” Mary said. “After ten hours at the controls of that plane, he’s going to beat. I’ll be there to run interference, so the poor man can get some rest. Remember, he was *my* friend long before you seductresses ever heard of him.”

Their plotting for the next twenty-four hours completed, Mary paid the check, and they headed off to search Miami Beach for party dresses. Red conceived of a take-off from Eve and Gwen’s matching anti-twins outfits that they wore to their coming-out celebration dinner with Red and Doc, where Red, Gwen, and Eve got so drunk, but Mary put the kaibosh on that. She wasn’t going to blow Son-in-Law Plan B by letting the old biddies at the Yacht Club decide that her daughter was a lesbian, and therefore off limits to their rich, eligible sons and grandsons. She planned to give them both a good talking to about discretion at the next opportunity.

In the meantime, she dressed them up to look quite differently, while guaranteeing excess salivation among the available boys. Mary explained to her seamstress that both outfits were to be one-piece bathing suits with matching long skirts. Dressed with proper jewelry, which she’d make sure both wore, the outfits would fit in at a semi-formal dance, but could be converted to the sexiest one-piece swimsuits any she-devil ever conceived by simply dropping the skirts and doffing the jewelry.

Red’s fire-engine red suit (to match the color of her freckles) started out with the halter collar that both Red and her mother loved. Instead of flaring from the breast down, however, it narrowed to cover the vee of her crotch. Wrapping up through her crotch, it flared out in the back to blend into a supporting belt around the narrowest part of her waist. The skirt zippered underneath the belt to look like one long dress, not the two piece garment it actually was. It wrapped around, opening at the front to provide peeks at Red’s long, shapely legs at every step when she walked. It also made covering her legs when sitting down virtually impossible. Strategically placed snaps closed the top of the skirt’s front to complete the illusion of a very revealing dress, rather than a skirt over a bathing suit. It could also be worn separately as a long skirt. They chose a fabric for the skirt with a southwestern-inspired print in red, blue, and gold.

Bud’s swimsuit was a yellowish off-white that matched the color of her hair. As Bud’s skin tanned to an even, tawny bronze color, as opposed to Red’s bright red freckles, the yellow color appeared light against the darker background of her skin, making the tan look exotic.

Bud’s suit, too, hung from a halter collar, but was fuller in the front to allow her larger breasts to move under the fabric. It was cut low enough so that each of her breasts was enclosed separately in a pleated bosom. A horizontal seam at the midriff made it possible for the suit’s lower portion to lie flat against Bud’s stomach, to display its flatness in contrast to the overhang of her breasts. Bud’s stomach was soft only in comparison with Red’s six-pack abs.

From there, the suit flared out to form a conventional panty-shaped bottom, with leg holes cut above her hips. Bud's skirt didn't hang from the suit, but from its own belt, intended to cinch around the narrowest part of her waist, and hang in folds down to her ankles. The open seam was also intended to hang down in front, with similar snaps to enhance the illusion that it was a one-piece dress, rather than a skirt over a swimsuit. The fabric had vertical stripes of yellow to match the swimsuit, a tawny orange to match Bud's skin color, and white to set off the other colors.

Both women ended up with high-heeled sandals colored to match their swimsuit tops.

That excess pubic hair would have to go, Mary decided. Let 'em shave each other if they had to, as long as they did it in the bathroom, and pulled the blinds. Mary McKenna Shipton knew the difference between perception and reality, and that each had its place.

Mary decided that both girls needed proper, provocative two-piece suits to wear right away. So, they ended up with very similar ones whose bottoms were little more than G-strings, and whose tops were small, nipple covering triangles hung from strings. Once again, Mary dressed her daughter in fire-engine red, and her daughter's girlfriend in bright yellow.

To keep the girls from being fried to a crisp, She bought wraps made of thin silk-like acetate the color of the suits. Both cover-ups were cut similarly, with three-quarter length flowing sleeves. She topped these with straw hats with wide, flat brims, and rounded crowns. A scarf featuring the appropriate color served as a hat brim for each.

Satisfied that her daughter and her daughter's friend would attract a maximum of the right kind of attention, she packed her off-the-rack purchases into the limo's trunk. Darrell would come back to pick up the completed dresses Friday afternoon. That would leave Saturday to correct any errors that might occur. Finally, she had Darrell drive them all back to the *Mary McKenna*, where she shoved the girls into her private bathroom to get properly shaved.

Once the girls were properly trimmed and inspected, Mary gave them approval to appear on deck. Used to living on her own, Bud felt uncomfortable being bossed around by a woman she'd met only a few hours ago, but she was patient to support Red. Red, on the other hand, loved having her mother fuss. It reminded her that somebody really cared.

Before letting them loose, however, Mary read them the riot act about discrete behavior.

"Coming out of the closet, gay pride, and all that may be very fashionable in Boston, but it ain't a-gonna cut it in this marina. Judy, if you aren't going to accept Doc Manchek's proposal – Don't give me that look! I know he's proposed a bunch of times, and you keep refusing. – If you aren't going to say 'yes,' and I mean the minute he steps on the dock, you'd better look to your other

options.”

“The cream of the crop, as far as options go, are right outside this hull,” she continued. “But, so are their old biddy mothers and grandmothers. If any of those old bats get the idea that you two are lovers, they’ll lock all those options up in the towers where they keep their sisters. Do you get my drift?”

“Yes, Mom.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You, Miss Fuck Buddy, have free reign to ball anything in Miami Beach with a penis. Hell, you can get away with fondling their sisters, too. But if you have any regard for your girlfriend here, give her a fighting chance, and don’t mess with her. I understand you two have an arrangement regarding the private parts of Doc Manchek. That works for me, although I wish your roles were reversed.”

“And you, Miss Nothing-With-A-Penis-Measures-Up are *required* to get your field properly plowed at every opportunity. I hope you’ve brought a supply of condoms. If not, tell me now, and we’ll fix it.”

“Yes, Mom. I have, Mom,” Red reported.

“Okay, now. Robes are over there. Your luggage is in your staterooms. Judy, you know where they are. Yours, and the one immediately aft for Bud. Get out of here, get presentable, and I’ll meet you on the bridge deck for supper in ... ” she checked her watch “ ... twenty minutes. Then, we’ll go plan a surprise for our intrepid flyboy. In the meantime, I’ll call the airfield to get an ETA for Darrell to pick him up.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Red kissed her.

“Thanks from me, too,” Bud said, and offered to shake her hand. Mary, instead, kissed her cheek, and pushed her toward the door. She could see why Judy liked this girl. She had a lot of good qualities beneath the raunchy act.

## 7

“Well, this is the prettiest this cockpit has looked since I-don’t-know-when,” Doc effused when he reached the gangplank. He was still wearing his flight suit and carrying his flight bag, which appeared more empty than full. After crossing the gangplank to the gunwale, he did a nimble step-step from the gangplank, to the transom seat, to the cockpit deck, dropping his flight bag on the cushioned transom seat, and hardly rocking the boat at all.

“Is that for me?” he asked unnecessarily, pointing to the pint mug of rich brown liquid, with a double-shot glass of clear amber liquid next to it on the white plastic folding table. The ladies had poured them as soon as they saw Darrell driving the limo through the marina’s security gate.

“Let me get out of this space suit, and then I’ll join you. Thanks.” Then, he disappeared through the cabin door to belowdecks.

Pointing with a nod of her head toward a man standing on the dock nearby trying to look inconspicuous, Bud asked her companions: “Who’s that guy?” The man was tall, and thin – almost gaunt – with a hawklike nose, short-cropped black wavy hair, thick-rimmed glasses, and a dark complexion. He wore a white polo shirt, which accentuated the darkness of his skin, kaki trousers, and rubber-soled leather running shoes. “He’s been by here twice tonight. Now, he’s just standing there.”

Red had noticed him as well, but knew nothing about him, either. Mary, whose back was to the dock, had to turn around. When she did, she recognized him immediately.

“Suby,” she said, “what are you doing lurking around here. Come on over and say Hi!”

Smiling when he recognized Mary, the man walked shyly to the gangway end and asked: “Permission to come aboard?” in a thick, diffident Indian accent.

“Certainly, come on over. Judy, can you find Suby another deck chair?”

Doc appeared in the cabin door just as Suby settled into the fifth deck chair. Red had moved the one reserved for Doc closer to Bud’s to make room for Suby’s next to hers. Suby immediately stood up with a slight bow.

“Sit! Sit!” Doc said. “My name’s Mike Manchek, but most people call me ‘Doc.’ I’m the skipper of this little piece of flotsam.”

Not yet sitting down, and with another slight diffident nod, Suby introduced himself: "I am Subramanian, but my friends call me 'Suby.' I own that Sea Ray in the last slip."

"Suby joined the club a few weeks ago," Mary explained, "and has been coming down every weekend. He's been here a lot more this week because he's on vacation."

"Yes, pardon my intrusion, but I was wondering what kind of man has three such beautiful creatures to open up his boat for him before he even arrives. Why is he so lucky while the rest of us are so poor. I did not see that one of the lovely ladies was my friend's wife, Mary."

Dropping into his deck chair, Doc said: "It doesn't usually happen, but it isn't quite as cozy as it looks." he began his own version of introductions: "You clearly know Mary; her daughter, who is also my little sister, is called Red; and this is Red's research partner, Bud." He said indicating the women in turn.

Doc had chosen to boycott Cheryl's nickname because he considered it to be inappropriate. Knowing that she preferred it, however, and would want Suby to use it, he cavalierly ignored his own rule, as he did any rule he felt like ignoring. Knowing that Cheryl would want to be introduced as "Bud," he introduced her as "Bud."

It took Suby a few seconds to work out the wording of Doc's introduction of Red. Clearly, she was Mary's daughter, and clearly Doc was not Mary's son. Yet, he called Red his little sister. Suby reached the erroneous conclusion that they were half siblings. He knew that Mark was Mary's second husband, but where did Doc fit in? He decided to leave the question unanswered in the interest of sanity. He realized that American families broke up and rearranged more freely than Indian families, and it was best to wait for facts to emerge before drawing conclusions.

Seeing Suby's perplexion, Doc assured him: "Don't worry about it, Suby. You step through the looking glass when you come aboard this boat."

This did not explain anything, but it did assure Suby that he wasn't supposed to be following everything that was going on.

"What will you have?" Mary stepped in as hostess, being ranking female at their little tea party. "We have wine, whisky, and ale out. I don't know what Doc has hidden away."

"There should be a couple thousand gallons of diesel fuel around here someplace," Doc quipped, facetiously looking around the deck as if to locate it.

“Doc, be nice. Suby doesn’t know you like we do,” Mary scolded.

“Okay ... I almost said ‘Mistress Judith,’ which is what I call Red when she bosses me around,” Doc said. “You two look so much alike, I got confused.”

“Shut it, Doc,” Mary ordered, crossly.

“Suby,” she explained, “Doc likes to talk in riddles. A habit that has unfortunately rubbed off on my daughter. He thinks it makes him sound Zen-master-ey. You just have to wait for the spaghettilike patterns of his speeches to work themselves out. Just try not to get too far behind.”

“We have cold water in the ‘fridge,” Doc said, to show he could speak plainly when he wanted to, “along with fruit juice, root beer, Classic Coke, and ... I can’t think of anything else. Nothing with rat sugar in it, though, unless one of these gorgeous creatures has polluted my icebox with vile chemicals.”

“Rat sugar?” Suby questioned.

“He means artificial sweetener,” Red explained. “He considers any artificial food products to be against the natural order of the Universe. Very un-Zen.”

“Are you a Buddhist, then?” Suby asked, hopefully. “I, too, follow the teachings of the Enlightened One.”

Doc pressed his palms together, put his elbows wide to the sides, and bowed in the greeting often used between Buddhists.

“Grasshopper?” Doc suggested to Red. She understood what he wanted.

“Doc practices a form of Zen, yes,” Red explained. “As you may know, Zen is a combination of Buddhism and Taoism. Doc’s practice incorporates advanced mathematical logic and modern physics concepts as well.”

“Ah, I have heard rumors of this practice, but why does he call upon you to explain?”

“To see how well I can do it,” Red stated.

“Ah! Then he is the master, and you are one of his students.” Suby concluded.

“I don’t take on students,” Doc stated darkly.

Suby looked from Doc to Red and back for an explanation. Doc maintained silence.

“If you don’t already understand it,” Red explained cryptically, “they won’t teach it to you. So, there are no masters, and no students.”

This was outside Suby’s experience, although it jibed with what he’d heard about this strange practice.

“Suby, perhaps we’ll discuss it at another time,” Doc said. Red’s head snapped around. She’d never heard Doc be even this open about his practice with a stranger.

“Right now,” he continued, “Mary is waiting for your drink order.”

“Ah, yes,” Suby said. “Perhaps some fruit juice?”

Mary, being the only one besides Doc familiar with where things were stored in his boat, headed down to the galley to get it.

“Now, perhaps I should provide a little more explanation of our little Wonderland Tea Party,” Doc announced. “I can see that Mistress Judith would prefer it, and I am her abject slave.”

Red flashed him a condescending smile. Bud broke into a grin.

“Suby, our lovely ones have just graduated from Harvard University. Red, or Judith McKenna as some unbelievers would have it, is an applied mathematician in my employ. Cheryl Thompson, is a marine archaeologist attempting to exist on a meager stipend from a professor at – the same institution?” He looked to Bud for confirmation.

“Yes, Harvard,” she said. “Hi, Suby. Call me ‘Bud.’”

“I, your humble servant,” Doc picked up again, “once wrote a little scrap of computational fluid dynamics software,” he continued, “which Red is kindly attempting to make user friendly. Earlier this week, Cheryl contacted me to ask if my software might help her solve a little research problem that her professor assigned to her. I, thereupon, directed her, via devious paths, to Red. As it happens, these two have been friends for years, and just didn’t know they needed each other for this problem. Is this clear enough? I’ve had to edit it down a bit.”

“Certainly, it is clear that Red and Bud have joined forces to solve a research problem that involves Red adapting your software to Bud’s problem,” Suby repeated, “And that Red and Bud are friends of long standing.”

“Excellent!” Doc said. “Like any recent graduates with aspirations for higher learning, they both have been looking for doctoral-thesis problems.”

Casting a baleful eye on Red, he added: “Some have been looking more diligently than others.”

“I *have* been trying hard, you creep!” Red yelped.

Unable to come up with a pithy comment, Doc finished his explanation: “And, they think this is it. I happen to agree with them, and have promised to provide support for Red’s part of the project. They’ve come here to explain to Mark what his favorite, and only, daughter and her best friend have cooked up, and to try to wheedle additional money out of him.”

Suby sat up, and became very interested. “I know a little about computers and software,” he pointed out. “What is the problem they wish to research?”

He directed this question to Doc, who turned to Red and Bud, and said: “Let’s see how well you can explain it. You’ve got sixty seconds.”

Red and Bud knew what he meant by “sixty seconds.” As he’d told them earlier, when making a presentation, you must engage your audience within the first sixty seconds, or all is lost.”

“You start,” Red said to Bud.

“As Doc has intimated, I am a marine archaeologist. The problem I’ve been assigned is to surmise the original arrangements of articles scattered by turbulent underwater currents after the breakup of a ship, from information about the articles’ final resting places and assumptions about the turbulent currents that may have broken up the ship. My professor, Dr. Samuel Wheeler, had heard about Doc’s software, and wanted to know if it could be used for the analysis. As Doc explained, I then contacted him, and he put me in contact with Red.”

“I listened to Bud’s problem,” Red took up the narrative, “and believe that the software can be used to extract useful information about such wrecks, although not necessarily exactly what Bud and her professor expect. Underwater flow systems of the type Bud is dealing with are chaotic. In addition, the breakup of a ship introduces additional uncertainties. I do think that we can work the problem backwards using Doc’s flow solver, Wavelet, to at least get probable original locations for the debris items.”

“The key will be to run a very large number of separate simulations, and compile the results into a probability map. The map will be in a configuration space. That is, for a known final configuration of artifacts on the bottom, what is the probability that the

original configuration was such and such, given an assumed turbulent flow field?”

“That should work,” Suby said, “but wouldn’t it take a great number of calculations?”

“Yes, certainly thousands, likely millions.”

“And are not CFD solutions of the Navier-Stokes equations notoriously slow to converge?”

“Yes, which is why we need Doc’s software,” Red explained, “it avoids solving the Navier-Stokes equations. Doc observed that all relevant solutions are linear superpositions of acoustic and shear waves, and that acoustic and shear waves propagate separately. Thus, instead of solving differential equations by asking the solutions to converge through repeated iterations, Doc’s software places an array of point sources as boundary conditions, and integrates to obtain solutions at relatively few field points. The time to reach a solution scales differently with problem size for the two methods.”

“What did she say?” Bud whispered to Doc.

“The right things,” Doc whispered back.

“So, your solution method uses computer time more efficiently for very large problems,” Suby said to Red, “but you still need to run an immense number of models. Where will you get a big enough computer? Does one even exist?”

“No single computer capable of doing it exists,” Red admitted, “but using cloud-computing we can spread the problem over a sufficiently large number of separate processors. It’s ideal for such a parallel processing approach – assigning different processors, or groups of processors, to calculate different models. In fact, each model breaks into  $2n$  separate wave solutions, where  $n$  is the number of field points. It is basically a massively parallel problem, which is ideal for a computer cloud.”

“And, what is Bud’s role in this project? How will she contribute, and what does she need money for?”

“Her input is needed in the calculation phase to set up the problem. What turbulence fields should we assume? What are the general problem parameters? What information would be useful to obtain? It would not do to calculate a particular variable to great accuracy and reliability, only to find out the archaeologists couldn’t care less about it.”

“True,” Suby admitted.

“During the testing phase,” Red explained, “she will set up the test program set. That is, she will pose sets of realistic situations to model, and evaluate the relevance and accuracy of the results. Finally, we will use the system in real archaeological surveys to

prove its accuracy, relevance, and reliability. That will, of course, be almost entirely in her hands.”

“Thus,” she continued, “while most of the emphasis will be on my work at the beginning, it will shift with progress through the project to being almost entirely her work. My thesis will concentrate on the system development, with the archaeology mostly appearing in the conclusion section. Her thesis, on the other hand, will emphasize the new research results obtained by the method, with system development mostly appearing in the early sections, and referencing my thesis. She needs the money to pay for time and equipment to do the archeological research.”

“And, you are making a formal presentation about this to my friend Mark Shipton tomorrow afternoon?”

“Yes, we are. At three o’clock. Why?” Red responded.

“While I was completely truthful about knowing a little about computers, I was not being entirely candid,” Suby admitted. “I am the vice president for business development for Blue Guru Systems. We are a company that develops, builds, installs, and services large server farms used by Internet service providers – ISPs. These are the same processors you would be tapping for your cloud-computing system.”

“Let me get this straight,” Bud said, not sure she actually understood what Suby had said, “when I rent space from an ISP for my website, and upload a bunch of Web pages that they store in huge server farms, and then distribute to people who visit my website, you made the server farms, and maintain them. Is that correct?”

“Roughly,” Suby agreed, “but in most cases, we actually own the server farms, and lease portions of them to your ISP. It’s more complicated than you suggest, but in the end, you are correct. Your cloud computer will be made up of slices of computing time on our processors.”

“I thought you understood Red’s explanation a lot better than the average boater would,” Doc observed dryly.

Suby smiled, and wagged his head from side to side (which is the traditional Indian affirmative nod), then asked: “Might I be permitted to attend your presentation tomorrow? We might have motivation to help fund your research, or at least lend technical support.”

Red, and Bud looked quizzically to Doc, who smiled, and shrugged his shoulders. Then, they looked at each other, squealed, embraced excitedly, and kissed. Doc leaned over to Suby, and said: “I’d take that as a ‘yes.’”

Mary looked at the girls embracing, and kissing, and glowered. This was not what she had in mind for “discrete behavior.”

Doc caught Mary's eye before she could blow *her* head gasket, as Red's car had done back in March, and with a look warned her to just shut up. Suby also noticed the intimacy, which went beyond what excited women normally display with their friends. So, Doc said to him: "Just ignore the fluid transfers. They're very excited."

"But, I have promised nothing!" Suby complained to Doc.

"They have confidence that you will, when you hear all the details. Their biggest concern has been how to find the right person: someone who could understand their proposed work, and might be in a position to do something about it. You are that person, and you seemed to have dropped from the sky into their lives at just the right moment."

"Ahh!" Suby said.

"Doc," Mary pointed out, changing the subject, "that took a lot more than the sixty seconds you gave them."

Mary had not been privy to Doc's advice to the two fledgling researchers, but understood it, anyway. While not having multiple doctorates, herself, she was still quite well educated, and knew the fine points of making a presentation every bit as well as Doc did.

"Yes," Doc replied, "but Suby asked his first question almost exactly sixty seconds into the explanation. That means he'd been hooked by that time. They did a good job."

"Well," Mary announced, intending to conclude the tea party festivities, "Doc's been flying a plane for something like ten hours, and is probably exhausted. Perhaps we should all retire, and let the poor man get some sleep."

"Oh, no," Doc countered. "I had the helm on auto-pilot the whole way. In fact – please don't tell the FAA – I even caught a nap. That, on top of jet lag, means I'm farther from bedtime than anyone else here. It's still seven o'clock inside my skin. I'll probably be up for hours, still. There's no need to run on my account."

Mary looked over the faces at the table. Red and Suby were already deep in a computer-jock conversation, and Bud was following Doc's every movement with her eyes, like a puppy. Mary decided that her presence was no longer required, and was likely to be counterproductive. So, she made her own excuses: "Well, there is on my account. I want to get my beauty sleep. I have a husband coming home to me in the morning, and I want to be fresh. So, good night. I'll see you in the morning. Some of us will be having breakfast on the bridge deck at seven o'clock. Doc, you're invited, and so are you, Suby. You night owls keep it down, or we'll have complaints. See you in the morning."

She poured a last glass of wine, held it up to Doc, and asked: “May I?” At his nodded assent to removing the glass from his boat, she turned, climbed up to and across the gangplank, and headed for the *Mary McKenna*.”

“I’m going to join Suby in some fruit juice,” Doc explained, standing up. “Beer and whiskey are great for drinking, but don’t replenish fluids lost at twenty-five thousand feet very well.”

He turned, and headed below. Bud glanced at Suby and Red, who were deeply engrossed in their own conversation, and quietly tiptoed down into the cabin after Doc. She closed the cabin door on the way.

Half an hour later, Suby noticed that he and Red were still alone at the table. “Where have they gone?” he asked in surprise. It was obvious to anyone over the age of eighteen where they went, and what they were doing, but he was still surprised. It had happened so fast, and so quietly.

“Somewhere in this tub,” Red answered, “there’s a forward berth being anointed with the mixed seminal juices of my two friends. She believes he’s clean, and she takes oral contraceptives religiously per her gynecologist’s instructions. He believes she’s clean, and is infinitely courteous when it comes to ladies’ wishes. That means she’s for sure getting a – are you familiar with the term ‘cream pie?’ – She likes to play with it as it oozes out. Doc’s going to have to change the sheets.”

“But, I thought that you, and she ...”

“Don’t think too much around here. Doc mentioned that you stepped through the looking glass when you climbed aboard? Here, reality progresses according to its own rules, and they may not be the rules you expect.”

As an example, she explained Doc’s theory of heterosexual and homosexual attraction, and why he didn’t like certain words applied to people. Suby was slightly surprised, but said that Doc’s ideas made perfect sense, and conformed closely to his own. He was surprised, however, to find Americans who not only understood, but applied those ideas in their personal lives.

Pulling the subject back from general considerations in ethical philosophy to what the Hell was going on in that boat, Red explained: “Bud and I were roommates in our freshman year. Sometime in second semester, it became what Bud has convinced me was a lesbian relationship. I didn’t think so at the time, but maybe I was kidding myself. Even then, I knew I wanted a husband, a home, the pitter-patter of little feet, and no lesbian relationship is going to give me that. I also very much like fooling around with the private parts of men, and having them return the favor. I just haven’t had very good luck with relationships with men. When Bud came back into my life, I guess I decided to try the other side of the street. So, we’ve had this relationship for years, but it’s never been exclusive – for either of us. We like to have sex with each other. Plain, and simple.”

“Generally, we don’t make any bones about it, and don’t care who knows. My Mom, however, wants us to cool it on this trip, so I won’t get a reputation around here.”

“Why here in particular?” Suby asked, imagining he was following all this.

“She wants me to get married, and give her a granddaughter. She wants me to marry Doc, but ...”

“Your own brother?” Suby asked, shocked. While he’d gotten used to social rules being ignored around here – not really broken, because that implies an acceptance of them in the first place, but simply ignored, as if they didn’t exist – he would consider brother-sister incest very bad judgement, and he’d come to expect good – if unconventional – judgement out of this clearly exceptionally intelligent woman.

Red, who’d forgotten they’d playfully kept up the masquerade of being actual brother, and sister, explained: “Oh, we’re not really blood relations! That’s for fun. We’re really good friends. We understand each other better than anyone else understands either of us. We like being with each other. We like the same kinds of jokes, which we play on each other constantly. And, we work together really, really well. I just don’t want to marry him.”

“Oh?” Suby opined. “It sounds like you should.”

“Everybody says that, but I want him for a friend, not a husband.”

“Oh,” Suby said, beginning to revise his opinion of her judgement.

“Anyway, Mom said that if I wasn’t going to accept Doc’s proposal.”

“When did he propose?”

“The last time was Monday. Mom said that if I wasn’t going to accept, I had to avoid blowing my other options – and this place is chock-a-block full of options – by fondling my girlfriend in public. You see they still use nasty labels, like ‘lesbian,’ around here, and think they really mean something. That’s why she got so mad when I kissed Bud tonight. I broke a promise, and will have to answer for it in the morning.”

“So, you are – unattached – at the moment?” Suby asked, hopefully.

“Yes. In fact, I’m under strict orders to, and I quote, get my field plowed as often as possible this weekend, unquote.”

This was excellent news. Suby had decided to put in his bid for her body, and maybe her hand, at the first opportunity. This sounded like it, but now he was unsure how to broach the subject. He started to open his mouth, but was interrupted by Red, who was thinking out loud.

“The problem is that I don’t really know anybody here.”

“You know me!” he blurted out.

Startled, Red looked him in the eye to be sure he was serious. What she saw there was serious. Shy, diffident, unsure, but definitely serious. She hadn’t considered him because –

“There’s a problem,” she said.

“I am unacceptable,” he said, crestfallen.

“No! No way! You are definitely more than acceptable. That’s why Mom called you over instead of just saying ‘Hi’ and brushing you off. I was trying to figure out how to get you into my nickers the minute you stepped onto the gangway. Why do you think I put your seat next to mine?”

“Then ... ?”

“In about twelve – no, about fourteen – hours I’m planning to ask you for up to a half million dollars to support my girlfriend’s research. If you come through, that would make me one of the most successful hookers in the history of ... whatever ... hooking. It wouldn’t look good, and it wouldn’t be right. I’ve never done anything like that, but was accused of it with Doc. I don’t want to go through that again.”

“Ahh, I see your point, but it is not really a problem.”

“Why not?”

“First, because you are not asking it for yourself, but for your friend. Second because I am not in a position to provide such a grant, myself. Third, because I long ago decided to introduce you to the people in my company who *are* in such a position, and recommend that they listen to your proposal. I wanted to hear your presentation in order to have understanding to better present your case. Fourth, because ... There is a word in your legal system ... ‘recuse,’ where a judge, when he has a personal interest in a case before the court, explains that he cannot render an impartial judgement, and so he cannot judge the case. I will recommend that our

corporate officers consider your proposal, and recuse myself from the discussions. Does this answer your objection?”

“Hmm. Yes it does. First, because it answers my objection. Second, because you’ll save me from a chewing out from my Mom. Third, because I haven’t had man-meat between my legs for a very long time. But, most importantly, because I find you so attractive, I’m getting wet just talking to you. What say, you show me your boat?”

“Shall we say something to Doc?”

“He’ll figure it out when he sees us gone.”

“May I show you my boat?” Suby asked.

“That would be wonderful,” Red replied.

Before heading toward Suby’s boat, Red pulled him over to where a big sailor had been sitting on a box near the *Mary McKenna*’s gangplank.

“Georgi, Suby’s going to show me his boat, the ... what’s your boat’s name?”

“*Tathagata*.”

“ ... What he said. I may not be back before morning. Tell Mom she doesn’t have to worry.”

Georgi didn’t take his eyes off them until they boarded Suby’s boat. Then, he watched the boat until relieved at two o’clock.

## 8

When she found Red's stateroom empty, and the bed unslept in, Mary's first suspicious-mother thought was that the girls had disobeyed her firm order, ditched the men, and shacked up together in Bud's stateroom. Like all parents, everywhere, her job was to watch for developing problems, and head them off before they became real problems, so her first reaction was to consider the worst.

She still thought of her daughter as a late adolescent, as she had been when she left home to live in Boston, years ago. She had not yet come to terms with the fact that her little girl had become a corporate middle manager in her own right, with responsibility for millions of dollars worth of assets, and dozens of subordinates.

Such realizations do not come easily to a parent.

So, her first thought was that maybe her charges had disobeyed her, and were cavalierly putting their reputations at risk by giving in to what Mary thought of as hormonal imbalances.

When she found Bud's stateroom in the same condition, she didn't know what to think. She half expected Bud to have her legs curled around Doc's midsection, but where was Judy?

It did not occur to her that her little girl would get Suby in the same wrestling grip in the short amount of time available. She thought of Subramanian as a quiet, shy young man who was painfully polite. That picture did not jibe in her mind with a man who'd get a girl in the sack on less than an hour's acquaintance.

She did not know Suby very well.

Truth began to dawn in Mary's mind when she went to the bridge deck, with its long view of the dock. From there, she spotted Red and Suby walking back from the direction of Suby's boat, grinning at each other from ear to ear. Red had a bear hug on Suby's right arm with her left breast firmly pressed against his upper arm. Her hair was not neat. Her blouse, normally arranged to perfection, was slightly askew and not tucked in. Her feet were bare. She was walking a little funny.

When they reached the bridge deck, Red made sure Suby was seated within easy reach of the coffee pot, leaned down to say something to him, gave him a full-lip kiss, and headed to where Mary was standing at the railing. Red was still wearing that same idiotic grin.

“Gotta talk to you,” she said to Mary, then dragged her toward the bridge itself.

At this hour and in port, the bridge was deserted. Red pulled Mary into the room, closed the door, and gave her an excited hug.

“I take it your little sleepover with Suby was not without reward?” Mary inquired.

“Mom,” Red began, “I know you’ve been wanting a granddaughter. How would you feel if she were a beautiful half-Indian baby?”

“Oh, no! Tell me you didn’t get yourself pregnant on the first night with someone you barely know!”

“Of course not, Mom. I’m not *that* stupid, especially not considering my track record with men. I always practice safe sex.”

“Oh, you had me worried for a minute. So, I take it you find Suby acceptable company?”

“Mom, the guy has *memorized* the entire *Kama Sutra*.” Red effused. “He was brought up in the Brahmin caste, and it’s required study for young Brahmin men. Isn’t that a deliciously good idea? We only got through maybe half a dozen or so of the positions. But, he came during *every one*! I used up almost my entire stash of condoms!”

“From the sound of the conversation you were having when I left, you do not find his mind unappealing, either.”

“He’s brilliant! That company of his? I’ve known about it for a couple of years. It’s one of the fastest growing in the business. It’s considered the technological leader, and most of the growth comes from his ideas.”

“Well, I’d kinda set my heart on having a half-Polish granddaughter, but if you want to make her half Indian, that’s good, too.”

“Oh, thank you,” Red said, hugging her.

“Now, where to you suppose that girlfriend of yours has got to?” Mary asked, her mind turning to the second of her charges.

“Don’t expect her or Doc to show up for breakfast. Not before ... “ She did a mental calculation. “Not before at least nine. Does Doc keep a motorcycle around here?”

“Yes, he stores it in the boat shed.”

“Then, they probably won’t show until after lunch. He’ll drag her off to some greasy spoon where he can salivate over her cleavage while forcing her to listen to him read *The Wall Street Journal*, like I’m going to do to Suby right now. He’ll then encourage

her to grind her breasts into his back while riding to someplace remote for lunch, then drive her back here barely in time for our meeting.”

“What are you going to do, now?” Mary asked.

“I’m going to spend an hour or so replacing bodily fluids under this canvas: a close encounter with coffee and orange juice is what I crave. Then, I’d like to put on that naughty string bikini, and talk my Suby into giving me a ride out to where I can work on my tan without peeping toms. Then, I’m going to come home to get decent for the meeting. How are you fixed for condoms. I’m almost out.”

“This is a fully equipped yacht.” Mary said as if stung by the question. “I’ll put a box in your stateroom.”

“Thanks Mom,” Red said. “You’re the best!” Then, she bounced out of the bridge door to join Suby at the table.

It was only eight thirty when a tired, disheveled, and happy Bud climbed the ladder to the bridge deck, and sat down at the table opposite Red.

“Baby, is there any coffee left?” she asked.

“Here,” Red said, pouring her a cup.

“Life saver!”

“So, what’s the verdict?”

“Mmm! I think it’s a draw. I’ll have to do a side-by-side comparison.”

“I’ll see what I can arrange,” Red suggested, playfully.

“What are you talking about?” Suby asked.

Red looked around carefully, to make sure nobody was within earshot. Then she said, conspiratorially: “Do you know what Bud’s nickname means?”

“I assume,” Suby said, “it is short for ‘Buddy.’ It seems a little masculine sounding for such a clearly feminine person, but I assume there’s a further explanation. Perhaps it has to do with her taste for young ladies?”

“You’re almost right,” Red intimated. “It actually is short for ‘*Fuck Buddy*.’ It’s one of her terms for her lovers.”

“I’m not sure I approve of it as Cheryl’s nickname.” Doc’s growly voice intruded. He’d come up the ladder to the bridge deck while Red was making her explanation.

“Why not?” Bud asked, a little miffed. She really liked her nickname.

“It denotes a certain callousness, and a lack of regard for the person it’s applied to. As if their only value is as an object for sexual pleasure. Now, there are some people in some situations, to which it applies perfectly. Most of Annie’s conquests, for example, are fuck buddies at best.”

“Who’s Annie?” Bud interrupted.

“One of Doc’s fuck buddies, whom I met in Daytona,” Red informed her. “Maybe ‘encountered’ is a better word. She’s a flaming bisexual nymphomaniac. She picked me up in a bar while I was waiting for the Big Guy to finish schmoozing one of his clients. She just acted friendly, then got me drunk, then got me dirty dancing with her in front of the bandstand. When she saw Doc, she practically raped him on a picnic table while the band was taking a break. Then, she realized we were together, and wanted to go back to our motel and fuck us both. When Doc wouldn’t go for it, she got pissed, accused him of hogging all the goods – namely yours truly’s genitalia – and left in a huff. If Doc hadn’t been there to bail me out, I don’t know what would have happened.”

“If she thought she could get away with it,” Doc said, “she would have tried to do you right there on that picnic table in full view of everyone. I’ve never figured out whether she adds exhibitionism to her list of turn ons, or whether she just doesn’t care. Maybe she’s found that it’s a good way to start gang bangs, which she definitely *does* enjoy. I think it more likely that she’d try to drag you behind the nearest bush to avoid being bounced from the bar.”

“So, you see,” he continued to clarify his point, “to Annie, *I’m* just a fuck buddy. I’m just another human being willing and able to excite her to repeated multiple orgasms. She likes me well enough to remember my face and learn my name because I’m able to keep up with her for a while, and willing to provide a dry roof and clean sheets for her to sleep on after she runs out of steam, and breakfast when she wakes up. She also likes that I can provide her with passes to the grandstands at the speedway, with tens of thousands of potential gang-bang guests. *That’s* the image ‘fuck buddy’ brings to *my* mind.”

“But, I don’t think the term is appropriate for Cheryl. You girls have very high regard for each other, and I’m pretty sure that Cheryl is a lot more selective about whom she has sex with. But, if that’s the term you like, I’m perfectly happy for you.”

“What would you call it?” Red pursued.

“Girlfriends, lovers, but neither reduces to a fun nickname, so maybe ‘Bud’ is best. I know she’s awfully damn good!” Doc concluded, grinning at the pun.

“I still don’t know what you ladies were talking about,” Suby complained.

Since Doc was there, Red blushed uncontrollably, and couldn’t say any more.

“What my suddenly diffident *girlfriend* was referring to,” Bud explained, “is a bet we made – Jeez, it was only Monday! About who was the best *fuck buddy*. I told her that she’d always been my best fuck buddy, ever. She wasn’t willing to say I was the best, though. She put me second best to that big piece of beefcake over there,” Bud said, pointing at Doc. “So, she bet me that after I’d had a chance to sample his wares, I’d demote her to number two.”

“What was the bet?” Doc asked. “Knowing you two, it wasn’t money, but some kind of forfeit.”

“You betcha! The loser has to eat the other’s snatch.”

“Sounds like heads I win, tails I win to me,” Doc scoffed. Then, he realized that could be interpreted as another off-color pun, and snickered.

“Not far off,” Bud answered, grinning herself. “Anyway, Red asked me the verdict, and I said ‘so far a draw.’ That I had to do a side-by-side comparison.”

By this time, Red was blushing so hard, she was sweating. She couldn’t take her eyes off Doc, anxious about his reaction, but she was afraid to meet his gaze at the same time. The others ignored it.

“Red said she’d see what she could manage,” Bud concluded her explanation. “Any suggestions, Oh Wise One?”

“I feel like Socrates as the condemned man being asked to pick his poison,” Doc said, uncertainly.

“That’ll pass. I’ll make sure of it,” Bud promised.

“At the risk of possibly injuring Suby’s sensibilities,” Doc suggested, “How about we all pile into my boat tomorrow morning at zero-six-hundred, and head off to Freeport in the Bahamas. Cheryl can do her taste test on the cockpit deck part way across. And, then the loser can pay her fine. Red, wear sun block. It’s going to be a long passage.

“Why should my sensibilities be injured?” Suby asked.

“Some people do not enjoy watching other people making love, that’s all,” Doc replied.

“Watching these two ladies make love will not offend me in any way, I assure you,” Suby promised.

“Then, it’s a date!” Doc said. “However, ladies, if I am supplying the venue for your contest, I expect a fabulous breakfast of coffee, orange juice, and ... and ... ham-and-cheese croissants laid out as we clear the harbor. Deal?”

“Deal!” Red, and Bud said in unison.

“In the meantime,” Doc announced, “if the lovely Ms. Fuck Buddy is finished spilling coffee on herself, I’d like to take her for a motorcycle ride. Do you have a pair of boots available?”

“Yes, sir, I do,” Bud said, slapping her knee. “My Baby over here warned me about your predilection for two-wheeled transportation, and I brought not only a pair of boots, but my motorcycle jacket. It will not be too warm, if I wear very little under it.”

“Spoken like a true biker chick,” Doc announced. “So, where are they? Let’s go! Chop! Chop!”

Bud left the table, and headed down to her cabin to change. Meanwhile, Doc sat down to suck down half a cup of coffee, and eight ounces of orange juice.

“You really are okay with our little sporting event tomorrow, Suby?” Doc asked for the second time. “Frankly, watching another man doing his best to pleasure a young woman in live action is not at the top of my list of things to do on a Saturday morning.”

“I do not plan to watch that part of the contest. I plan to be busy doing my best to pleasure another young woman.” He smiled sinfully at Red, who didn’t blush, but licked her suddenly puffy lips.

“Oh, no!” Red exclaimed, growing panicky with sudden recollection. “Saturday morning! We have a dance at the yacht club Saturday night, and Mom spent thousands of dollars on dresses for Bud and me. Don’t tell Bud how much, by the way. She doesn’t know, and I think it would flip her out. But, there’s no way I’d risk wrecking Mom’s plans just to to play tourist in Jamaica.”

“So, we’ll do it Sunday, instead,” Doc replied, as if it were the easiest thing in the world. As far as he was concerned, it was.

“I dunno,” Red said. “what if we’re all hung over?”

“Then we can postpone it. In fact, I’m not facing any deadlines after your dog-and-pony show this afternoon, and neither are

you. I think Cheryl could convince her boss that hanging around here would advance her – and by extension his – research more than going back to Boston. Suby, do you think you could organize a little meeting with your guys for the girls to present their proposal next week?”

“I cannot be sure, but I believe everyone she needs to talk to will be in Miami. The office is less than a ten minute ride from here. Yes, I believe I can set it up.”

At that point, Bud appeared back on deck wearing black leather pants and her motorcycle jacket. The jacket was fully open to reveal the top to her yellow string bikini underneath. She was wearing the white rubber-soled deck shoes Red had found for her up in Boston to have something to wear on deck, and carrying her black boots with a pair of socks rolled up in a ball and stuffed inside.

“I didn’t know if it was okay to wear my boots to cross the deck to the gangway,” she said, looking to Red for guidance. Red looked up to Doc.

Realizing that he’d been elected as the arbiter of boating-footwear etiquette, he said: “It’s okay if you’re just crossing the deck to the gangway. The rule is there to keep people from running around, climbing ladders, and going topside in leather-soled shoes at sea. Eventually, they’re going to slip on a wet spot, then fwееееew! On a boat this size, in port, and with dry decks, the chances slipping are low.”

“Should I put on my boots, and take my shoes back below?”

“No. I assume you’ve got the bikini bottom on under those leathers.” He looked to her for confirmation, which he got. “Then, bring them with you in case you want to take off the pants while walking around later. Some people think that wearing cowboy boots with shorts and bathing suits is cute. It always struck me as stupidly mis-dressed.”

“Okay,” Bud said, then sat down in one of the deck chairs to put on her socks and boots.

She planned to carry the shoes down to the bike. Bud seldom carried a bag or pocketbook, preferring to stuff the things, like money and ID, that people always need to carry around, into the pockets of the pants she habitually wore. She liked presenting the dykish tough-chick look combined with plenty of feminine touches, like jewelry and makeup. The combination always struck her as very sexy, and attractive to potential lovers no matter how many X chromosomes they had.

Doc could vouch for it being attractive to *him*, anyway.

## 9

While Bud was sitting in one of the chairs at the table changing her footwear, Doc explained about the change in boating/sporting plans.

“So,” Bud said to make sure she understood the change, “the trip to the Bahamas is off for tomorrow, along with my little erotic taste test, but you’re talking about extending our stay in Miami into next week.”

“In a nutshell, that’s right,” he confirmed. “We’ll stay in port tomorrow to make sure you guys have time to get ready for the party. There might be time for sightseeing, or going out for sunbathing in the morning, but from what Red’s said, Mary wants you girls at the party with bells on. These things usually start out as a cocktail party until around twelve or one, then the old married folks go home, and it turns into a swinging singles bash for the twenty-somethings. I can only assume Mary wants you two there for that part. I’ll go along to watch out for little sister.”

“You won’t watch out for me?” Bud wasn’t sure she liked that.

“I don’t think you need any watching out for. I trust you to teach *them* some things.”

“And, you wouldn’t go, otherwise,” Red said, sarcastically.

“Hmmm. A potential orgy organized by supermodels. Let’s see. I guess I’d probably stop in for a while,” he allowed, “just to be friendly, of course.”

“But, don’t worry,” he continued to Bud, “what I meant is that I plan to make sure that Red gets to have maximum fun. You, I’m planning to *give* maximum fun to, party or no.”

Bud liked that better. Red wasn’t sure she did.

“The rest,” Doc finalized, “will be up to what Suby arranges for next week.”

“Suby, what are your plans?” Doc asked, turning to him.

“I must start by making a few telephone calls to see what can be arranged, which will allow you to finalize your plans.”

“Our plans,” Red corrected him, “Mistress Judith wants your genitals within fondling range as much as possible.”

“Thank you, Mistress Judith,” Suby said. “Your whim is my command.”

Turning to Doc with an amused smile, he said: “I see why you say you can refuse her nothing.”

Doc started to say: “You’re catching it, too,” but only got the first word out before he found his mouth stopped by Bud’s lips, his view blocked by her face, and his surroundings masked by her hair.

Bud had suddenly swarmed onto his lap for some intense making out. She’d had enough of this group-dynamics stuff. She wanted all Doc’s attention for herself, alone. She kept the making-out-with-Doc action up until she was sure he had forgotten the existence of everyone and everything else.

She could always tell when she had his full attention, because everything else disappeared for her, too. It was like falling into a sea of erotic sensation, where nothing in the surface world applied to her, anymore.

She liked that. She wanted more, and she didn’t want anything else.

“Eh-Hem!” she heard Red trying to interrupt, obviously not for the first time. Bud had lost track of time, and she didn’t want it back.

Looking around, she saw that Red was sitting across from them at the breakfast table looking miffed. Suby was nowhere to be seen, having gone off to make his phone calls.

Looking back at Doc, Bud saw he was still smiling to her out of his meditative trance. She went back to kissing him.

“Oh, shit!” Red said. She knew exactly the sensations Bud was experiencing, having experienced them, herself. The memory made her want to push Bud aside, and experience them again directly, rather than just in memory.

Standing up, she repeated, “Shit!” vehemently, and stomped off to her stateroom for a good pout.

A few minutes later, Doc said: “I think we pissed her off,” and went back to kissing.

Twenty seconds later, Bud cryptically said: “Good,” and went back to kissing.

It was almost ten minutes later, when Suby showed up, and asked: “Where’s Red?”

“She got pissed, and walked off in a huff,” Bud mentioned while staring into Doc’s eyes. She liked Doc’s eyes.

“I guess she doesn’t think much of making out as a spectator sport,” Doc mentioned, while returning Bud’s gaze. He liked her eyes, too.

“You can probably find her pouting in her stateroom,” Bud advised.

Twenty minutes later, Mary came out to find Bud and Doc sharing the last of the eggs and sausage, which were by now completely cold. They didn’t seem to mind.

“Where’s Judy?” Mary asked.

“Watching us make out pissed her off, so she went below,” Bud explained.

“Good,” Mary cryptically said, herself.

Noticing the coincidence of both Bud and Mary being pleased by Red’s getting pissed off, Doc explored the universe of possible reasons why, then compared the possibilities found to the circumstances surrounding the events, and figured out that Bud and Mary were in cahoots to make Red regret breaking up with him enough to change her mind.

“Hmph! Should work,” he muttered cryptically, himself.

Realizing that Doc had divined what was going on, Bud said to Mary: “You can’t keep anything from him, can you?”

“It’s best not to even try,” Mary advised.

“Okay, what do you have to say about it?” Bud asked Doc.

He just made a motion like closing a zipper across his mouth. He had long ago settled on using the Jonathan Livingston Seagull strategy with respect to Red:

*If you love something, set it free.*

*If it comes back to you, it’s yours.*

*If not, it never was.*

The strategy called for him to do nothing to influence Red's decision. His role was to make sure that she knew the door was open, but to voice no opinion about whether she should use it.

On the other hand, the strategy allowed third parties to do all the influencing they wanted. It was part of the evolution of the Universe – the inevitable flowing of Tao. Unlike the overwhelming majority of people who use the word, Doc knew that was the true meaning of “karma.”

Next, Doc planted a big, wet kiss directly on Bud's lips. It reminded her that there were excellent reasons to make out with Doc, independent of anything Red might choose to do. She returned the kiss.

Mary hoped that meant Doc planned to carry out his part in her scheme, and that it did not mean the door was closing as Bud went through it, herself. She prayed that her daughter would come to her senses, and push past Bud before that could happen.

Still, there was Suby. ...

“Where's Suby,” she asked when the pair came up for air.

“We sent him down to fetch her,” Bud replied.

“It's been a while,” Doc pointed out.

“Good!” Bud and Mary said simultaneously.

Ten minutes after that, Suby appeared in the companionway, leading a satisfied-looking Red by the hand. Red was pleased to note that Doc and Bud were nibbling the last of the cold bacon, rather than attempting to get into each other's clothing.

Mary stepped over to the shipboard intercom to request a fresh pot of coffee from the galley. Nobody appeared ravenous, so she didn't bother ordering more food.

“So, what are you four planning?” she asked.

“We plan to hang around in port all morning,” Red explained.

“With a short expedition for lunch?” Doc suggested.

“And be back here to get ready for our meeting with Red's Dad,” Bud concluded.

“Then,” Doc suggested, “dinner and a movie?”

“There’s a new show at the Contemporary Art Museum,” Red announced, brightly, “and they have a great restaurant. Mom, you and Mark come, too. Make it a family outing!”

“Your stepfather and I are members,” Mary pointed out, “and there’s an opening night bash for the artist. We could all go: *hors d’ouvres* and culture for dessert. I’ll have to check, but I think it starts at eight.”

Bud didn’t utter a word. She didn’t care. She was now madly in love with *both* Doc and Red, and would do anything to be with them. If they’d said, “Let’s go clean up horse poop at the rodeo,” she’d have wanted to be there.

“Don’t forget the yacht club dance tomorrow night,” Mary pointed out.

“We won’t,” Red said, flashing a guilty look to Doc.

“I thought we might check out the boardwalk tomorrow morning,” Doc said, covering her guilty look, which he knew concerned their earlier plans that Red had kaiboshed.

Red felt guilty that they’d thoughtlessly almost wrecked Mary’s plans in favor of an outing that could only be characterized as selfishly hedonistic. The fact that she’d herself caught the error almost immediately, and in plenty of time to prevent any real damage, didn’t prevent her from feeling guilty.

“We can do lunch, there,” Doc concluded.

“We need to be back here in mid-afternoon – by two or three – to get ready,” Red added, recovering her poise.

“There’ll be plenty of food at the dance, so we won’t need dinner,” Mary explained, “and dancing will start at dusk. It’ll keep on ‘til around midnight. I guess some of the younger members keep the party going by the pool until dawn.”

“I explained that, already,” Doc said. “It sounds like we’ll all join in.”

“I intend to get thoroughly swacked,” Bud stated emphatically, “and imbibe in as much sex as I can attract.”

Mary pursed her lips at the bluntness.

Doc’s expression combined raised eyebrows, an indulgent, amused smile, and a slight chuckle.

Red's eyes sparkled, signaling her intention to play Pancho to Bud's Cisco Kid.

Suby's face carried the non-committal look of one who's not quite sure what to tell others he is thinking.

## 10

“Doc, are we going for a motorcycle ride, or did I put this outfit on for nothing?” Bud asked.

“I think we still need a report from Suby about what arrangements, if any, he was able to make,” Doc replied. “Suby?”

“We were not able to set the meeting up until Thursday at eleven,” Suby reported.

“Cheryl,” Doc advised, “I think you owe your professor the courtesy of a phone call. We’re assuming he’ll give you the time away from Boston, but you’ve got to convince him before making any plans.”

“Do it now?” Bud asked.

“That would be my advice,” Doc replied.

Bud pulled out her cellphone and speed dialed a number.

“Dr. Wheeler? This is Cheryl Thompson. ... Yes, I’m down here in Florida getting ready for our meeting with Gulf States Petroleum about funding for the debris modeling project. ... Yes, it’s this afternoon. ... Yes, she does have great contacts. In fact, yesterday we turned up another possible funding source. Her parents are friends with the vice president for business development at Blue Guru Systems. Do you know them? ... Yes, they run server farms for Internet companies. He happened to stop by for drinks on Doc Manchek’s boat. ... You remember, he’s the guy at Scottsdale Systems Technology who wrote Wavelet in the first place. ... Anyway, we explained to him what we want to do, and he thinks his company might let us use their servers for our computer cloud. ... We hope they’ll donate computer time and technical assistance, at least. ... No, we won’t forget to ask for money. ... The reason I’m calling is that he says he can set up a meeting for us to present to the company here next Thursday. ... That’s the soonest time they can get everyone together. I want to stay down here until then. ... We can use the time to prepare for the presentation, and to start working on the project. My partner’s here, and so isn’t Doc Manchek, so we can get a lot done. ... I guess we could. ... Let me get a piece of paper. We’re on deck, now, talking over our plans. ... Sure, you can email me the list. I have my laptop, here. ... Doc’s got his own jet here, but it’s only got two seats. But, his boat goes a kazillion miles an hour. He’s talking about playing tourist in Freeport as a day trip. I’m sure we could work something out. You send me the contacts, and I’ll ask. ... Basically, this’ll eat up all of next week. ... It was Doc’s idea, and Judy’s Mom didn’t blink an eye, so there shouldn’t be a problem. ... Do you want to talk with him?”

Offering the cellphone to Doc, Bud said: “He wants to talk to you about accommodations and such. I don’t think he’s quite got

the picture, yet.”

Doc accepted the telephone, and said into it: “Hello, Dr. Wheeler. This is Dr. Manchek, here. How can I help?”

“Hello, Dr. Manchek,” said the voice over the phone. “I just want to make sure you know that Cheryl doesn’t have any funding to cover this trip.”

“Sure she does,” Doc said, cheerfully, “SST is covering it. I’m charging it off to application development. It’s what we pay Judith to do. Cheryl’s expenses are just part of the cost of Judith’s doing her job. Her expenses are minimal, anyway. She’s staying on Judith’s parents’ boat, and it’s a big boat, so there’s no cost for food or lodging. Each girl has her own stateroom, and there are no other guests. She won’t be in the way. I think Judith’s Mom wants to adopt Cheryl, anyway. She can stay as long as she wants.”

Mary looked pleased by Doc’s description, indicating that he understood her feelings exactly.

“Now, Cheryl’s your research assistant,” he reminded Wheeler to show he understood, himself, “so it’s up to you how you want her to spend her time. Judith’s going to stay here through Thursday to make the presentation, but I think it’ll work out better if Cheryl’s there, too. She can explain her part – which is your part – of the project better than Judith can. It’ll also be good experience for her. Obviously, I think it’s the thing to do, otherwise I wouldn’t have suggested it.”

“Are you Judith’s academic advisor?” Wheeler asked.

“I hope not! I don’t need to take on that job, too. I’m her boss, as well as her friend. As I said, this is what we pay her to do. As you know, this whole project didn’t exist a week ago, until you sent Cheryl to us for help on your problem. We dropped it in Judith’s lap because Wavelet application development is her department. She noticed it might make a good Ph.D. thesis project, and I agreed. In the three days since then, she hasn’t found an academic advisor. We had planned for her to spend next week on that, but now, she’s got a presentation to do. When she gets to it, she’ll be talking with people at both Harvard and MIT, so it will have to wait until she gets back to Boston.”

“So, this project might not get off the ground at all.” Wheeler surmised.

“Oh, no. We’re committed to Judith’s doing it. The funding for her part is already in place. SST’s covering it – all of it – because it’s part of our business plan, and we want to own the intellectual property she generates. What’s at issue is funding for Cheryl’s part, which is your research. Unless we’re very badly misinformed, additional funds for computer time, research equipment, and support personnel would not hurt your research team.”

Doc heard a chuckle on the other end of the line.

“No, all contributions are gratefully received,” Wheeler acknowledged. “And the ladies have made amazing strides in the short time they’ve been working on this project. When I sent Cheryl to you, I’d hoped for just an ‘It might work’ from you folks. I hoped that months down the line, we might get some technical assistance, and maybe a little money for next year. This has been amazing. I’m just trying to keep up with how fast it’s moving.”

“Well, things just happened to fall into place on this one. When that happens, we try to make maximum use of the situation. I’ll have Cheryl email you my contact information. Whenever you have any questions, or anything I may be able to help with, feel free to contact me. Of course, we need to let Judith and Cheryl run this project themselves as part of their education. I haven’t worked with Cheryl very long, but she seems a very capable young woman. I’ve worked with Judith quite a bit, on the other hand, because she’s a rising star in our company. She has exceptional leadership skills. Between them, I have no doubt that they will do an excellent job.”

“I can say the same thing about Cheryl. She’s an exceptionally talented young lady. I’ve known her for years. Her elder brother was one of my post docs. That’s why I felt confident giving her this problem to solve on her own. So far, it looks like I was right.”

“There’s one other thing,” Wheeler said. “I suggested that Cheryl spend time down there making contacts she’ll need to do the research. I understand that you guys are located in Miami Beach. I assume she could rent a car to visit places up and down the coast. I’ve also some people I’d like her to meet in the Bahamas, Jamaica, and the Virgin Islands. Will that be possible, or am I asking too much?”

“It will depend on how many places she needs to go whether there is time in one week to do it. There’s a private jet, a fast boat, and various kinds of ground transportation at her disposal. I plan to be here all week, too, with nothing to do but help with this project. I’ll make sure Cheryl gets where she needs to go, and I don’t think she’ll need to rent a car unless she wants to.”

“Alright,” Wheeler said. “Please put Cheryl back on the line, and thanks for all your help.”

“Cheryl, he wants to talk to you,” Doc said, handing her the phone.

Taking it, Bud said: “Hi! ... Thanks. I won’t let you down. ... Yeah, it’ll take me a few minutes to get my laptop cranked up – breakfast turned into a planning meeting, so I haven’t even dug it out of my stateroom, yet. Give me about fifteen minutes, and I’ll send it to you. ... Okay, thanks again. ... Bye.”

“Doc,” she lamented, “it’s beginning to look like we aren’t going to get that motorcycle ride in. I’ve gotta email my professor your contact information, and everything I can dig up on the Q-T about Suby’s company. Then, I might as well clean out my email. I

really ought to get together with Red on what we're doing this afternoon. I don't even know where we're going to be doing this presentation. I don't know where I should go to work, or anything."

"There's an old saying," Doc said, sympathetically: " 'Work is the curse of the drinking class.' I don't know where it came from."

"It's from Oscar Wilde," Mary told him. "Bud, you can set up right here, if you want to. If you need more privacy or less noise, there's a small desk in your stateroom, or you could set up in the forward salon. I believe that's where you'll probably make your presentation, anyway. Just go straight forward from your stateroom. Mark will want to use his office when he gets here, so I'd stay out of there. It's on the port side off the forward salon. There's also a small conference room on the starboard side. There's a head right next to it on the starboard side, for when you need that."

"I guess I'll come out here," Bud said, "so I can quiz Suby and Doc about the information I need from them. Then, I'll go back to my stateroom to play email. Baby, when do you want to get together about the presentation?"

"Why don't you and Doc take the bike out for lunch when you finish your email," Red responded. "Then, we can get together in the salon when you get back."

## 11

Five hours later, Red was kicking off their presentation to Mark, Suby, and Doc. Doc knew it all by heart because he'd served as Red and Bud's audience for several rehearsals.

Both women had done presentations before, of course. Red had run several meetings a week with her project team back in Arizona, and didn't even rehearse presentations anymore. Wheeler required all of his graduate students to make a verbal progress report to his assembled team every week, so Bud had a lot of recent public-speaking experience as well.

This, however, was a little different. They were planning it as a canned presentation to be made for multiple funding agencies whose representatives might not have the technical background needed to understand their project. Also, neither Red nor Bud had ever made a sales presentation, which is what they were doing: selling their project to agencies as the best place to invest their available funds. Finally, Red and Bud had never made a joint presentation together, with all the coordination required to make it come off smoothly. So, they'd decided to make several trial runs over the past three days, using Doc as a guinea-pig audience, to smooth out the presentation, and make sure they covered what they needed to cover, and leave out enough to give their audience questions to ask.

They'd decided to use their presentation to Mark as a dress rehearsal for assumed future presentations to strangers, so they'd brought appropriate business-formal attire to wear. The idea was to appear attractive in a non-sensual way to subliminally evoke a sympathetic reaction from the male executives they expected to encounter, while not offending those who were female. The strategy was expected to garner sympathy from female viewers as well, who would be expected to dress the same way for the same reasons. You wanted to appear attractive, Doc pointed out, but wanted your audience concentrating on what you have to say, not fantasizing about making out with you.

Red wore a dove-gray summer-weight suit with a pale pink blouse open at the neck enough to show a triple string of cultured pearls, but no cleavage. The suit's skirt was form hugging to feature her long, narrow figure, but reached to mid-calf to avoid exposing shapely legs. Red wore black patent-leather shoes with a one-inch heel to prove she wasn't afraid of her height.

Bud's outfit was similar, but had narrow blue and white vertical stripes – too narrow to be discerned from a distance – instead of a solid color. Her blouse was similar to Red's, but yellow in color. Her necklace was an amethyst pendant on a light gold chain. The heels on her maroon pumps were a bit higher than Red's, but not out of what would be considered the “comfortable” range.

Both women wore gold studs for earrings, rather than something flashier.

Red was glad she'd heeded Doc's advice about tattoos months ago in Daytona Beach. He'd told her to hold off until she found something she wanted to wear for the rest of her life. She hadn't expected, at the time, to be standing where she was, making the presentation she was making, and to the people she expected to be making it for, but now she was, and was glad she didn't have to worry about their reaction to any tattoos she might have picked up.

Bud hadn't needed the advice. She's always been out for excitement, adventure, and really wild things, and knew that anything that didn't wash off limited what she could get away with. Since she always planned to get away with a lot ... .

Doc had warned them that their audiences would be under no such constraints about what they should wear. They'd be presenting to people wearing everything from suits and ties, to beachwear. So, they were not uncomfortable when Doc walked in wearing cut off jeans, an untucked polo shirt, and no shoes; Suby wore a rugby shirt with horizontal orange stripes, knee-length baggy tan shorts, and deck shoes; and Mark looked like he'd just stepped in off a golf course, except for wearing dark blue sneakers with white soles instead of golf cleats. The contrast between the presenters and presentees was a normal part of the activity they were engaged in.

The presentation, of course, went off exactly as Red and Bud had planned. Even the technical difficulty that wily Mistress Judith, Nymphomaniac Executive had staged to prove they could recover from unanticipated difficulties seemed to have its desired effect. Tapping into Doc's experience with the funding process, they were able to anticipate what information their audience would need and want, and provide just enough information to elicit the questions they wanted to be asked. Doc had, as he'd promised, kept his mouth completely shut during the whole time, so Red and Bud could do their thing before a virgin audience.

Red and Bud were a little surprised when, after their presentation was over, Mark simply said, with a blank expression: "Thank you very much, ladies. If you don't mind, I'd like to discuss this with Doc and Suby privately. Could you wait in the aft salon?"

In other words: "Please go away."

Not sure if they'd blown it, Red closed her laptop and disconnected it from the video display system, then she and Bud filed out. They wandered back to the aft salon, and sat in two of the club chairs there in stunned silence. Neither dared look the other in the eye.

In the forward salon, Mark said: "They did a great job, Doc. How much coaching did you have to do?"

"I just advised them on what to expect. What questions they had to cover, and so forth. It was mostly moral support and encouragement. What do you think of how Cheryl handled herself?"

“She’s obviously exceptionally smart, and seems to have a lot of guts. She worked well with Judith, too. She was very professional. A couple of times, however, I thought she was going to ad lib something, then thought better and stifled it.”

“She’s normally what you might call ‘ uninhibited,’ and she’s still not sure how far to go in a situation like this. She just needs more experience. She’s actually got a spectacular personality when she lets loose.”

“Suby,” Doc asked, turning to him, “do you still think this is something your company would want to get behind? Is there anything they need to change for that meeting? In fact, is that meeting still on?”

“Why would it not be on?” Suby retorted.

“I’m just exploring the possibility that what you saw today is not what you expected.”

“It was more professional than I expected,” Suby replied. “They clearly worked very hard on it. I was surprised they knew so much about costs. Describing lessons learned from previous expeditions was a surprise. How did they know?”

“Some of it came from Cheryl’s professor. They also talked to people at Wood’s Hole, the Smithsonian, and the National Geographic Society.”

“Was that your idea?” Mark asked with a sly smile.

“I suggested Wood’s Hole during our first conversation about this project, but they came up with the contacts at the Smithsonian and Nat Geo. I don’t know how much they got from Cheryl’s professor. I hadn’t talked with him before this morning, although I knew they had discussed it with him.”

Turning back to Suby, Doc said: “They put in the stuff about how sponsoring their project might benefit your company on their own today. I hadn’t heard that before. I’d kinda hoped they’d think of it, but hadn’t talked to them about it. What did you think about that?”

“Red had been quizzing me about our goals and mission,” Suby replied. “Clearly, she was paying attention to what I told her. I did not realize she was gathering information to put into her presentation. It was very smart. I’m impressed. Yes, I think she covered it well, and will get a positive response from our executives.”

“Is there anything we should tell them to change?” Doc asked. “I hate to give them nothing but positive feedback. They need something to work on.”

“Well,” Mark suggested, laughing, “tell Judith to lose the fake technical difficulties. We’ve all used the systems too much to be taken in by that.”

## 12

“Why’d you creeps have to make us sit in the corner for fifteen minutes,” Red asked Mark over dinner that night, which had, as Doc intended, turned into a celebratory dinner. “We thought we’d blown it, and you were going to disown us.”

When Doc had finally come out to give them the good news and give them a synopsis of the critique, Red had punched him hard in the upper arm. Then both women had pulled him into a tearfully grateful three-way embrace.

“Get used to it,” Mark said with an indulgent smile. “Nobody’s going to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ right away to supplying you two with hundreds of thousands of dollars. Doc will and I will because we love you, Judith, but nobody else will. Expect to spend days or weeks, maybe even months, waiting for an answer after getting a stony-faced ‘Thank you’ from people you’ve just spent half an hour or more trying to sell your project to. They’re afraid to say ‘yes’ in case the next presentation is even better, and they’re afraid to say ‘no’ because they might want to give you the money in the end. That’s the nature of what you’re doing. It hurts, but that’s the way it is. It’s hard for them, too.”

Red and Bud looked to Doc for confirmation. He just nodded agreement.

They’d had an early dinner because the opening-night bash for the artist’s show started at seven o’clock, rather than eight. During the day, Mary had made a phone call, which resulted in invitations waiting for them at the members’ entrance when they arrived. On a whim, Mary had broken with tradition and arranged the invitations to be for the ladies “and guest.” The girls thought it was a great idea. Doc was the only one of the men who appreciated the humor. He thought it was great fun to be allowed in as Bud’s guest. Suby didn’t notice, and Mark didn’t care.

Red and Bud had dressed for dinner by the simple expedient of removing their businesslike suit jackets, opening their blouses two buttons further down, and putting on the jewelry they’d brought to wear to the yacht club dance Saturday night. Doc appeared in an arresting white western-style suit, white shirt, and black bolo set in silver. Suby wore a pair of black slacks and a pastel blue sport coat over a pink shirt and no tie, which looked very Miami Beach. Mark wore a light gray business suit with a red tie, while Mary wore a light green dress with her usual halter top and knee-length pleated skirt. Doc quipped that with her flaming red hair and red freckles, she looked very Christmasy.

Mark and Mary spent most of the time talking to their Miami-based friends who happened to be there, and barely glanced at the art. Bud, Doc, Red, and Suby, however, spent the two hours until the museum closed taking in the paintings and sculptures in that

entire wing of the museum. They met the artist, who turned out to be a tall, quiet man in his late forties, who was grateful for, but somewhat overwhelmed by, the attention his work was finally getting after all those years of neglect.

The quartet listened in amused silence while a woman who fancied herself an art critic held forth about what each of the paintings meant. The stunned artist politely agreed with everything she said, although the meanings she read into his work clearly were news to him. Doc thought the whole experience was a hoot. Bud and Red agreed with him. Suby had no experience of the American art scene, and thus no opinion whatsoever.

Ten minutes earlier, the artist had been explaining to Doc that his art was entirely non-representational, and his sole goal was providing the viewer with “a pleasant visual experience.” He called his technique “chamber music for the eyes.”

After the art-critic lady had left, they told the artist how much they enjoyed looking at what he’d created. They enjoyed his use of form and color, and said they looked forward to seeing more of his work in the future.

Doc bought a four-foot by six-foot painting that gave the impression of dynamic motion with just three wide, swirling ribbons of primary color on a white background. He wrote out a check for two thousand dollars on the spot, then ran off to find someone who could arrange for it to be drop shipped to SST.

He wanted it to go on the wall behind the receptionist’s desk. They’d move the SST logo from the wall to the front of the desk. He sent Pat an email from his cellphone explaining that it was coming and what he wanted to do with it. It would be there when he got back to Arizona.

The museum closed at nine o’clock, and Red wanted to find a blues bar to go dancing. She hadn’t been near anything resembling exercise since Wednesday, and was feeling it.

Mary, however, hadn’t had Mark around for nearly a week, and wanted to take him back to the boat to do what they typically did when left alone on the boat after being separated for several days. He thought that was a good idea, too.

They settled on a plan that had the young people walking two blocks to a place Suby knew about, while Darrell drove Mark and Mary back to the boat in the black stretch limo. Darrell would then drive it back to the club to be available whenever the four friends were ready to leave.

They found they were somewhat overdressed for the bar Suby led them to, which was more of a tee-shirt, jeans, and sneakers joint. They, however, figured nobody would bother four people who came in together, sat together making their own party, and the shortest of whom was five-ten.

The band was taking a break when they came in, and everyone had sat down or crowded around the bar. There was no table free that was large enough to accommodate them. A couple sitting alone at a large, round table right in front of the bandstand waved them over to join them.

“Please sit!” said the man, who was in his late twenties or early thirties. “There’s plenty of room. My name is Fred, and this is Ginger.”

He was medium-tall, thin, and had a Brillo-pad bush of tightly curled red hair. Ginger was also thin, but showed the curves of a twenty-something woman who got plenty of exercise. Her short hair showed the reddish-gold color that light brown hair takes on when exposed to a lot of sun. Both wore colorful tie-died tee-shirts that they’d obviously recently bought at the same store. His hung out over baggy knee-length shorts similar to what Suby had worn to Red and Bud’s presentation, and leather sandals. She wore white capri pants with a lighter-weight pair of sandals.

“Why thank you,” Doc said, walking over and starting introductions. “Folks call me ‘Doc.’ This is my little sister ‘Red.’ Her buddy, whom some people call ‘Bud,’ whom I’d like to think is now my buddy. And Red’s date, ‘Suby.’ I think that accounts for everyone. May I buy you a thank-you round?”

“No need,” Fred said, indicating their beers. “We just got these, but thanks for offering. This table is so big, and there’s no need for us to hog it all. Do you live around here?”

“Suby does,” Red jumped in. “Bud and I live up in Boston, and that thing,” she pointed to Doc, “usually hangs out in Arizona, as you can tell by his outfit. Doc, where’s your hat?”

“In Arizona, where it belongs.”

“Why’d you bring that suit and not the hat? The black one you wore with it in Nevada would have been perfect.”

“I didn’t bring either. The suit you saw in Nevada is still hanging in my closet. It’s way too heavy for Florida in summer. I bought this one today while you two were getting ready for your presentation. Di’ ja think I was gonna just sit in a deck chair waitin’ for ya? Apparently, you didn’t notice that this one is a lightweight summer suit. They didn’t have a hat I wanted.”

“So, is this vacation?” Fred asked, curious about what would bring them all together in Miami Beach from all over the country.

“Cheryl, it’s your turn,” Doc announced. “You explain.”

“It’s not really vacation, except maybe for Suby,” Bud attempted. “Red and I are down here to raise funds for our research. Doc came in from Arizona to provide moral support. We did our first presentation today, and got promised an important grant. We’re out celebrating. Is that a good explanation, Doc?”

“Well said, my dear.”

“By the way,” she told him in a complete *non sequitur*, “I want your body.”

“And you shall have it,” Doc laughed. Red elbowed Bud in the ribs. Suby looked nonplussed.

Fred and Ginger looked at each other as if they didn’t know what to think. Oh, well. It *was* a bar, and these people had probably already been drinking. When you invite strangers to share your table, you shouldn’t be surprised at what you get. Actually, that had been the idea. If you invite new people to your table, you *may* fall into an adventure.

## 13

“You look kinda familiar,” Ginger said to Red.

“Doc, can’t we do something about this?” was Red’s response. “I can’t even go to a bar without being recognized. Is there anything I can do to stop it?”

“Not without washing off all your makup, shaving your head, wearing sack cloth, and shrinking about a foot,” he said.

Sighing, Red admitted: “I’m Judith McKenna, and since that business in Nevada I can’t seem to go anywhere without somebody recognizing me. Someday I hope it will wear off.”

“So, you must be Doc Manchek?” Ginger asked.

“Guilty as charged,” he said.

“And you must be Eve Salazar the news reporter, but I thought you were a brunette?”

“No, I’m Cheryl Thompson, the archeologist. I’ve never met Eve, but I understand she is a brunette.” Bud looked to Doc for confirmation.

“Yes, she is a brunette – every inch of her,” he reported, then with a faraway, wistful look, added, “A rather spectacular brunette at that, with a most fabulous skill set. Mmmm!”

He smiled, and bounced his eyebrows in fun.

Red kicked him under the table.

“Ow! What was that for?” he complained.

“General principles,” Red replied. “You deserved it.”

“Uh, oh,” he warned, “Mistress Judith is getting annoyed. I guess we shouldn’t talk about lovely, luscious, ...” unable to settle on any additional adjectives beginning with L, he finished with, “... Latinas.”

Ginger looked to Bud, confused about why talking about one of Doc's old girlfriends should set his sister off, instead of her.

"I'm just a newbie Doc squeeze," Bud explained, seeing the question in their eyes. "I'm not intimidated because I know where he'll be sleeping tonight, and I expect to be there with no bells on. Besides, I happen to know that Eve left him for another woman."

"Who is now a rising-star programmer in my employ," Doc pointed out to prove that he harbored no ill feelings.

"Red, however, still hasn't gotten over him," Bud added, playfully.

Red looked back and forth between Bud and Doc as if trying to figure out whose back to bury the dagger in first.

"I thought she was your sister!" Ginger practically squealed at Doc.

"Not really," Bud explained for him. "They just play at it. It gives her an excuse to hang around flirting with him all the time. Otherwise, she'd have to admit to being in love with him."

Red looked at her as if she'd found a home for her dagger.

"But, I think we'd better get off that subject before blood starts spurting," Bud added, looking nervously at Red. She didn't know how much of this Red could take without blowing a gasket, or what might happen if she did. She thought it might be imminent. Red knew it was.

By that time, the band had come back from break, and started a slow number. Bud took Red tenderly by the arm, and said: "C'mon, Baby."

Suddenly, Red's expression changed. She remembered how much she needed this girl, who'd been her best friend for so long, and how much she loved her as well. She didn't want to fight with her. She wanted her to make the anger go away.

Giving Bud an abashed, remorseful look, Red got up and followed her to the dance floor, where they started a close waltz.

Seeing the looks on Fred and Ginger's faces, Doc said to nobody in particular: "Looks like Red's gone down the rabbit hole again. Cheryl will pull her out, if anyone can. "

"So, what brings you to Miami Beach," Doc asked Fred in an effort to change the subject.

"We are on vacation," he replied. "We go back Sunday. ... Is she going to be alright?"

“Ultimately,” Doc replied. “She’s kinda lost her bearings. Been through a lot since last Spring, and isn’t quite sure who she is, anymore. Lots of mood swings while she sorts it out. What do you do when you’re not on vacation?”

Doc was still trying to put the conversation on a new track.

“I’m a loan officer with a Chicago bank,” Fred allowed the subject to change, while staring at Red and Bud. Red was now leaned over to lay the side of her face on Bud’s shoulder, while holding her in a tight embrace. Bud was also holding her close as they danced, and petting the back of her head. “Ginger is a CPA,” Fred concluded.

“Who does your taxes?” Ginger asked, hopefully, taking her eyes off what Red and Bud were doing to see if she could land a new client.

Smiling, Doc said: “The company accounting department. The most important thing I learned in financial accounting class was to hire good accountants, and trust them to do their thing.”

“That’s good advice,” Ginger gave the stock CPA response.

“Don’t the stockholders complain about your using company accountants for your personal taxes?” Fred asked.

“There’s only one stockholder, and I’m pleased with the arrangement.”

“Oh!” Fred said, impressed. “So, what do you do?”

“*The company* does aerospace research on a contract basis,” Doc explained. “I mostly kuck around, getting in everyone else’s way. Sometimes somebody needs help, and I can lend a hand. It keeps me busy.”

“And, Mr. ... Suby is it?” Fred turned to him, “What do you do?”

“I am the vice president for business development at Blue Guru Systems,” Suby replied. “Perhaps you have heard of us? We build data storage facilities and servers for Internet service providers.”

He, too, was watching Red and Bud carefully. He was feeling jealousy pangs.

Seeing Bud gesturing to him, Doc said: “Suby, it looks like its our turn. You take Cheryl. I’ll take Red.”

By now, Suby felt like he was on quicksand. Since Doc seemed to have everything under control, however, he decided to trust him and go with the flow. He followed Doc to the dance floor. When Doc tapped Bud’s shoulder, she released Red into his arms, and

turned to Suby.

“I’m sorry, Doc,” Red said as he swept her into the waltz. “I don’t know why I acted like that.”

“I do. It’s okay,” he replied. “You’ve had a hellova week. Cheer up. I’ve got your back, and so does Cheryl. We’re going to tickle you until you smile.”

At that, she actually did smile. A little wan, but it was an actual smile.

“Poor Suby,” she said. “What will he think?”

“I think it’s time for you to remind him who his date is,” Doc advised, waltzing her over to where Bud and Suby were dancing, so they could exchange partners.

“Thanks, Doc,” Bud said when the exchange was completed and the couples moved apart. “I didn’t know what to do. I’m sorry I set her off like that. I should know better.”

“Well, you’re a little buzzed from the wine at the opening,” Doc replied. “It interferes with fine nuances of perception and judgement. You guys patched it up. She’s fine, now.”

“Could we sit down?” Bud asked. “Red’s been exercising me to death all week, and I did a lot of standing in front of the class today. My knees are kinda rubbery.”

Doc led her back to their table, where Fred and Ginger were trying to figure out if they were having fun, or should they go someplace else.

## 14

“Damage plastered over,” Doc informed them. “Red should be fine now. Or, she will be if *my* new lover, here, would quit needling my *ersatz* baby sister, so she could concentrate on *her* new lover.”

“To whom,” Bud asked, not quite following what he’d said, “are you referring?”

“I’m not quite sure,” Doc said in surprise. He suddenly realized that the referent of “her” was ambiguous, and he couldn’t resolve it, himself. “I think I may have meant both of you. You’ve both been neglecting your dates to feel each other up. Remember Mary’s instructions.”

“How did you know about that?” Bud asked in surprise. She couldn’t picture Mary reporting every conversation with her daughter to Doc, yet she didn’t think anyone else had told him about Mary’s reading them the riot act.

She looked at him seriously for a few seconds, then shook her head.

“Red warned me about your using The Force,” she said. “So, where have you hidden the mirrors?”

Instead of answering, Doc just shrugged his shoulders.

“Suby thought you were kidding,” Bud laughed, mainly for Fred and Ginger’s benefit, “when you told him he’d stepped through the looking glass when he came aboard your boat. I think he’s becoming a believer. I know I am, now.”

“How’re you two holding up?” she asked Fred and Ginger. “Hanging around with Doc, especially when Red’s around to wind him up, can be unnerving.”

“You aren’t exactly a straight arrow, yourself,” Ginger pointed out, thinking about how closely she danced with Red.

“Honey, I’m about as straight as a corkscrew,” Bud intimated, driving the point home with a lecherous wink at her.

Ginger surprised herself, and Fred, by giggling. She was enjoying being so close to so much naughtiness with (apparently) no danger to her own virtue. She had her husband with her, so what could go wrong?

She was pretty naïve.

“So,” Ginger asked Doc, “are you guys going to dance together, too?”

“Nooo, I think not,” he replied.

“I don’t know about Suby,” Bud explained to Fred and Ginger, “but the word is that Doc’s as queer as a twenty-dollar bill.”

“Twenty dollar bills aren’t queer,” Ginger pointed out.

“That’s what I said when I heard it. Doc, do you know about Suby?”

“Baby, you’ve spent as much time with him as I have. I’ve no idea.”

“So, Red’s on the Doc radar screen, and Suby’s not. ... Am I?”

In answer, Doc turned to her and smothered her with a long, lingering kiss so intense it made *Ginger* break out in a sweat. Once again, the outside Universe fled far away, and Bud found herself alone with Doc in a warm, happy place.

She didn’t realize that this was *satori*.

“Mmmm,” Bud said.

“Red says Suby’s a big *Kama Sutra* fan,” Bud said when situational awareness returned roughly thirty seconds later, and she remembered where they were in the conversation. “What does *it* say on the subject?”

“I’m am *not* a *Kama Sutra* fan,” Doc countered, “so I’m not the one to ask. I only read it once, and don’t remember it’s saying much about guys doing it with each other. I vaguely remember it being mentioned, but remember nothing specific.”

“The book lost credibility with me,” he continued, “when it said wives should be ready to advance their husbands’ careers by cuckolding them with the king. That struck me as bad advice. Michael Crichton provided what I think is a very accurate description of the likely result in *Pirate Latitudes*. She died of a venereal disease she’d picked up from banging sailors years after shooting her husband in the groin, then drinking claret while she watched him bleed to death.”

He concluded with: “When the *Kama Sutra* went on to suggest that husbands should be ready to pass their wives around to their friends, I decided to take everything in there with a grain of salt.”

“I dunno,” Bud teased, “*that* one sounds like fun. Don’t you want me to have fun?”

“I want you to have anything you want, Baby,” Doc told her. She suddenly realized he meant it as a promise. “But, both practices strike me as the fastest way to destroy a marriage.”

“I don’t believe it,” Bud said in mock amazement, filing the promise away in a place she kept important secrets. “Wait ‘til it gets around that Doc Manchek is a prude! That’s not your reputation.”

“I don’t know or care about my reputation,” Doc said seriously. This subject was starting to annoy him, and he was not used to getting annoyed.

Could this girl be getting under his skin?

Yes.

With Red in there, already, it could get crowded!

But cozy. He thought it might be a good thing.

“If you’re going to set up an exclusive relationship,” he decided to explain, “it should be exclusive. If you want to run around, then run around, but don’t pretend you aren’t running around, and don’t make vows that you won’t be running around.”

“Hmm,” Bud said, eyeing him critically, but making no further comment. She liked running around, but maybe ... . Kids and puppies?

All this talk about sexual experimentation was getting Ginger excited, however, and giving Fred fantasies as well. On a whim, he started hinting that the two women should go up and dance together. The band had by then amped up to a number with a boogie-woogie beat. He was curious to see what would happen.

“No,” Bud kiboshed the whole idea. “My legs are killing me. I just want to take my shoes off and prop my feet up on this chair.”

“The weekend’s just beginning,” Doc pointed out to her with concern.

“And I want to make it to the end.” Bud said. “And, no long walks on the boardwalk tomorrow morning, either. Just keep me curled up in that forward berth of yours until indecently late, then prop me up in a deck chair with lots of coffee and fruit juice. Anyplace you want to transport me to will have to be on that motorcycle. I ain’t a-walkin’ anywhere.”

She demonstrated her resolve by pulling her chair over against Doc's, arranging the chair in which Red had sat strategically for her to prop her feet on, and kicking her shoes off. Hugging Doc's arm, she nestled her head on his shoulder and fell into a satisfied trance, just twitching her feet in time to the beat.

Percieving that Bud and Doc weren't going to provide any more entertainment for a while, Ginger grabbed Fred's hand, and led him over to the dance floor. Soon, Doc realized they'd collaborated with Red and Suby to invent a new dance that combined elements of jitterbug and square dancing. It was a jitterbug that involved passing partners back and forth, like in a square dance. He was amused to note that Red was teaching them some dirty dancing steps she'd picked up from Annie, as well.

He figured that Bud really must be leg-weary, or she'd join in. It seemed to be right up her alley. Instead, she just hugged his arm contentedly, and watched.

It took him several minutes to realize the truth. It wasn't so much that she was leg weary, but that she was more interested in cuddling with him, than flirting with them.

That's how buzzed *he* was.

## 15

Nobody saw anybody the next morning until ten o'clock, when Bud and Doc wandered over to the *Mary McKenna* in hope of finding some breakfast leftovers to scrounge. That was, of course, exactly what Mary hoped they'd do. She really liked having her family gathered around, and made sure Cook set out a buffet with warming trays.

Mary, having been the source of Red's strong maternal instinct, had mentally adopted Cheryl as a second daughter. She enjoyed now having two girls to look after, instead of just one. Since they'd each picked out their own guys, and promised to forego fooling around with each other, it was looking like the big family she'd always wanted. She had high hopes of lots of grandchildren to spoil.

Darrell hadn't been sure last night that he approved of Red inviting a strange couple – by then thoroughly inebriated as well as flushed from exercise – to continue their party on Suby's boat. He especially didn't like that, after he dropped them off, Doc and Bud quietly slipped onto the *Strange Brew*, instead of joining them. He trusted Doc to keep Red in line. When he saw that the woman had positioned herself between Red and Suby in the back of the limo, and that the man sat awfully close to Red, he pursed his lips in disapproval.

Of course, he did not let them see him expressing disapproval. Moral judgements were not part of his job description.

He had looked at Doc to see what his reaction was, but he and Bud were totally focused on each other. Well, maybe. He noticed that Doc still checked from time to time to note exactly where Red was, and what she was doing, and scan around for anything that might affect her, until she disappeared into the cabin on Suby's boat.

So, he was still on the job, protecting her.

Darrell decided he could leave keeping Red from doing something she'd regret later to Doc. That was *his* job. If Doc trusted Red to take care of herself on Suby's boat, that was good enough for Darrell.

He felt even better when Red called him about one o'clock to drive her guests "wherever they want to go." Darrell noted that they held hands the whole way, but looked guiltily at each other. Darrell surmised that Red and Suby had had their way with both of them, and the couple were wondering what that meant for their marriage.

Darrell didn't care, as long as Red came out of it okay.

“So, how’d you like your first swinging experience?” Bud asked Red when she and Doc found her wolfing down eggs, bacon, and sausage with Suby at the table on the bridge deck.

Red gave a little startled jump, and looked guiltily at her mother, who was sitting at the end of the table. Bud was still hung over, and hadn’t noticed Mary. She felt like a fool.

Mary’s face carried a stony look. She knew what had happened on Suby’s boat. Reporting such things *was* in Darrell’s job description. She was pleased that it hadn’t involved Bud, but annoyed that it had happened at all. Still, it indicated that Red was taking seriously her order to “get her field plowed as much as possible.” Mary was, however, reconsidering the wisdom of that order.

Seeing all the reactions, Doc just looked amused.

Mary looked at him, wishing he’d step in. She wanted to warn Red that the swinger lifestyle and the kids and puppies lifestyle were incompatible, and hoped Doc would be her ally.

Doc saw what was going through Mary’s mind, and thought about it. Then, he gave Mary a little negative shake of his head. They should leave it alone, and let Red figure it out for herself.

“I’ll tell you about it later,” Red said to Bud. It was really girl talk, anyway; as inappropriate in front of the men as it was in front of her mother.

“Ohh-kay,” Bud replied, clapped her trap shut, and headed for the buffet.

“Good morning, everyone,” Doc said, cavalierly. “I trust we all had rewarding evenings, whatever we did. I certainly did. Where’s Mark?”

“He’s off doing boat stuff,” Mary announced, still annoyed. “He waited around until nine-thirty for you, but when you didn’t show, he went off with Captain Warren. He made some crack about you being more interested in Cheryl’s parts than boat parts.”

“Cheryl’s cuddlier,” Doc replied, smiling to Bud, who was monitoring the conversation from in front of the scrambled eggs warmer. She was shoveling eggs onto a colorful *talavera poblana* dinner plate that looked heavy enough to survive a fall from table height to the deck.

“These rich people know how to live!” she thought. She didn’t want to go home to her little cramped apartment in Chelsea that she had to share with those three bitches. Red had better make up her mind about Doc soon!

Red didn't care about boat parts, or rich-people lifestyles. She did care about Suby's parts, and liked fooling around with them. She liked fooling around with them a lot! She also liked fooling around with Bud's parts. And, she liked playing games with Doc. She should be having a hellova good time this weekend.

Then, why was she getting annoyed so much?

What seemed to annoy her the most was seeing Bud and Doc making goo-goo eyes at each other. She'd never minded Doc flirting with Eve, or hearing about him fooling around with supermodels or female ASU grad students, so that couldn't be it. Was she *that* much in love with Bud? Maybe that was it.

She, too, decided she didn't want Bud going back to that apartment in Chelsea. She had plenty of room at her place, and it had been lonely there by herself all these years. Half the time, she couldn't sleep because that big bed she'd bought for whenever she got lucky seemed awfully empty.

It had been really great this week. Cheryl had stayed over so they could start early to work on their project plan and presentation. Since they'd broken the ice with their performance Tuesday night (ostensibly for Red's watchdogs, but Red had a suspicion it was really for themselves), it seemed stupid to put Cheryl anywhere but the other side of that bed.

Red had been sleeping like a baby. They'd worked hard all day, then watched TV together when they got too tired for creative thought. Finally, they'd crawled into bed together, fooling around for a while, then curling up like spoons in a drawer.

The next thing Red knew, it was morning. Red knew that it was the curling up that made her sleep so well.

## 16

“Bud, please move your stuff into my place when we get home,” Red said, when she finally got Bud alone in the small conference room off the forward salon. They could be pretty sure they wouldn’t be disturbed there.

They’d left Mary, Doc, and Suby sitting at the breakfast table via the simple expedient of telling them they were going off for some girl talk. It made a lot of sense for them to go off together to discuss the previous night’s experiences without prying ears. But, Red had some more pressing business for them to settle, first.

“There’s lots of room, and we can get a lot more done if you’re not commuting back and forth to Chelsea.”

Bud, who knew that wasn’t the real reason, sat in stony silence waiting for Red to get honest.

“I love you,” Red finally said, “and want you with me. I don’t want to be alone anymore.”

“That’s better, Baby,” Bud told her. “I don’t want to go back to Chelsea either. I’ve *always* loved you.”

Immediately, Mistress Judith, Nymphomaniac Executive, took over to organize the move. She quizzed Bud about what she had that she wanted moved, estimated the required space and compared it to the available nooks and crannies in her apartment, and roughed out a Gantt chart for the project, including tasks for finding a mover, waiting for the mover’s availability, packing up Bud’s stuff, physically performing the move, unpacking and putting things away, and making love to celebrate their new life.

Bud was wise enough to realize the “new life” would be short lived. She vaguely wondered how long it would last, and what she would do when Red abandoned her for Doc.

Ahh, to Hell with it. She’d handle it when it happened. If it took too long, *she’d* move in with Doc, and let Red stew in her own juice. It would serve her right.

Anyway ....

“So, how’d you like your first swinger experience,” she asked Red to change the subject.

“Ohhh, shit!” Red exclaimed, excitedly.

“Suby, by the way, isn’t queer, and neither is Fred,” she added. “But, they’re open minded enough to double-team.”

“So,” Bud prompted, “give with the details.”

“Nobody was sure how to get it started, except Suby,” Red explained. “He started making out with me. Once I started getting hot, he started undressing me, then feeling me up. Fred and Ginger watched what we were doing, and copied us. Pretty soon, we girls were naked, but the guys still hadn’t even opened their flys.”

“When Ginger and I were really wet, Suby signaled for her to come over, and join in. She mostly wanted to make out with Suby because she’s a virgin with girls, or was. Suby encouraged this, but signaled that he wanted me in there, too.”

“I realized that Suby knew Ginger was a virgin with girls, and was easing her into making out with me. When she got that idea, Suby kind of backed off, and let us go at it.”

“He and Fred enjoyed watching us, and opened their flyes to masturbate. I was surprised what a turn on it was to have them watching us make out. Ginger got really excited, and started pumping out orgasm after orgasm.”

“I thought she was faking it because we hadn’t gotten beyond hugging and kissing. But, when I put my fingers in her vagina, it was already full of clam juice!”

“So, then I started stroking my fingers in and out of her vagina, while sucking her nipples. She kept coming and coming. Next thing I know, she’s got her fingers in my vagina, and is stroking it like an expert.”

“Pretty soon, I came on her hand – by this time she had three fingers in there – and I dumped juice all over the place. You know how that is.”

“Ohh, yess!” Bud replied, with a merry sparkle in her eyes. Red realized *they’d* be making love when she finished her story. It was inevitable.

“When Ginger wiped it all over my groin, then started wiping it inside my anus, too, I thought maybe I’d been wrong about her experience level, so I asked: ‘Has she been with a woman before?’”

“Fred said he didn’t think so. Ginger smiled and just kinda hummed, but then she looked down and shook her head, ‘no.’ I told her she was doing well, and rewarded her by coming on her hand again.”

“So, I started smearing her juice into her anus, too. Apparently, she’s into anal, like you are, because she started squirming to

get my fingers all the way in there.”

“By this time, I’ve got my two middle fingers all the way into her anus with my thumb in her vagina, and she’s got me in the same grip.”

“Meanwhile, the guys had pulled off their clothes, and were stroking big erections. Ginger’s eyes sparkled at that, and she leaned over to suck Suby’s penis. So, I did the same with Fred.”

“Ginger seemed disappointed when Suby blew his load in her mouth. Knowing Suby, however, I told her not to worry, and sucked the load out of her mouth, then went back to sucking on Fred. I knew Suby would be back pretty soon.”

“Now, you’ve got to understand that I was sitting on the lounge in Suby’s salon. He’s got this big leather lounge that kinda wraps around, and the middle part folds out into a double bed. Ginger and I had been sitting in the middle between Suby and Fred. When Suby called Ginger over and got her started making out with me, she’d ended up with one knee between my legs and the other where she’d been sitting. When I started going down on Fred, that put me pretty much on my back on the lounge, with Ginger on top of me, but at an angle to go down on Suby, who was sitting on my other side. When Suby came in her mouth, and I sucked it out, that put Ginger more or less parallel to me, with one leg and her crotch between my knees, with her ass waving in the air.”

“Fred had seen this, and went around behind to ass fuck her. Apparently, they do this a lot.”

“Okay, now Ginger likes that, but is in an uncomfortable position, with her weight on her belly and one leg, while I have my thumb in her vagina, and two fingers up her ass. When she feels Fred pushing his penis into her anus beside with my fingers, she kinda slides off between my legs. My arms aren’t *that* long, so I lose my grip.”

“So, now she’s doggy style between my knees while Fred rams her anus. So, she pulls her fingers out, and starts eating my pussy.”

“That ain’t half bad, so I come all over her face.”

“Instead of drowning, she likes it. She takes a deep breath, and goes back for more by burying her nose in my pussy, and her tongue up my ass.”

“I’ll bet that worked!” Bud suggested.

“Ohh, yeah. Big time! I started coming on her face, and just kept coming, and coming. I was out of control.”

“Next thing I know, Suby’s in there pounding my vagina. He’d had time to recover – he’s fast – and climbed on top of Ginger’s head. That pushed her out of the way, so he’s got me in missionary position, while Fred does Ginger doggy style.”

“I’m not too worried about Suby coming in there because he’s just had an orgasm, and it’ll take him a while to come again. So, I enjoy letting him fuck me barebacked.”

“Ginger starts trying to get Suby’s attention. Looking over, I see Fred’s now lying on his back on the lounge next to me, with his feet on the deck. She’s sitting on his dick with her back to his face. I can only assume that his penis is still in her anus.”

“When she gets Suby’s attention, she leans back, and presents her vagina for Suby to fuck. Suby likes that idea, and can do something about it because by now I’ve got his erection back to full force.”

“Ginger’s on the pill, and wants him to come in there while Fred comes in her ass. Later, she told me it had been a fantasy of hers. Well, my Suby was up to the task. I guess it was up to her expectations, because she squealed like a stuck pig, while coming all over the place. That got Suby ready in a hurry, so he and Fred filled her holes practically at the same time. Afterward, she just slid off onto the deck, and sat there, watching the stuff ooze out. She even asked for a hand mirror!”

“And what were you doing while they were plugging her holes, I wonder?” Bud asked.

“Suby has this air freshener bottle that he’s going to have to replace.”

“So,” Bud summarized, “we’re left with Ginger sitting on the floor, with her legs spread, and using a hand mirror to watch herself dribble all over Suby’s deck.”

“She looked very happy.”

“So, what comes next?”

“Suby served drinks to Fred and me. Ginger just sat there playing with her double-load of semen mixed with her orgasm. Afterward, we managed to hoist Ginger up off the floor and shove her back into her pants and shirt. I don’t think she ever found her underwear. Finally, I called Darrell to take them home.”

## 17

By the time Red and Bud reappeared on deck, late breakfast had segued into late lunch. They had less than an hour to satisfy bellies before Mary came looking for them to start getting ready for the yacht club dance. It was at least going to be the highlight of *Mary's* weekend. She wanted nothing to go wrong with showing her daughter off to the available bachelors.

Red's managerial talents were not just some recent phenomenon arising from her experience at SST informed by coaching from Doc and Mark. She'd learned most of it from her mother.

Back when Mary was a child, public schools started training girls to run a household in junior high. The class was called "Home Economics" for a reason: an important part of it was how to manage a household like a small enterprise. Girls tended to remember the cooking and sewing, but what was being driven into their heads was planning and execution. Mary had earned high grades in Home Ec, as she did with everything else, and she'd spent decades practicing and perfecting her skills.

Mary applied every bit of her managerial skill to her current project: getting Red to make her a granddaughter to spoil. Her current Plan A – Doc – seemed to be sputtering on life support. Plan B was Suby. That had a promising start, and certainly hadn't sputtered (Red pulled him aside regularly for fluid-swapping sessions, and hadn't slept in her cabin once since meeting him). She hadn't, however, developed the single-minded obsession that Mary expected to see in a sure-fire winner.

Mary was thus working on Plan C: some as-yet-unidentified hunk who would set Red's bells jangling loudly enough to drown out everything else.

Maybe he'd be at the dance.

Unfortunately, he was not.

Bud did her best to cooperate with Mary's strategic plan by trying to monopolize Suby while pushing Red to interact with everything else wearing pants. She even got Doc, whom she'd given up trying to fool about anything, to help make sure Red made the rounds.

"Please, Doc," she'd said, "Mary wants Red to meet every eligible guy here. We can't let Suby monopolize her, even if he is her date. I'll keep Suby busy if you'll make sure Red gets around."

Doc knew what the plan was, and would support it. He'd been Mary's friend before even hearing about Red, so he was predisposed to help her get her way. He also knew that it would not hurt, and could only help his *ersatz* baby sister put her life in order. He was a firm believer that knowledge gained through experience was the key to wisdom. This night was an opportunity for Red to gain a lot of experience in a short time, and he would do his part to promote it.

Unlike Bud, and even Mary, Doc recognized that Red was one of the two or three smartest people there, despite the place being packed with high achievers and their children. The others believed in Red and knew she was smart, but only Doc really understood *how* smart. He could usually estimate a person's IQ within ten points after a thirty-second conversation. He could ballpark it with just a brief glance. He'd already glanced at everyone. Red topped the list.

Red being top of the list mentally, there was no way she could miss what her friends were cooking up for more than a few minutes. Trying to finesse her was simply stupid. Instead, Doc just pulled her aside and explained the situation.

"Mary wants to treat this like your debutante ball," he explained to Red. "She thinks the guys here are going to be the most likely to make you happy in the long run, and she's right. You're more likely to find your soul mate here, than wandering around the streets of Boston – or Cambridge."

"But, Suby ...," Red started to say.

"Suby is the first guy you met here that's about the right age. You owe it to yourself to meet the others before settling on him. Bud's going to keep him occupied while you check out the others. I know you've been looking for a husband for four years – at least. Don't quit now."

"What about you?"

Red was concerned that with her gone, *he* might end up the male equivalent of an old maid. What if she found a guy here, or someplace else, and Bud went with Suby? What would become of Doc? She didn't want him to end up being passed around among girls like Annie for the rest of his life. *That would be terrible!*

"You don't worry about me," he responded. "You just worry about you. Right now, all I want is for you to be happy."

"Thank you, Doc," she said, hugging him. "You know, you really are my best friend in the whole world. You're the best friend any girl could ever have."

"Then stop getting mushy, and do what I ask."

With that, he escorted her over to a young man standing at the bar, whose father owned that one-hundred-fifty footer tied up on the other side of the marina.

“Christopher, I’d like you to meet Judith McKenna. Her stepfather’s Mark Shipton, who owns the *Mary McKenna* berthed over near where my boat is. She’s down here visiting from Boston. Judith, Christopher just graduated from Johns Hopkins.” Turning back to Christopher, he asked: “You’re studying to be a doctor, aren’t you? Judith’s working on her Ph.D. in applied mathematics.”

Red started asking Christopher about Johns Hopkins. What was it like there? Doc had exaggerated a little. She’d found a thesis problem, but was still trying to decide where to go for her Ph.D. Would Johns Hopkins be a good place to check out?

Percieving that his part was done, Doc turned to the bartender and asked for a shot of Jameson. The bartender was a pretty lady with strawberry-blonde hair, and a tough personality. You need a tough personality if you’re a pretty lady trying to make a living as a bartender. Doc decided to hang around the bar talking to her for a while. As we all know, he liked pretty ladies with tough personalities.

Christopher asked Red to dance. After that number was over, he brought her to the table where he’d been sitting with some of his friends. A little while later, Doc showed up to drag her off to meet another group. Then, another, and another.

She learned a number of things:

They were all rich;

They seemed to care about what they *were*, or were going to *be* (doctor, lawyer, financier, etc.), more than what they were going to *do*;

The tall ones had an awfully high opinion of themselves;

The shorter ones were scared to death of her;

The girls hated her on sight;

The few who recognized her couldn’t care less if she was a celebrity because they all thought they were celebrities, themselves;

They couldn’t comprehend that she worked because it was fun;

They'd better all stay away from Bud, because Bud would eat them alive, and spit out the bones;  
They were all children compared to Doc – and Suby, for that matter.

## 18

Red woke up seeing a lemony glow in a sky still scattered with stars. She'd been awakened by the sound of a young woman crying bitterly. The sound came from the other side of the fence that separated the yacht club's private beach from the public municipal beach. Standing up to look over the fence – it was a six-foot privacy fence, which meant Red easily could see over it by simply standing on a rock on tippy toes – she spied the source of the sound. It was a young woman sitting by herself in the sand with her face buried in her hands.

Red could see she was about medium height and had a lean figure with small breasts. She could see that because the woman was stark naked.

When the girl put her hands down briefly to stare hollow-eyed at the horizon, Red recognized her as someone she'd met last night at the party. Something had happened to get her on the wrong side of the fence, *sans* clothing. Whatever it was, the memory left her mortally ashamed.

On top of that, she was now trapped on the decidedly nude-unfriendly municipal beach with no idea where her clothes had disappeared to. She'd crawled up with her back against a largish rock, which was the only thing within twenty yards big enough to hide her from prying eyes in the parking lot behind her. She was obviously shamed, humiliated, and scared, with no way to get out of her fix.

Red could not be judgemental about the girl's waking up naked on the beach. Red had woken up naked on the beach, herself. The difference was that Red woke up naked in a pile with her best friends in the world, Doc and Bud, and with her current lover snoring not far away under a similar pile of supermodels.

She smiled at the idea that skinny, diffident Subramanian had managed to keep three hot chicks busy all night, while the few preppy jocks who'd managed to stick it out 'til dawn were now slouched alone in rattan chairs on the patio, or on the patio floor, itself. One looked like his head rested on a pillow of vomit.

Another difference she had from Carol – she now remembered that the trapped girl was named Carol – was that she knew exactly where her swimsuit was. She could see it over there in the pile with the skirt portion of her dress, Doc's suit and Bud's dress. Despite being falling-down drunk, Doc had carefully chosen a flat rock above the high-tide mark on which to pile their clothing.

Was that a waiter's uniform jacket in the pile, too? Squinting through the pain pounding in her head, she wondered, "Where did that come from?"

Glancing at the body pile she'd just left, she realized that, yes, there were three bodies there – one male and two female – as she thought there should be, but *she'd* already stood up and walked over here. So, it couldn't be her in the pile. She could remember at least *that* much number theory! Through the pounding hangover she now realized was splitting her head, she wondered who belonged to the third body in the pile.

Later. She'd work on that later. Right now, she had more urgent business to attend to.

"Carol?" she called to the trapped girl, who looked up with a startled deer-in-the-headlights expression.

The girl wanted to run, but there was no place to run. Recognizing Red from the party, she uncertainly nodded, "yes." She had disliked Red on sight, just as the other girls had, recognizing her as an unconquerable rival. But, she was in trouble now, and would take any help offered.

"You wait right there," Red called to her unnecessarily. "Give me a minute, and I'll come get you."

Carol's expression, which already included fear, embarrassment, humiliation, and remorse, added a little bit of hope. She nodded "yes" again.

"Are you okay?" Red asked. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm not hurt," Carol called back. "Please help me."

Running over to the clothing pile, Red pulled on her bathing suit, and picked up Doc's new pastel-blue double-breasted suit jacket, which she knew he'd bought especially for the party. Thinking better of it, she dropped the jacket and picked up the dark blue tee shirt he'd worn under it, instead.

Carrying the shirt in her teeth, she ran into the water up to her knees, then shallowly dived into the harbor. Finding it hard to swim with her breath blocked by the shirt, she stuffed it down into her tummy behind the suit's front, to be held there by the belt that kept the whole garment together. She figured it would be safe there, and she would feel if it started to slip out. Then, she swam out past the end of the fence below the extreme low tide mark, around to the municipal beach side, and back to where Carol was hiding behind her rock.

“My vagina’s full of cum,” Carol moaned, tearfully.

“Nothing we can do about that, now,” Red said in a businesslike tone intended to inspire confidence. “Put this on, and we’ll get you out of here.”

While Carol pulled Doc’s tee shirt over her head, then stood up, Red estimated time, effort, and potential interference for two routes back to the yacht club, and decided to swim back around the fence with Carol, rather than walk out to the street.

“Are you up for a short swim?” she asked to make sure.

“Okay,” Carol answered.

By the time they reached the other side, Red was too exhausted to more than crawl half way out of the inches-high surf. Carol, who’d only had to swim one way instead of both, managed to sit up on her hip, but was also too exhausted to climb further out of the water.

“Thank you,” Carol panted.

Red just flopped her arm in an attempt to wave acknowledgement.

Looking up, Red saw Doc sitting up with his knees separated and bent, and his penis and testicles dragging in the sand. He looked hung over and confused.

“It’s too early to bring in another girl,” he told Red.

“This is Carol,” Red panted. “She was in trouble.”

“Cripe!” Doc swore, “Picking up strays, *again*? First thing on a ... What day is this?”

“Sunday,” Bud moaned without even picking up her head. She’d been sleeping with her head on Doc’s chest, and had landed face down in the sand when he sat up. She’d just turned her face to the side to allow breathing.

“What’s going on?” The bartender asked, sitting up and brushing sand out of her hair.

“The tall one got up early to rescue another stray,” Doc pointed out. “I didn’t think the pound was open this early.”

“Hey, guys,” Red said, sitting up and trying to see through the swirl of stars that the swimming effort on top of the hangover

sent dancing through her head. She thought she was going to vomit.

Holding tight against the purge reflex, Red clapped her hand over her mouth.

Miraculously, it worked. Spasm passed, she continued: “Carol really is in trouble. We’ve got to help her.”

“What’s wrong? – Nice bathing suit.” Doc waved at his own tee shirt enveloping Carol like a wet tent.

## 19

“Who’re you?” Red asked the bartender, whom she hadn’t yet recognized. Through the swirling fog that exhaustion from her swim had turned her hangover into, Red tried to place her in the grand story of last night. She couldn’t do it because she had no recollection of anything that happened last night. She’d apparently blacked out.

“Don’t you remember?” the bartender asked.

Red shook her head.

“That doesn’t say much for me!” the bartender said in a hurt tone.

“Oh,” Red said, confused.

Feeling sorry for hurting the bartender’s feelings, Red put in an extra effort to remember what had happened. Then, it came flooding back.

It was after the band quit for the night, and most of the people left. They’d started dancing to a stereo on the patio. A bunch of girls started doing a strip, and everyone else joined in.

Red decided *not* to join in. She saw that the girls were stripping, and now fondling each other, only to get the guys excited. She’d already decided these were not guys she particularly cared to excite, so she just sat down in one of the rattan chairs to watch. Suby and Bud did join in, however. Bud was always up for anything kinky, and it looked like Suby echoed the sentiment.

Red started wondering if Bud would volunteer for a gang bang, but she didn’t. It was one of the others – Carol! That must have been what started Carol getting into trouble.

Carol was trying to pull Suby into the gangbang, but Bud dragged him out and over to where Red was sitting.

“Stay away from her,” Bud warned Suby. “That goes for you, too, Red. I saw her popping some pills about an hour ago. It looks like she’s gone down her own rabbit hole. Don’t you guys follow her! I see trouble brewing.”

“Listen to her,” Red told Suby. “She’s seen so many druggies gone bad that she won’t touch the stuff, anymore.”

Heeding Bud's warning, Suby headed back to the knot of girls dancing and fondling each other. Bud went to join in, too. Pretty soon, however, a few more boys showed up because Carol disappeared, leaving them unsatisfied.

Three supermodels decided they liked Suby more than the other boys, and lured him down to the beach. Red expected that they'd figured out that he was the only male there with a high-six-figure salary. There were others there who might have the potential, but it was potential only. Suby'd already converted potential to fact. Bud followed down to the beach because she didn't think much of the available males, either.

Sometime later Red got bored and decided to see what was happening down at the beach. At least, there were people down there that she liked.

Suby was having the time of his life banging supermodels. Red found Bud sulking nearby, and sat down with her. Bud had been keeping Suby busy so he wouldn't interfere with Red's socializing with available hunks. When the supermodels showed up, volunteering to help out, Bud let them have their way with him. But, then she didn't know where Doc was, so she just sat down in the sand with her head spinning.

Red sat next to her. Red seemed pretty drunk, too. Remembering that Mary had asked them to forego making out with each other, they just sat in silence with their sides pressed together.

A little while later, Doc showed up with a strawberry blonde bearing a tequila bottle. That was the bartender he'd been flirting with all evening. When she got finished cleaning up the bar, she'd grabbed the tequila bottle and hooked up with Doc to see what might be fun.

When Bud saw Doc walking up with his arm around the bartender's waist, she yelled "NO!," and tackled him to the ground.

The surprised bartender stood there looking from Doc to Red, and back again. She decided that, rather than fight for the tall, handsome brunette, she'd settle for the tall, pretty redhead, and brought the bottle over to Red.

That accounted for the massive hangover, as well as the memory loss.

Joyce! That was the bartender's name.

Red remembered being upset about seeing Bud tackle Doc. *She* wanted to tackle Doc, but she'd promised Bud her chance. Besides, she reminded herself, she didn't want Doc for a lover. That, however, didn't stop her from feeling upset.

Joyce was certainly attractive, and Red had by now lost her general inhibitions regarding women, anyway. Red decided to make do, too.

But, the farther she saw Doc going with Bud, the more it hurt, and the more she drank, and the farther she went with Joyce to drive it all out of her mind.

By the time Bud had her legs wrapped around Doc's midsection with her feet half way up his spine, and he had his arms wrapped tightly around her neck in the pose sometimes described as "the beast with two backs," she was grunting loudly at every stroke. Red at that point had Joyce in an equally tight sixty-nine pose (women have their own version of the beast with two backs), and was making similar noises.

Eventually, Doc came hard inside Bud. Percieving this, Joyce broke her clinch with Red, and started lapping Doc's semen out of Bud's vagina. Feeling devastated and alone, Red just curled up with her head nestled in the curve of Joyce's waist, and cried herself to sleep.

## 20

All this recollecting took Red all of two seconds to complete, along with the analysis to sort it into something that made sense. To make up for having forgotten the bartender, and thank her for trying to give her a good time, Red forcibly changed her expression to one of bright recollection.

“Oh, yeah! Mmmm, you taste good.”

The bartender wasn't fooled. She had noticed that, as ardently as Red had made love, she hadn't had a single orgasm. But, she responded with a smile that hid her disappointment.

“Apparently, we still have a problem,” Doc interrupted, eyeing Carol. “What happened to *you*?”

Carol's expression, which had hauled itself laboriously up all the way to forelorn, took a sudden plunge past suicidal to completely hopeless, and she burst into tears again.

“Ecstasy can do that,” Bud, who was now sitting up, explained. “It was ecstasy, wasn't it?”

Carol hung her head, and shook it up and down while contemplating her navel.

“Is it addictive?” Carol asked in fear, lifting her eyes to Bud's face.

“Not particularly,” Bud assured her. “It's not physically addictive, but people can get hooked on the euphoric feelings. It breaks down inhibitions, too, so you can get into all kinds of sex. The sex is more addictive.”

Carol looked surprised at that.

Doc stepped in: “Sex is the basic human addiction. Nature uses it to keep couples together. That's why society frowns on partner swapping. It screws up relationships between couples by getting them hooked on sex in general, instead of sex with their regular partner.”

“You were gang banging, weren't you,” Bud stated.

Carol wagged her head up and down, again.

“She said her vagina’s full of semen,” Red reported.

“Does that mean you’re likely to be pregnant?” Doc asked Carol.

Still with downcast eyes, Carol shrugged uncertainly. She didn’t know.

“Where’d you get the ecstasy?” Bud asked.

“You know,” Doc interrupted. “I don’t want to know any more about this. She needs to be checked out at a hospital, and the cops are going to get involved. Ecstasy’s an illegal drug.”

“If it’s not addictive, why do I have to go to the cops?” Carol asked. She was really scared about involving the police.

“Because it’s against the law,” Doc stated. “*You* don’t have to go to the cops. *We* do. If we don’t, we’re liable, and can get into more trouble than you will. They’re already going to give Red the hairy eyeball, wondering why she got involved in the first place.”

“I was trying to help,” Red said, startled. “I couldn’t just leave her like that!”

“You know that, and I know that. Unfortunately, the cops *don’t* know that. You’re going to have to convince them.”

“You mean she’ll get into trouble just for helping me?” Carol asked. “That sucks!”

“Through a gas pipe,” Doc agreed. “I’m no fan of our drug laws. I think the whole system’s stupid, wrongheaded, and does far more harm than good. But, that’s the system we have. Unless and until it’s changed, we have to live with it. That means Red has to make a telephone call, and the rest of us have to skedaddle before the cops show up. She’ll stay with you, Carol, until the cops get here. They’ll pack you up into an ambulance for a quick trip to the hospital for an examination, which is what you need most. She’ll stay here to explain how she found you. Hopefully, they’ll be satisfied with her explanation and just take her statement.”

“I’ll stay, too,” Bud announced. “I’m the one who saw her taking pills. And, I was the one who saw there was something wrong. I’ve also been through this kind of thing before with jokers screwing themselves up with worse drugs. By the way, Carol, except for the possible pregnancy, there’s nothing that’s happened to you that won’t wash off.”

Red and Bud stared at Doc, expectantly. Red’s personal addiction was to having Doc around to back her up in stressful situations. She actually just wanted him around all the time. She could handle such situations on her own, but always felt more confident when he was around, just in case, especially when the heat was on. Bud was used to relying on herself – working without a net as it were – but she’d quickly found it was awfully nice to have him standing around while doing it.

“Yes, I’ll stay, too,” he confirmed as if they’d twisted his arm, “as the token responsible adult. But you, Joyce, shouldn’t get involved. You might also wake up that pile of bodies over there, and get them out of here before they get embroiled, too.”

“What about those up there?” Joyce asked, indicating the still sleeping forms on the patio.

“To Hell with them,” Doc said, crossly. “At least some of them were probably banging the poor girl, too, and deserve anything they get. Frankly, I’m pissed that *anybody* would make love to a girl, then leave her in the lurch like that. Carol, whatever else you feel and do, you should be mad as Hell at the guys who got you into this, and tell all your friends who it was and what they did. Peer pressure can do more to straighten out people’s behavior than all the laws in the world.”

## 20

That was how Doc, Red and Bud ended up cooling their heels on the yacht club's front porch waiting for the police to arrive. The police took their own sweet time about it, though, because it was clear that there was no urgency to the call. The cops had other things to do that involved real spurting blood, and ongoing mayhem. The bruised sensibilities of some preppie girl who'd done something stupid at an all-night party, but was now safe, could take a back seat. They'd get to it when they got to it.

Carol thankfully found her dress wadded up on the patio. It was dirty from being tossed on the ground and stepped on, but not even torn. She never found her underwear, but that was a small sacrifice. Finding her dress would make explanations to her folks a lot easier when they found out about her adventure, and it would mean she had something to wear to the hospital that fit.

When she returned the tee shirt to Doc, he just spread it over the porch railing to dry in the dew-saturated Florida air. To get decent, he just pulled on his pants. He was so thoroughly bronzed from hanging out on his terrace in Arizona that he looked fully dressed even without shirt and shoes.

Red already had her swimsuit on, and Bud put on hers. They piled their skirts on a rattan sofa on the porch. Their even complexions – one a deep, honey-colored tan, and the other a dazzling galaxy of spots – made them look presentably covered, too. This was, after all, Miami Beach.

Carol, now wearing her party dress with only minimal soiling, actually looked overdressed compared to the rest of the group.

Joyce, who'd had a thoroughly good time at the after-hours beach party, despite having only gotten Doc's semen second hand, decided to skip going back to her tiny apartment on the yacht club's grounds, and opened the bar to prepare mimosas all around. She was, after all, the only one in the building with official status. Everyone else was a member or a guest. She figured the three supermodels qualified as Suby's guests. Suby and the girls stayed discreetly in the bar with Joyce, while Bud, Red and Doc waited with Carol on the porch for the cops to finish their donuts and decide to show up.

When the cops finally arrived forty minutes after getting the call, they were surprised to find the group engrossed in something entirely unrelated to the crime they'd been called about.

The way that happened was, while sitting on the porch sipping the-hair-of-the-dog-that-bit-her as a hangover analgesic, Bud had noticed an impressive antique ship's bell mounted in a frame on the yacht club's front lawn, right next to the flagstone walkway

leading from the crushed-shell parking lot up to the porch and the front door. It looked both old and authentic, so Bud took her archeologist's butt off the porch, and down there to investigate it.

Red was surprised to hear a startled "What?" from Bud as she read the inscription on the bell. Looking down, she saw Bud standing, transfixed, staring at it.

Red went down to find out what on Earth *that* was all about.

"What is it?" Red asked.

"That's Bill's ship!" Bud yelled, pointing to the bell's inscription.

Bill was Bud's older brother, who had been lost diving on a wreck off the Florida coast years before – before the girl had even graduated high school. Red surmised that this big lawn ornament happened to be the bell from the wreck he'd been diving on when he didn't come back.

"That's interesting," Red commented, thinking that the coincidence of its ending up on this particular lawn was enough to explain Bud's startled reaction. Enough years had elapsed since her brother's accident that Bud was over mourning for him, but seeing the bell here would have been a shocker. "I wonder how it got here."

"You don't understand," Bud explained. "It shouldn't be *anywhere*. Bill and his diving partner were surveying the wreck of *this ship* in something like a hundred-sixty feet of water. That's well below the limit for recreational divers. They were surveying the wreck for Dr. Wheeler in preparation for possibly excavating it. Wheeler published their preliminary results after my brother and his partner disappeared. He put the project off, though, because the wreck was in deep water, and the survey was never completed after the team was lost. Frankly, I don't think anyone had the heart to go down to it after what happened to Bill."

"As an ancient shipwreck of archeological significance," Bud continued, "it's off limits to salvage operations. In a hundred-sixty feet of water, it's out of range for recreational divers. By law, everything on that wreck is owned by the Federal Government, so this is stolen property just as much as if it was a cylinder seal looted from the Iraqi National Museum."

"It shouldn't be here," Bud summarized, "It should be at the bottom of the Straits of Florida. Some well-equipped pot hunter dove on that wreck illegally, and brought that bell *here*."

"Doc," Red yelled back to the porch, "did you know that your yacht club has an illegal artifact for a lawn ornament?"

Doc trotted down to her, saying: “Don’t yell. It’s still eight o’clock on a Sunday morning. People are sleeping.”

“Sorry,” Red apologized for thoughtlessness. “Bud says this bell was salvaged illegally.”

“Oops!” Doc said, thinking this was a minor and not exceptional *faux pas* for the yacht club.

“The *Castillo de Santa Guadalupe* was never excavated, and is off-limits to salvors,” Bud explained. “In fact, Wheeler’s the only one with a permit to touch it!”

“Double oops,” Doc replied, still not seeing it as a major issue in the grand scheme of things. “It was here when I joined.”

“My brother died surveying this wreck five years ago. The bell was down there, then. That’s how he identified the wreck. Some bastard’s been fucking with our wreck since then. They’ve probably screwed everything up!”

Doc realized that Bud was really upset. It was like stopping at the grocery store on your way home from vacation, and finding your own entertainment center for sale in the middle of the parking lot. Clandestine pot hunters were the organized thugs of the archeology world, and they’d ripped stuff off from *her* team.

Abashed, he said: “Sorry. I’m sure nobody in the club was involved. They probably got it as a donation. Maybe even anonymously.”

“Of course it was an anonymous donation,” Bud replied, heatedly. “Whoever stole it probably couldn’t find anybody stupid enough to collect something so obviously easy to identify, especially since it’s linked to the deaths of two divers.”

“Oh, I didn’t know about that.”

With his hangover, information was coming at him too fast. He’d missed the comment about Bud’s brother dying surveying the wreck.

“One of them was my brother!” Bud was getting loud again.

“I’m sorry,” Doc said, really embarrassed for the club, as well as distraught about how it upset Bud. “What can we do?”

Realizing that Doc and his friends at the club would have had nothing to do with the crime, Bud took a deep breath and tried to calm down. They were innocent dupes – victims as much as she and the archeological community, and ultimately the History of the World. The crime pissed her off royally, but they weren’t the criminals.

“We’ve got to go down and find out what they did,” she said. “If they’ve ruined the site, which they probably have, somebody’s going to catch Hell. Can I use your cellphone to text a message to Wheeler? He’s going to want to know about this right away.”

“Certainly,” Doc said, leading them back up to the porch, where he fished his cellphone out of his jacket pocket and handed it to Bud.

“How do you make this thing work?” Bud whined. Doc’s cellphone was at the other end of the price range from what she had access to. Red stepped in to help her.

## 21

When he stepped onto the porch, the Miami police detective was angered by the statuesque blonde in the revealing swimsuit shushing him while she finished dictating a text message to the gorgeous redhead in the even sexier bathing suit.

“Sorry,” the huge, bearded surfer wearing nothing but expensive suit pants said, stepping in to greet him.

“She’s reporting evidence of a federal crime we just uncovered.”

“We thought this was just a case of some girl stoned on ecstasy,” the detective said offering his hand for the man to shake. “My name is Detective Stephen Mills of the Miami Beach police department. What are you talking about?”

“This is something else,” Doc explained. “It looks like we’ve got two incidents in one day. The intense blonde lady is a marine archeologist who just found an artifact looted from a supposedly virgin shipwreck. It’s like you tripping over a single body left over from a gang war. You’d want to know what happened to the rest of them.”

“*She’s* an archeologist?”

“What would you expect a female marine-archeology graduate student to look like?”

Mills found himself wondering what was really going on, and how he was supposed to react, but mostly how he could get invited to archeologists’ pool parties.

“We called you about this young lady,” the big guy said, indicating Carol, who was sitting with a frightened look on her face, “whom my friends found on the municipal beach around dawn this morning. Apparently, she’d taken ecstasy after our yacht club dance last night, and was indiscreet with some unidentified boys. She doesn’t seem injured, but we figured she should be checked out at a hospital. Then we figured you guys would know what to do better than we would, so we called you. I can’t give you any more information than that because I was asleep at the time. It was the redhead who found her. The blonde with the pot-hunter fixation says she knows something, as well.”

“Who are you?” Mills asked.

“Oops, sorry,” the surfer dude apologized. “I’m a little flustered, myself, this morning. We’re all a bit hung over, and not

firing on all eight. My name's Dr. Michael Manchek. I live in Scottsdale, Arizona, and am a member of this club. I'm here for the weekend on my boat, the *Strange Brew*, docked in slip A-three, but it looks like I'll be extending my stay through next week due to archeological emergencies." He nodded in Cheryl's direction.

"Isn't '*Strange Brew*' the title of a punk rock song about drugs?" Mills asked, suspiciously.

"No, it's a 1960s classic rock song about a beautiful psychopath who causes trouble for her lovers. The singer is advising his audience to stay away from her," Doc responded. "It has a beautiful, lilting fuzz-guitar lead, and a hypnotic backbeat that perfectly expresses the emotional fascination – simultaneously irresistible and repellant – that characterizes the woman. 'Strange brew' refers to the mix of longing and fear she excites in her victims."

Getting back to his introductions, he said: "The blonde is my girlfriend Cheryl Thompson, who is a graduate student at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The redhead is the daughter of Mark Shipton, who owns the *Mary McKenna*, docked in slip A-five. They live aboard during the season."

"When do you think the season is?" Mills asked sarcastically. "It's June, and the temperature will be in the high nineties today."

To Floridians, the tourist season generally ended in April, when the weather in the Northeast turned nice, and the snowbirds went home.

"I live in Arizona, where today's high will be one-thirty," Doc answered in the same tone. "For us the season is whenever we want it to be. When it cools off in October, Mark will go back to southern Texas, where it will still be warm. I can't stay that long because I've a company to run in Arizona."

"Is it a medical-device company?" Mills asked.

"Aerospace technology. I'm a physicist, not a medical doctor. Don't you want know about the victim?"

Mills suddenly realized that this guy wasn't intimidated by cops. He was being polite and helpful just because he was naturally polite and helpful. That called for a slightly different approach.

"I just need contact information," Mills explained, "then we can get to the victim."

"Sure," Doc said. "I'll give you my business card in a minute, which has my cell number. It's in my jacket over there. You can

always contact the ladies through me, or through the main office.”

“You didn’t give me Miss Shipton’s name.”

“Sorry, we got sidetracked. Where were we? ... Her name’s Judith McKenna. Shipton’s her stepfather. She works for me at my company’s satellite operation in Boston, Massachusetts. She and Cheryl share an apartment in Boston. They’ll probably be here through next week as well. You can get their direct phones from them. They have my PDA right now, and I avoid memorizing phone numbers.”

“And, the victim?”

“You’ll have to ask her. I think her first name’s Carol, but that’s the extent of my knowledge. The first I knew of her, she was rising like Aphrodite from the sea.”

While Mills interviewed Carol, Bud finished her text message and wanted to talk to Doc about her problem.

“That can wait until Detective Mills is finished with us,” he advised her. “The bell’s been here at least two years. No bad guys are going to get away in the next hour.”

Realizing he was right, Bud shut up, and went inside to scout up a cup of coffee and think about what she should tell Detective Mills.

Red handed Doc’s cellphone to him, which almost immediately buzzed with a reply from Wheeler to Bud’s message.

Wheeler’s message said: “MST CHK REK. - W.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It says ‘must check wreck,’ with Wheeler’s initial as a sign off. Can’t you read a text message?”

“Yeah, but it frost’s my butt,” Doc fumed. “Is it against some law to spell words out in text messages?”

“Connect charges pile up,” Red said, as if that explained it.

“Like I care!” Doc griped. Then, he texted back:

“Cheryl gone for coffee. Understand urgency. Will use my boat tomorrow to check wreck. Plan today. More by email later. ---

Manchek”

The thing buzzed almost immediately. Checking it, Doc read: “GUD. THX. - W”

Pursing his lips in annoyance at the entire texting universe, he just handed the thing to Red, who handed it to Bud, who’d just come back out of the bar carrying a thick porcelain mug filled to overflowing with black coffee. Red showed her how to get back to the previous messages.

“Tomorrow!” Bud yelled after reading the exchange and painfully spilling hot coffee on her hand. “We need to find equipment, another qualified diver, and a dive master. It’ll take more preparation time than that. At least another day, maybe more. Likely more.”

“I’ll bet we can borrow an ROV in less total time, and fish it over the side of my boat without risking damage to that body that I love.”

That made Bud smile at him.

Red’s shoulder muscles tensed painfully.

“After you guys are done with the police,” Doc ordered Bud, “you and Mistress Judith are to work out a plan involving *Strange Brew* and an ROV. Red, pay any expenses with your SST credit card. I deadlift about five-hundred pounds, so anything weighing under two hundred should be safe to handle off the swim platform. Lighter is better, of course. All we need is something with a video camera, say about five hundred feet of tether, and a way to record the images. I want a finished plan at five o’clock.”

“Yessir!” Red said.

Bud, who’d never really seen Doc in action before, just stood in stunned silence.

“C’mon, lover,” Red said to her, pulling her by the arm, “we’ll get started while we wait for Detective Mills to be ready for us.”

Red was used to working with Doc, and knew that Bud wasn’t. She knew that Doc expected her to show Bud the ropes, and get her acclimatized to the bang, bang, bang style of SST operations. She was already pulling together in her head a Gantt chart for their planning activity, which would segue into planning for the whole operation, and finally into the operation, itself.

She started by collecting her cellphone from her handbag, which was still on the table in the hall by the yacht club’s front door.

Then, she speed dialed Darrell, and asked him to get her computer out of her cabin, and bring it to the clubhouse front porch.

“Now, where’d you get that coffee?” she asked Bud.

## 22

Red, who'd had more responsible-adult management experience than Bud had – although only a fraction of what Doc could claim – knew enough to monitor Detective Mills' progress in interviewing Carol so she'd be ready to respond when her turn came. So, she was already saving her project files and closing up her computer as the ambulance came for Carol.

Carol was thoroughly embarrassed by all the very public attention she was getting. Doc figured that was a good thing. She'd think twice about putting in a repeat performance.

By the time Mills called Red over for her interview, she and Bud were sitting primly, waiting for their turns. First Mills interviewed Red, then Bud.

He listened quietly, taking notes, while Red told her story in her own way. Then, he commended her for being a good samaritan and reaching out to someone who was in trouble. Then, he made sure he had good contact information, and asked Red to look over her statement to make sure he had it right before signing it.

Finally, he thanked her, and called Bud over.

He remembered Bud shushing him when he arrived, and gave her a much harder time than he had Red. How did she know about the drug? How did she know it was ecstasy? What was her role in the gangbang that started at the party? Who were the others involved? Did she take drugs, herself? Did she know where Carol got the drug? How long had she known Carol? When did Carol leave the party? Why did Carol leave the party? Did Bud leave the party with Carol? And so on. And so forth.

In the end, however, he just had her sign a statement, and let her get on with her business. Her statements jibed well with Carol's and Red's.

Perhaps surprising, Carol had been very forthcoming, and had given an accurate, truthful statement. While they were waiting for the police to arrive, Doc, figuring she'd probably try to lie her way out of as much as possible, had gone to work on her. He'd talked to her about what she'd done, and pointed out *why* it was stupid. They'd talked about what she could do to get past it. Then they talked about what she was going to tell the police. Doc pointed out that his friends had no motivation to lie to the police for her. Anything Carol said that wasn't the honest-to-God truth would be found out, anyway. It would be best to swallow her pride, admit she'd been stupid, promise she'd learned her lesson, and get clear of it as quickly and cleanly as possible.

That she'd done, so Detective Mills didn't for a minute really think Bud been involved. He had, however, decided that some minor harrassment was in order to teach her a lesson.

After being there about an hour and a half, he left with a wave to Doc, and a smiling nod to Red.

Bud got the point: cooperative, responsible adults get better treatment from cops than wise-asses.

Bud should have known. Bud *did* know. She'd just forgotten in the heat of the moment.

After Detective Mills left, Red showed Bud the progress she'd made while Mills was harrassing Bud.

"I can only find leads to three local places where they're using the equipment we need," she reported. "There's the local university's archeology department, but there's nobody there now. There's a marine construction company, and a salvage guy on Key Largo."

"Hey, I know that guy, Scott Arnold," Bud exclaimed in surprise. "He used to be in the university's archeology department. He worked with my brother. I didn't know he'd gone into commercial salvage."

"Do you know anything about him?"

"Just what a seventeen year old girl visiting her big brother would know," Bud smiled. "He's even taller than Doc, and has great muscles. I used to get wet just standing near him. He seemed really competent. He was really conscientious about diving. Kept talking safety, and advance planning. Very professional. I think we should start with him."

Red dialed the emergency number listed on Arnold's website.

"Hello, is this Scott Arnold?" she asked when the call connected.

She listened for about fifteen seconds, then said: "I'm sorry to disturb you at home on a Sunday, but we're hoping you can help us with an ROV. ... My name is Red McKenna, and I'm a research analyst with Scottsdale Systems Technology. We're down here doing some development work on a marine archeology system, and something came up that makes us want to take a quick look at a particular wreck site in one-hundred-sixty feet of water. My boss suggested we use an ROV, and you're one of the leads I turned up with an Internet search. One of our team, Cheryl Thompson, says she knows you, and said we should try you first. ... Yes, she's Bill Thompson's little sister. She just graduated from Harvard, and is working with Dr. Wheeler now. It's Wheeler who wants us to check the site. ... We have a forty-five foot cruiser in Miami Beach. ... The owner says we can handle anything under two hundred pounds

off the swim platform. ... Yeah, but I know this guy. He's huge. If he says he can do it, he can do it. ... His name's Dr. Michael Manchek. ... Big mahogany speedboat with a deckhouse. ... Yeah, it's supposed to go like blazes, but I haven't been out on it, yet. ... My stepdad says it'll do about a hundred. ... We'll be down here all week, but Doc promised Wheeler to try to look at the wreck tomorrow. Wheeler's hot to get an evaluation. Could you hold on a minute, please."

Bud had been trying to get Red's attention. Now, she whispered: "Don't say anything about pot hunters. We don't know who's doing it. Could be anyone, especially a salvor."

Red nodded her head.

"Thanks, I'm back. Sorry about the interruption," she said into the phone.

"... Anything reasonable. We're well funded, but don't want to waste it. ... five grand for the week? We only want it for the day. ... five grand for the day, too!" she laughed. "I'll have to get an okay and get back to you. ... It won't take long. The people I need to consult are all right here. I should be able to get back to you in ten or fifteen minutes. ... Okay. I'll call you right back."

Red hit a button to disconnect the call, and speed dialed Doc's phone. She could see from the porch that he'd gone down to *Strange Brew* and was now sitting in a deck chair with his feet up on the transom seat talking with Suby.

"Doc," Red said when the call connected, "we just connected with a guy who has an ROV we can rent for the week for five grand. ... I asked. He won't rent it by the day. ... Okay. ... He's in Key Largo. ... I assume we'll have to go down and get it. ... I think it's closer to where Bud says the wreck is than we are here. ... Can we take your boat down today, stay in Key Largo overnight, load the ROV today or tomorrow morning, then go out to the wreck tomorrow? ... He says it only weighs twelve pounds and has a five-hundred-eighty-foot tether. ... Video camera and recorder. ... I'll let you know what we decide to do."

Disconnecting the call, she said to Bud: "He says it's our budget, so we should act like grownups and decide for ourselves."

"I've no idea what to say. What do you think?"

"Well, it's expensive, specialized equipment, but that seems a bit high," Red said. "A luxury car for a week would cost less than a quarter of that. I really don't know, though. Have you any experience? Does Wheeler use them?"

"I've seen guys using them," Bud replied, "but don't know how much they cost to operate. The department has a couple, so we don't have to rent them, and I don't know anyone else who's ever rented one."

“Do you know how to run one?” Red asked. “I sure don’t, and I’ll bet Doc doesn’t, either.”

Thinking out loud, Bud speculated: “Maybe if we told Arnold it was overpriced, but we’d go for it if he’d teach us how to use it ...”

“That works for me,” Red said. “Let’s see if he’ll go for it.”

Pulling out her cellphone, Red redialed Arnold’s number.

“Hi! It’s Red McKenna again, Dr. Arnold. ... Five grand a week seems a bit high, but if you’d teach us how to use it, we could go for it. ... Oh! That’s included. I didn’t realize. That’s another story. Thanks. Where is it, and when can we pick it up? ... We’d bring the boat down later today, and stay over down there. ... How do we find you? ... I can navigate a plane, but not a boat. Doc can, of course. ... Okay, let me get out a pen. Okay, shoot! ...”

Red started jotting down directions in her research notebook.

“ ... You think it’ll take two to four hours to get there? ... He flies a plane like a bat out of Hell, but I can’t see him doing anything unsafe. ... How about if I give you a call once we know when we’ll get there. ... Okay. See you later today.”

“That’s it,” she announced to Bud. “We’re on!”

## 23

Doc and Suby had been lounging in *Strange Brew's* cockpit, trying to cure their hangovers with Irish coffee. Doc had brewed up an extra-strong pot of coffee, and was dosing it with bourbon.

"She's in love with you, you know," Suby said.

Thinking Suby meant Bud and was referring to the after-hours beach party, Doc denied it: "It was a lark. Cheryl likes sex, and an all night orgy on the beach is just what would get her cranked up. She probably would have taken you on, too, if you'd come over to our pile."

"I didn't mean Bud," Suby corrected. "I meant Red. She's in love with you. She was pouting down in her cabin Friday morning because she couldn't stand watching you make out with Bud. Then, she started crying when you cream pied Bud on the beach. I saw it from where I was. She can't stand seeing you make love to another woman."

"Ah, yes. I wasn't sure you noticed. What I am sure of is that this weekend has all been a put-up job by Cheryl to try to break up that brother/sister fantasy Red uses to cover up her feelings."

"What's that all about, anyway?" Suby asked. "I ask only to understand my position with respect to Red."

"It's a long story," Doc explained. "In short, Red's had a really rough time over the past ten years. Did you know that her father was murdered ten years ago? We just discovered all the facts last Spring. All she knew before that was he'd disappeared, abandoning her and her mother. She's had a lot of frustration, rejection, and disappointment since. Basically, she ended up rolling all that emotion into one sticky ball, and rubbing it in my fur so it stuck, but she made the mistake of falling in love with me first. It's a psychoanalyst's dream!"

"Is she insane?"

"Lord, no!" Doc said emphatically. "She's got emotional issues to resolve, but she knows it, and is trying to work them out. The brother/sister fantasy is a relatively harmless way to keep her relationships sorted out while she works on it. It's okay as long as she knows it's a fantasy. I've the feeling that Mary's decided that it's served its purpose, though, and enough's enough. She no doubt seconded Cheryl into her campaign, although some of what's gone on this weekend is all Cheryl. It's too over the top for Mary."

“Where does that leave me?” Suby asked.

“In the long run, probably not in a very good position. Red desperately needs emotional support, and validation that somebody loves her. But, she’s got Cheryl for that. They both live up in Boston, and I can’t see Cheryl abandoning her now. She’ll no doubt move in with Red until Red gets her head straight. With you a couple of thousand miles away, you probably won’t have much chance with her after this trip. I suspect this double dating thing is mostly to satisfy Mary. She’s afraid Red will get a reputation for being a lesbian.”

“Isn’t she?”

“Obviously not, or she wouldn’t have been crying down on the beach. She’d have been happily chewing on the bartender, grateful for being spared the attentions of us ugly, smelly men. I’m pretty sure Cheryl’s just another attempt to sort her own emotions out. She’s had crappy luck with men, and may be trying the other side of the street.”

“On second thought,” Doc added, “if Red really ends up not wanting me – I don’t like that idea, but it could happen – you might have a good chance, after all. You guys get along really well. You’ve a lot in common. You seem to satisfy her sexually. Maybe I shouldn’t try to discourage you.”

“You are a strange man, to avoid discouraging a potential rival,” Suby said.

“The very definition of love is to put the other person’s happiness ahead of your own.”

“True, true. Changing the subject, I’m surprised to hear you talk about whether Red is a lesbian. I thought you didn’t like that term.”

“You asked the question. I don’t like the term when applied to people,” Doc agreed. “It makes sense when applied to acts. What Red and the bartender were doing on the beach last night certainly was lesbian activity. No doubt about that! What I object to is using the word as a label for a person. And, if you remember, I said categorically that Red was *not* a lesbian. Between the caffeine and alcohol, I’m going to wax pedantic here. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Go right ahead,” Suby invited.

“Every human being is a complex mixture of traits, or characteristics – features? We talked about this before, I believe. Anyway, some of those characteristics are especially associated with males, and some with females. Most characteristics, however, are gender neutral. Things like ‘healthy,’ and ‘intelligent’ are gender neutral. Narrow shoulders and wide hips are female-associated, but

many men could fit the description. Broad, heavily muscled shoulders and aggressiveness are male-associated, but a lot of females show those traits, too, sometimes together, and sometimes separately.”

“Different people find different characteristics more or less attractive for mate selection,” Doc continued. “Most males find most female characteristics more attractive than most male characteristics. In fact, most males automatically feel some aggression toward people exhibiting many of the more overtly male characteristics. Females tend to exhibit a complementary reaction to sex-associated characteristics.”

“From what I can gather, surveys show about ten percent of males, and a slightly higher percentage of females, find certain same-sex characteristics sufficiently attractive that they are willing to take certain same-sex partners as lovers. Some even like same-sex characteristics enough to prefer same-sex mates. The most reliable statistics show about ten percent of both sexes liking or preferring same-sex partners, but everyone agrees there’s massive underreporting. My guess is the true number is closer to twenty percent because that’s the number that keeps popping out if you meta-analyze studies like visual scanning of photos. Eighty percent follow the patterns you’d expect of classic heterosexual interest. That leaves twenty percent who break the pattern, not ten percent. Of course, there are people who claim that *all* women secretly desire other women, but that looks to me like politically motivated wishful thinking. I’ve seen no scientific evidence to back it up. I have the same suspicion about reports that peg the percentage at just three or four percent: political motivation in supposedly scientific studies. It happens a lot. My own experience indicates a higher percentage – closer to the twenty percent I mentioned.”

“The thing that’s important is that everyone has varying reactions to different characteristics, and every person displays both male and female characteristics. What determines who we choose depends on a convolution of preferences and characteristics. In other words, the closest useful mathematics would be a convolution sum: take person A’s preference for such-and-such characteristic, multiply it times a measure of how strongly person B exhibits that characteristic, then add it to a similar product for the next characteristic, and so forth. The situation is too complicated to handle by just slapping a label like ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’ or ‘straight’ on a person. It’s ludicrous!”

“I’ll tell you a story,” Doc promised, but was interrupted as his cellphone started to buzz, “ ... It looks like Red has some news on the ROV front,” he said as he answered the call.

“Hi, Red. Whachagot? ... Can’t we just rent it for a day or two? ... I guess we’ll have to live with that. ... Where is he located? ... Will he deliver it, or do we have to go down and get it? ... Where’s Key Largo compared to where the wreck is? ... That helps. ... Yeah, that should work. Can we fish it off the swim platform? ... That works. What’s it got for sensors? ... It all sounds good, but you two have to make the decision. It’s your budget. You should act like grownups and decide for yourselves. It’s what I pay you for, and

it's what Cheryl has to learn. ... Okay, bye."

Shutting off the call, he said: "Looks like they may have found their ROV. They'll call back when they've made their deal."

"You were going to tell me a story," Suby reminded him.

"Ah, yes," Doc said. "This happened to me a few years ago, and started me trying to understand people's sexual preferences."

He paused a minute to organize his story mentally.

"I was staying with some friends in Hollywood, California. One day – I think it was in late afternoon – we were in a bar, and one of my friends introduced me to an individual who, he said, was what he called a 'drag queen.' That is, a male homosexual who dressed as a woman, and, most importantly, who thought of herself as a woman."

"I use female pronouns here because she made it clear that was what she preferred," Doc explained.

"Despite being dressed as a man at the time, she exhibited all of the female characteristics possible while dressed as a man: modified speech, mannerisms, and so forth. She even had a slight build, more in the female range than male. She also made it clearly obvious that she was interested in me as a sex partner."

"Now, I've always been interested in women more for their insides – personality, intelligence, and such – than for their outsides. There are lots of beautiful women running around loose, but those with beautiful personalities, like Red and Cheryl, are harder to find. So, when this creature started coming on to me the same way a beautiful woman would, I found myself responding! Damn, but it was easy to accept her as a beautiful woman trapped in a man's body, and respond to the woman. I almost wished – no, I did wish – I could get past that man's body. I *wanted* to like her!"

"Later, I spent a lot of time trying to figure out what it was that attracted me to her," Doc continued, "and what repelled me at the same time. That's how I came to realize that all people are a mix of male, female, and neuter characteristics, and to realize how complicated the process of mate selection really is. It's one person responding to a complex mix of traits in another person."

"Since then, I've had no patience with labels. Just because one woman falls in love with one other woman, it says practically nothing about whether she'd be attracted to a third woman, or about how she'd like any particular man. There are just too many variables. The labels don't really work, and I've seen the harm trying to apply them can cause."

"Now," he concluded, "you asked if Red were a lesbian, and I said: 'No.' The label would imply that she always prefers

women as sex partners, rather than men. It's a blanket statement that is obviously not true. She's had a number of serious male lovers, and only one female one, and I'm not sure how serious that is. She's also let herself get dragged into a few situations where she's performed sex acts with another woman, but I don't think those were at all serious, either. Mostly, while she was doing it, she looked like she'd rather be someplace else, but not strongly enough to want to disappoint her partner."

"I wouldn't stand for the 'bisexual' label, either, because it's no more valid, and can be just as hurtful, as the 'lesbian' label. Finally, anybody calling my Red any hurtful name is asking for a one-way ticket to the hurt locker, themselves. As a Buddhist, I find violence distasteful, but we must protect those we love. If we don't, who will? The same, by the way, goes for Cheryl, whom I find myself becoming rather fond of, too. Anybody with the guts to take on the world the way she does rates very high on my list."

"By the way," Doc interjected, "that gutsiness is a traditionally male-associated characteristic that I find very attractive. Put a generous measure of it into an otherwise female package, and I find it almost irresistible."

"Thank you for sharing this with me," Suby said. "I have not had the experience you describe with a 'drag queen,' but what you say corresponds with my thoughts and experiences, as well. I also thoroughly agree with your feelings about our two friends, whom I now see coming down here from the club house."

## 24

“Scott Arnold is waiting for us to show up at his place in Key Largo,” Red announced. “The deal clincher was when he said he’d teach us how to use his ROV for nothing – nothing above the five-grand rental fee, that is. We just have to get there.”

“Suby,” Doc questioned, “are you up for a trip to Key Largo? We’ll probably be there for a few days, but they have an airport from which the little silver bird will bring you back here whenever you need it to.”

“No,” Suby replied, “my vacation is over. I have to start closing up my boat, and go home tonight. I’ll see you on Thursday at my office?”

“Oh, yes,” Red said, positively. “We’ll be there Thursday, although I might just come looking for you when we get back from Key Largo.” Then, she pulled him into a tight embrace for a long, thorough kiss.

After Suby had headed off in the direction of his boat, Doc said: “You ladies need to pack sea bags for several days. We don’t know how long we’ll be living on *Strange Brew*. I suggest three days worth of undies; bathing suits with cover ups for casual evening wear; at least one pair of slacks or jeans; and a couple of tops just in case. We’ve got sweatshirts and sweaters aboard if needed, which I don’t think they will be. See you back here when you get here, but don’t dawdle. The sooner we cast off, the sooner we get to margaritas at the end of the day.”

Twenty minutes later, Red was unaccountably pleased when Doc gave her a task to complete on her own: “Mistress Judith, you’re almost a pilot now, let’s see you use what you know about preflighting an aircraft to prepare this boat for sea. Cheryl, while she’s doing that, please head down to the galley, and make up a really big thermos of strong black coffee. I find having hot coffee available to be very pleasant on a voyage, but trying to brew it in a pitching galley to be an invitation to minor burns.”

Red was pleased because Doc was giving her individual attention. She especially liked that he called her “Mistress Judith.” All the time she’d been packing a sea bag – as usual using her SST flight bag as an impromptu knapsack – she’d been worrying about how this overnight (perhaps even over multiple nights) trip would work out cuddlingwise.

She did not want to be the third wheel pushed out by her two best friends while they played hide-the-salami together in Doc’s bunk.

On the other hand, she wasn’t looking forward to the alternate possibility: that they’d all three cuddle up there. She didn’t like

the idea of sharing. She wasn't quite sure whose attention she didn't want to share. Bud, after all, officially had the status of her current lover. But, deep down, it was Doc's undivided attention she craved.

She was very much regretting having given Bud *carte blanche* with Doc, and she was getting seriously worried that she'd never hear another veiled proposal from him. He seemed to be responding to Bud entirely too well.

As Bud had planned, this weekend had given Red the opportunity to compare what she had with Doc with a wide range of other options, and she'd concluded that the other options fell way short. Even Suby, who ran a close second to Doc, definitely came in second. In fact, it wasn't really all that close.

Red knew that her affair with Bud was very definitely a temporary situation. She found that she *did* love Bud. She wanted her around all the time, and loved sharing adventures with her. She knew it was love because it was exactly the same way she felt about Doc. But, Red knew she couldn't have with Bud the family she yearned for.

Since as long as she could remember, the image of her life as an adult had been centered on having babies to bring up. Having a career was important. She liked playing with computers. She loved number relationships. But, those babies were the top items on her gotta-have list.

And, to do that right, you had to have a husband. Not just because of the biological requirement. There were all sorts of ways around that. But, babies need a father, and mothers need that father's help and support, too.

*Her* babies were going to have the best father possible. It was the only way she could see to being the best mother possible, and she wasn't going to allow her babies to have anything less. When she was a little girl, that father had always appeared to be someone just like *her* father. Now, the image that popped up unbidden was someone just like Doc.

But, if she somehow ended up with Doc, what would become of Bud? At the party, she'd worried about what would happen to Doc if she married somebody else. Now, she worried just as much about what would happen to Bud. The thought of her ending up as a slutty old cougar seemed horrible. Red wanted her to have someone like Doc, too.

They couldn't share, of course. Red just wasn't willing to share. Not her Doc. She also knew that Doc wouldn't be willing to share, either. They'd briefly discussed his feelings on the subject 'way back before they'd ever been lovers, themselves. He generously was willing for her to have someone else, if that was what she wanted, but he would never be willing to *share*, any more than she would.

What they needed was a Doc clone.

She didn't know what she was going to do. Figuring it out was one of the things she needed Doc to help her with. Maybe Bud, too. She just couldn't do it on her own.

Calling Red "Mistress Judith," and giving her a job to do on her own assured her that Doc still cared. As long as he cared, she felt that there was still hope for her.

As for cuddling arrangements, he'd figure something out. And, it would be alright. She just had to believe, and it would be alright in the end. Doc always took care of her, and he would in this, too.

Right now, however, she had a job to do. She had to come up with a pre-flight – or pre-cruise – procedure that he'd be proud of. She believed that as long as she could make him proud of her, she'd be alright.

Preflight checklists always start in the cockpit, so her pre-cruise checklist should start in the cockpit. Specifically, it should start at the helm station. She should start by turning on the master switch to check, especially, the fuel levels in both tanks.

"Does this thing have a master switch?" she asked looking around the dashboard behind the steering wheel.

"Turn the key switch on," Doc replied, obviously pleased that she'd thought to look for it. "Most boats have a key switch for each engine, but I prefer a main switch locked with a key, then individual toggle switches for each engine. Why carry around two keys?"

Red ran her finger over the switch panel to verify that all of the switches were in their "off" positions. She also checked to make sure all of the circuit breakers were in their "on" positions. Then, she turned the key switch on, and verified the fuel levels in both tanks.

"Both tanks are full," she called to Doc, who had his rump propped on the transom seat, with his legs splayed out to either side, heels dug into the deck to keep from slipping. "Do you usually refill the tanks every time you close down the boat?"

"No more than we do when leaving an airplane," he replied. "The last time I was down here, however, I planned to leave the boat closed up for a while, so I topped the tanks off to prevent condensation. The tanks are still full."

"You don't have a fuel shutoff, do you?"

"No. Most boats don't have them. Right now, however, is a good time to start the blower to vent any fuel fumes that may have built up in the engine bays. It's more important for gasoline engines because gasoline evaporates faster than diesel fuel, but it's a good

idea with diesels, anyway.”

“While you’re at it,” he continued, “you might as well run the bilge pumps, too. If you see too much bilge water pumping out, it may mean something’s wrong with the automatic switches, or possibly there’s a leak.”

“How will I know how much is too much?”

“I’ll know, and you’ll get a feel for what’s normal. This time, I want you to notice where the outlets are, and how much comes out of each. There are three on this boat: forward, amidships, and aft. There should always be a little bilgewater from rainwater and normal seepage through the seals. Listen for the sounds, and don’t forget to shut the pumps off when water stops flowing.”

When she reached the stage where on an airplane she’d undo the tie downs, she asked: “Should I undo all the lines? I don’t want the boat to float away.”

“Good thinking,” Doc said. “At this point, I usually drop all the lines except a single bow and stern line. Then undo those right at the end. Leave cutting the shore power and water lines until after you’ve started the engines.”

“I assume there’s no tower to call. Do I call other traffic to notify them I’m taking off.”

“It’s ‘shoving off,’ but we don’t do that. You should, however, listen for a weather report. That will partially check your radio, too.”

He showed her how to switch on the VHF radio, and get a weather report.

## 25

Stepping to the helm when he was convinced Red had checked everything that needed to be checked before starting the engines, Doc said: “Red, this will be your first – no, second – lesson in operating turbine engines.”

“Running a marine turbine is pretty much the same as running a turbine in an airplane or helicopter,” he continued. “So, what you learn today will help you with your turbine rating for your pilot’s license. *Strange Brew*’s powered by two Rolls Royce Gnome Turbine engines that produce one-thousand-fifty horsepower each, and weigh less than a small-block Chevy engine. We run the output shafts through single-speed hydraulic transmissions to make shifting between forward and reverse easier.”

“There are four gauges for each engine,” he continued, pointing to two columns of four gauges located at the extreme left and right sides of the dash panel. “From top to bottom, they are the compressor-shaft speed, output shaft speed, exhaust gas temperature, and a combined fuel-pressure and fuel-flow gauge. The top three are standard gauges needed to run any gas turbine engine. I added the fuel-pressure and fuel-flow gauges just because I like to know.”

“The readings run zero to one hundred percent on the compressor shaft speed, and zero to one hundred ten percent on the output shaft speed. The exhaust gas temperature has a single scale in degrees Celsius. The placard on the bulkhead to the right gives the startup and shutdown procedures.”

“We want to start the engines now, to bring them to operating temperature before we untie the boat. Besides the master switch, which makes the whole system live, there are fuel pump, starter, and fuel-flow switches, and igniter push buttons. We start one engine at a time, even though they have completely separate electrical systems with their own batteries, and could be started together.”

“I like to start with the starboard engine, although it makes no difference. Make sure the power levers are at idle, and the shifters are in neutral. Turn on the master switch with the key. Then, turn on the fuel pump, and wait until the fuel pressure gets into the green arc. With the fuel pressure in the green arc, switch on the starter. When the compressor speed reaches fifteen percent, switch on the fuel flow. Then, push the igniter button. You’ll hear a ‘whoosh’ sound when the engine fires up. Hold the igniter button in until the output shaft speed reaches fifty percent, then let it go and switch off the starter. At that point, you’re done. When the exhaust gas temperature reaches about five hundred, start the second engine.”

Doc stood closely behind Red, his right hand resting on her shoulder, while she started the second engine from the placarded list. When it was running, she turned her head to smile up at Doc with pleasure at having done it all by herself. He smiled back at her.

“Cut shore power and water?” Red asked, remembering his earlier suggestion.

“Yup. Any idea how to do it?” he asked.

“I’ll figure it out,” Red replied.

“The power panel is at the bottom of the companionway,” he said, pointing down through the cabin door. “Start by switching from shore power to ship’s power before dropping the lines. Coil the shore power cord and water line, and we’ll stow them under the cockpit deck.”

“Cheryl,” Doc said, “please go up on the forward deck to catch the bow line. I’ll go out on the dock, release it, and toss it to you.”

When he’d tossed her the line, he said: “There’s a hawse pipe by the cleat. ... That’s it, with the chain leading to the cap. Just pull off the cap, and stuff the free end of the line down in there – it’s called the ‘bitter end’ – to keep it from blowing in the wind. ... That’s right, push it all in, and it won’t knot up when you pull it out. Put the cap back on, and come aft.”

“Doc,” Bud called to him, somewhat put out, “I know what a hawse pipe is, but only you’d try to use ‘em to stow dock lines. *Most* people just use ‘em for the anchor rode. I also know what the bitter end of a line is. I grew up in Newburyport, just down the river from your Dad’s boat works. In fact, I used to watch you taking boats out all the time. You didn’t notice me, though. I was just a gawky little tomboy on a fishing boat. I’ve been piloting boats since I was ten. We never had anything this fancy, but I can dock a twin screw as well as you, and I can sure as Hell handle a dock line. Don’t try to teach your grandmother to suck eggs!”

“Oh! Sorry,” Doc apologized, but did not look embarrassed. Rather, he looked slightly annoyed that she hadn’t already let him know. “We’ve been on this tub for three days, and you acted like you knew nothing about boats. What was all that business with footgear Friday morning?”

“You guys were making such a big deal, I wanted to make sure I knew the rules on Red’s Dad’s boat. You guys sounded really anal about it!”

Abashed, Doc walked aft and released the stern line, then tossed it to Bud, who received and stowed it as she had the bow line.

“Now,” he said to Red, climbing aboard and walking up behind her, “there’s no wind, so getting away from the dock will be easy. Use the shifters to control the boat’s momentum. Don’t turn the wheel. Keep it centered like it is. She’s not like a car or a plane. You don’t have to give her continuous power, just a kick to change speed or direction, then let ‘er drift. Start by putting both engines

forward to start the boat moving straight ahead, then pull ‘em back to neutral. We’re going to let her drift out one boat length, then reverse the port engine to spin the boat around to port. That will also kill her forward momentum.”

“You do know port from starboard, don’t you?” he asked, not being sure what to expect, anymore.

“Sta’b’d,” Bud yelled over to correct him, needling him about having overlaid a mixed-up western accent on top of his native New England pronunciation. “If yah ah s’post ta be an ol’ salt, don’t say it like a lubbah!”

“That thing on the end of the word ‘lubber’ is called an ‘ARR’ it makes an ‘rrr’ sound,” he shot back.

Pointedly turning away from her, and cracking just the hint of a smile, he said to Red: “Again, you do know po-rrr-t from sta-rrr-boa-rrr-d,” he repeated with a mock-angry glance over his shoulder to Bud, who giggled. They liked playing with each other, too.

“Yes,” Red replied. “I’ve hung around my stepfather’s boat for three years. He’s as bad as you are about nautical terms.”

Pleased, Doc winked at her, gave her a friendly squeeze, and said: “Okay. Just before you complete your turn, put the port engine forward to stop her turning. When the turning stops put both engines forward to take her straight toward the channel. At that point, you start using the wheel to steer.”

## 26

Soon Red was standing at the helm grinning from ear to ear as she steered the boat on a straight course to who-knows-where.

“See those two jettys forming a breakwater out there?” Doc said, pointing with his finger.

Red nodded, yes.

“See those two lighthouses at the far end marking the opening?” he pointed again.

Red again nodded, yes.

“Head down the center of the channel between the jettys, and exit between those two lighthouses. If a boat comes the other way, let it pass to port, by steering to starboard. He’ll let you pass on *his* port by steering to *his* starboard, and you’ll both turn away from each other – just like we do with airplanes. To make sure he’s not doing something stupid, watch the aspect change of his bow as he starts to turn. That’ll be your first indication of what he’s really doing. When you make your turn, make it definite as a signal to him what *you’re* doing. Piloting is a cooperative endeavor, so communicate your intentions.”

He watched for a few minutes to make sure Red had *Strange Brew* under control. Then, he stepped away from the helm, and turned to face Bud.

“That was easy! Cheryl, I’m going to have Red take us out about five miles so we’re well away from the shallows. Then you can take over and turn southwest. I’ve got the coordinates of the first buoy marking the Key Largo channel already programmed into the GPS, along with a waypoint about half way down. I’d like you two to switch back and forth at the helm, so you both get practice piloting *this* boat, and learning her quirks. Seas are fairly flat today, so we can cruise at about fifty knots. The run should take about an hour, so if you take the helm for a half hour, which should get you to the first waypoint, then let Red take it again for about a half hour to the first buoy, you can show off at the end by taking over to bring her into the harbor at Key Largo.”

“Which is it, Doc,” Red asked, partly because she was enjoying him being needled about nautical talk, and partly because she subconsciously wanted more of his attention. “Should I call her an ‘it,’ or it a ‘her?’ You just used both.”

“The boat is a ‘her.’ The helm is an ‘it.’”

“Doc,” Red called out again, “It looks a little rough in there between the jettys.”

“It always is,” Doc responded. Returning to the helm, he increased the power-lever settings slightly, increasing the boat speed to make steering more effective. He stood behind Red with his hands on the wheel over hers, showing her how to steady the boat in the chop. “The jettys trap the wave energy, and it builds up. It should be calmer once we get through,” he said.

Outside the jettys, the water calmed right down. It became almost glassy smooth. Doc advanced the power levers up to about one quarter. *Strange Brew* surged ahead, easily climbing up on her bow wave to skip lightly across the surface. He let Red run the boat straight out until he judged she was out about five miles, then turned on the GPS to pick up the first waypoint.

It took the GPS a few minutes to run through its startup procedure, and find its satellites. Then, he set the display for a pattern featuring an arrow in the center, which now pointed to the right.

“Cheryl, come up here,” he said. When she appeared at his side, he pointed to the GPS display, and said: “I don’t know what GPS display you’re used to looking at, but I find this one particularly useful when navigating in open ocean. It’s just like the standard aviation display for the very-high-frequency omnidirectional radio-beacon system.”

“VORs are fixed installations at certain locations on the Earth. Seen from the air, they look like a tall white conical tower surrounded by a wide circular white wall. The display’s arrow points in the direction you must steer to get to the VOR.”

“GPS waypoints are similar, except there’s really nothing physical there. They’re just latitude and longitude data in the computer’s memory. The GPS knows where you are, and the speed and direction you’re moving. It then calculates the direction you need to go in order to reach the waypoint. Red, you know how to do this with aircraft, so it should be no problem. Cheryl, have you used this kind of display before?”

“Yes.”

“Good, then you’ll have no trouble, either. Red, why don’t you make your turn toward the waypoint, then let Cheryl take over.”

Red spun the wheel to the right. By now, she had a rough idea how to make small corrections to keep the boat moving in more or less the right direction. Making a large change in direction, however, proved a little more difficult.

She overcorrected, so the boat swung well past the direction toward the waypoint. The arrow swung first off to the left of vertical, then back to the right as she overcorrected again, then started swinging to the left again. Doc patiently waited until Red brought it under control, and had the arrow pointing straight up.

Doc stepped out of the way, assuming that Bud knew how to take over the helm and could teach Red the proper technique. Once Doc was out of the way, Bud stepped close behind Red, then reached around to grasp the wheel with her right hand just to one side of Red's.

"I've got it now, Baby," she said quietly.

Since Bud's position left her with nowhere else to go, Red stepped to her left out from between Bud and the wheel. Then, Bud reached out with her left hand to grasp the wheel with both hands.

Doc pushed the helm seat up behind her, and she rested her bottom on it, relieving the stress on her legs. She was looking at a long stint at the helm.

Doc stepped over to the left side of the cockpit, and sat on a similar seat, where he could comfortably look over the bow, scanning the horizon for other traffic or potential problems.

Perceiving that the nearest people were now many miles away on other boats, Red stripped off the shorts and tank top she'd worn in the marina. She'd been on display at the marina for days, and was looking forward to an hour feeling the sun and wind on her naked body.

Red stepped over behind Bud, slipped her arms around her waist, and leaned forward a little to touch Bud's back with her nipples. Bud leaned back to make contact with Red.

"You don't mind, do you?" Red asked.

"No, Baby. It's nice. Could you untie my top?" Bud had, anticipating a couple of hours well out to sea, worn her bikini with its cover up in the marina, planning to drop them when they got away. While Red took *Strange Brew* out of the harbor, Bud had dropped the cover up. She was now too busy steering to remove the bottom, but wanted to lose the top.

A few minutes later, Doc stepped over behind Red and Bud, and reached up to advance the power levers. Bud stiffened slightly as the boat's speed increased. Then, she started smiling more, enjoying the higher speed. Doc waited a few more minutes to give her a chance to become comfortable controlling the boat at that speed, then increased the power setting more. Eventually, he had the boat skimming along at 55 knots, according to the GPS. By that time, Bud was grinning ear to ear.

When Doc was satisfied that Bud could handle the boat at that speed, he pulled out a couple of deck chairs, and set them up facing aft. Then, he brought the coffee thermos and three porcelain cups up from below, poured the three cups, handed one to Red, put

another within Bud's easy reach, and stowed the thermos in a niche obviously installed just to keep it safe and within reach of the pilot's station. Then, he turned to sit down in one of the deck chairs with his feet propped on the transom seat.

A few minutes later, Red asked Bud if she'd like another cup of coffee. Bud said: "Yeah, thanks, Baby."

Red refilled Bud's cup from the thermos, and handed it to her. Then, she poured herself a second cup saying, "I'm going to sit down for a while."

Seeing Bud nod "okay," Red reached around to give her a quick kiss on the lips, then turned to sit in the other deck chair, which she pulled up next to Doc. Together, they sat watching the wake trail off toward the horizon.

After Red finished her coffee a few minutes later, she got up and moved to the transom seat to catch some sun. Playfully, she kissed the top of one of Doc's feet, which were still propped up on the seat. Then, she lay on her back, spreading her legs slightly and hooking one knee over Doc's feet, instead of trying to get him to move them.

## 27

When the GPS showed only five miles left before they reached the waypoint, Bud called: “Baby, c’mon up here. We’re almost to the waypoint. It’ll be your turn.”

It would take a about five minutes to reach the waypoint at that speed.

By then, Red had turned over to get sun on her back. She noticed that Doc was spending more time staring at her buttocks than at the wake. She liked that. It made her feel attractive.

When Bud called, Red stood up, kissed Dock lightly on the top of his head, and walking up behind the pilot’s seat, she put her empty cup on the shelf next to the thermos, and stood behind Bud. She wrapped her arms around Bud, and gave her a light kiss on the shoulder to let her know she was there and ready.

“Okay,” Bud said, “get ready to take over.”

Bud stood up, and moved the pilot’s seat back to make more room behind the wheel. Red had to step back to make room.

“Reach around behind me,” she told Red, “and take the wheel with your right hand to keep it steady.”

Red did so.

“Now, keep the wheel steady while I slip out from in front of you.”

Bud let go of the wheel, and slipped smoothly out from between it and Red, leaving Red standing in front of the wheel.

“It’s going so fast!” Red exclaimed, nervously.

“That’s alright,” Bud soothed, “it’s a good, stable boat, and the sea’s not very rough, so you’ll be fine. I’ll stay here with you, and we’ll just get you used to it.

Looking over her shoulder, Red saw that Doc had turned his deck chair so that he could watch what they were doing. As he often did, he was staying in the background, letting others make things happen, but watching carefully in case his help was needed. His face held that quiet, pleased smile it showed when he liked the way the Universe was evolving.

Red was too nervous to sit in the pilot's seat, so she swung it further out of the way. That made more room for Bud to stand just behind her, and slightly to her right.

"See," Bud said, "the faster we go, the more responsive the steering is. When we were just idling out of the harbor, the boat took a while to respond whenever you turned the wheel. Now, the response is immediate."

"When I turn the wheel, she banks like an airplane!" Red said in surprise. "How come?"

"You'll have to ask Doc," Bud replied. "Speedboat hulls seem to do that. I don't know why, but I like it. Just have faith that she'll do it, and it'll be okay."

As soon as she saw that Red had things under control, Bud stepped back to get out of her bikini bottom.

"Right now," she said stepping back up behind Red, "let's concentrate on your keeping us on course. You've drifted off a bit."

Bud gently put her right hand over Red's right hand, and pulled downward to turn the wheel. The boat banked sharply to starboard, throwing up a curtain of spray to port. Bud watched as the magnetic compass rotated toward the heading she'd been keeping. As the compass heading approached her target, she eased the wheel back to port to slow the turn, then stop it at the heading she wanted. A few seconds later, the arrow on the GPS display caught up, pointing directly upward to indicate that they were moving directly toward the waypoint.

"It is just like flying a plane," Red said in surprise, "except you don't need rudder pedals to coordinate the turns. That happens automatically!"

"What do you mean 'coordinate the turns?'" Bud asked, not having any training or experience with piloting an airplane.

"In a plane," Red explained, "banking – tipping the airplane to one side or the other – turns your direction of motion, but the fuselage – the plane's body – doesn't turn. You have to use rudder pedals to rotate the fuselage separately, so it ends up pointing in the direction you want to travel. A coordinated turn is when you match the fuselage's rotation rate with the turning of the direction of motion, so it all happens together."

"If you're too slow with the rudder," she continued, "the nose points to the outside of the turn, and it's called a 'slip.' If you're too aggressive, the nose points to the inside, and it's called a 'skid.' Slips and skids feel awful, but when you get the coordination right, it feels like magic! This boat feels like magic."

“Doc?” Red called out, half turning around. “Why can’t we make airplanes that automatically coordinate turns like this?”

“We can,” Doc said, standing up and walking forward to join the two women. While walking forward, he kept to the port side of the boat’s centerline to keep his weight from tipping the boat. “The most famous design was the Ercoupe, developed in the 1930s and produced until the late 1960s. A lot of pilots, however, like having rudder pedals available to do things like cross controlling, and even spins when they want to. Up in Massachusetts, I have a Beechcraft Musketeer that has a spring-loaded system that banks the plane when you operate the rudder, but lets you override it with pedals and a steering yoke when you want to. Really good pilots with aerobatic skills like the additional control. There are a lot of maneuvers that you just can’t do without rudder control.”

“Why does this boat bank when it turns?” Red continued, getting to the question she really wanted to ask.

“Boats turn by angling the propeller thrust to one side or the other. The propeller thrust is applied well aft of the boat’s center of pressure. The torque from having the prop thrust applied aft of the pressure center rotates the hull so that it’s no longer going straight through the water, but trying to side slip. Water piles up on the side of the hull toward the outside of the turn, and that provides the side force to turn the boat’s course.”

“Having the boat bank in the turn is nice, but it’s incidental to making the turn. Lots of boats don’t do it. Multihulls, for example, often don’t. Watch an unlimited hydroplane in a turn, sometime. They turn flat. Deep-Vee hulls, like this one, generally bank because the water piling up under the chine lifts that side of the boat.”

“What’s a ‘chine,’” Red interrupted.

“It’s the sharp edge where the boat’s side meets the bottom,” Doc explained. “If everything is right, you get a coordinated turn, but having the turn precisely coordinated is not important in a boat.”

“Why not,” Red asked.

“We coordinate turns in an airplane because uncoordinated turns can get you into trouble. When airplane wings stall out in uncoordinated turns, they can spin out of control and fall out of the sky. We don’t like that. It can kill people, wreck aircraft, and generally ruin everybody’s day. When boat hulls stall, however, they just settle down in the water – no big deal. Poorly coordinated turns in a boat are less comfortable than well-coordinated turns, but are not dangerous. Mostly, nobody notices.”

“So, at no-wake speed ...” Bud prompted.

“The hull is stalled, so hydrodynamic forces don’t do anything. Buoyancy holds the boat up, instead. Turns are uncoordinated,

but gentle enough that nobody cares.”

“And when a boat’s on plane? ...” she probed further.

“The boat is supported by hydrodynamic forces – it skips over the water instead of plowing through it. Uncoordinated turns feel sloppy, but waves upset things more, so nobody notices except in really flat conditions, like today.”

“Why do they say you get best fuel mileage when you’re up on plane?” Bud started probing a new subject, since they’d gotten Doc talking about how boat hulls work. This was something she’d wondered about for years. She thought maybe she had an idea, but wanted his explanation.

“Up on plane, you have to move less water to move the hull. With the hull stalled, the boat has to sink until it displaces its weight of water: Archimedes’ principle. To move forward, the boat hull has to push all that water out of the way. That takes energy, reducing your fuel mileage. As the boat rises up onto plane, it displaces less water until it’s just slapping down on the top few inches. Less water moved means less fuel used per mile until you’re mainly using fuel to overcome air resistance and viscous drag against the water. Once you’re fully up on plane, however, those continue increasing with the square of the speed. The faster you go, the faster you use fuel. Fuel mileage drops inversely with speed. So, your best fuel mileage – miles per gallon – is at the point where you’ve just gotten fully up on plane – you know, when the bow drops down and the boat starts to run more-or-less level.”

“I told you he was smart,” Red bragged, proudly.

## 28

Scott Arnold not only lived up to Bud's advance billing, but exceeded it. Bud had said he was bigger than Doc, but that didn't prepare Red for what she saw as Bud guided *Strange Brew* up to the sea wall at Key Largo Harbor Marina.

When Red called Scott after rounding the outer marker to tell him they'd arrive in about a half hour, Scott had changed the suggested landing site. Instead of trying to crowd in with his boat at his dock behind his house, Scott suggested they tie up at the marina. There, they would have their own shore power and water hookups, and it was just a short drive to his house.

Bud was actually pretty nervous bringing Doc's boat into Key Largo. Despite her bragging, *Strange Brew* was the biggest boat she'd ever docked, and she hadn't piloted *any* boat in over a year, and that one was a nineteen-foot runabout with twin outboards.

On top of that, the canal Scott told them to pull into looked really, really narrow. It couldn't have been much wider than twice *Strange Brew's* length at its widest, and there were boats docked on both sides. Even at idle, the boat moved faster than Bud felt comfortable with in such tight quarters. So she *drifted* it in, just applying a little nudge with the engines now and then to keep it moving and on course.

Luckily, the canal was mostly straight as an arrow, with only one right-angle turn about a half mile in from the mouth where the canal system communicated directly with the Atlantic Ocean. She made that turn by reversing both engines to stop the boat, then reversing her port engine and putting the starboard engine forward to spin the boat in place, then giving the boat a forward nudge with both engines to drift it on to the marina.

Altogether, it took her forty-five minutes from the time she took over at the outer marker to the time she slammed the starboard bow loudly into one of the pilings at the marina's seawall. The jolt would have sent Red, who was on the bow ready to toss a line to Scott, into the drink if she hadn't seen it coming and crouched down to keep her balance. As it was, she fell over onto the deck.

As the bow deflected off the piling, and continued moving forward, she stood up and tossed the line to Scott. Scott allowed the bow to bounce out away from the sea wall a little, while the stern continued to drift in. Then, he snubbed the bow line around a piling to arrest the boat's forward momentum while Doc threw a bight of the stern line over another piling.

"I'm sorry," Bud wailed to Doc, as he made the stern line fast. She was coming to tears from a combination of chagrin and exhaustion. She'd wanted so much to look good bringing his boat in, and had blown it at the last second.

“You did fine!” he encouraged her. Hugging her and kissing away the tears. “That’s one Hell of a narrow channel, and you brought it right in. A little slow, perhaps, but that’s best in an unfamiliar channel with an unfamiliar boat.”

“But, I hurt your boat.”

“No, you didn’t. That’s what rub rails are for,” he laughed. “You did more damage to the piling, but that’s what pilings are for, too. You’re tired, and tired people can’t do things as precisely as they’d like to. I think you did great. I’m proud of you. You can take my boat out anytime.”

Doc saying he was proud of her made Bud feel really happy. The hugs and kisses didn’t hurt, either. She had decided that one way or another, Doc wasn’t ending this vacation as a free man. If Red didn’t snag him, she was going to.

Watching how Red reacted to Scott Arnold, Bud figured she would get to take Doc home, herself. Red was following Arnold with her eyes, like a puppy in love.

Not that Bud was surprised. She figured Scott would make Red’s mouth water on sight. Well, maybe not exactly her *mouth!*

Scott Arnold was, as Bud had said, a couple of inches taller than Doc. When he met them at the dock, he was wearing a tight white tee shirt tucked into dark blue shorts that came to midway on his thighs. The outfit showed off his swimmer’s physique: broad, muscular shoulders and chest, narrow waist, and legs bulging with muscle.

When Bud had last seen him, he was already going prematurely bald. Since then, he’d obviously decided to capitulate to his genes, and shave the rest of his hair off. That made him look even more masculine and powerful. The only hair visible above his shoulders consisted of blonde eyebrows.

The women had put their clothes back on when *Strange Brew* approached the first marker outside the channel into the Key Largo harbor. When she saw Scott Arnold, Red wished she’d changed into her bikini instead of putting the tank top and shorts back on. She found him physically *very* attractive.

Seeing his muscular body reminded her of how much she’d enjoyed the feel of Doc’s muscles. She hadn’t cuddled up with that kind of body in months. Suby’s body was wiry, and Greg, the last guy she dated before Suby, had the long, narrow-but-soft body of a techno-geek with thin genes. She didn’t realize how much she missed it until she saw Scott Arnold. She was definitely hungry for some beefcake.

Maybe she’d found her Doc clone.

Bud had gotten over her Scott-Arnold crush years before, when she briefly met him while visiting her brother as a gawky teenager. Arnold had thoroughly ignored her. Watching him watching Red told her that he wasn't going to ignore *her*.

"Cheryl?" Scott said when he saw Bud. "What happened to that skinny tomboy I used to know?"

"She grew up, Scott," Bud replied. "I see you haven't descended into decrepitude, either. How's the pot-hunting business?"

She meant it as a friendly joke, but Arnold gave a guilty start when he heard it.

"That's not funny," he said, taking her comment a lot more seriously than she meant it. "My business is recovering valuable cargoes that would otherwise rot at the bottom of the sea. We're very careful not to damage archeologically significant sites."

"Hey," Bud returned, "I was just kidding. I know you wouldn't do that."

"Salvage operators get accused of it all the time," Arnold said with a whipped-puppy expression. "We get pretty sensitive."

"Sorreee!" Bud replied.

"Dr. Arnold," Red jumped into the uncomfortable silence, "are we all set with the ROV? I brought my checkbook if you've brought the machine."

Arnold brightened.

"It's 'Scott,'" he said, "and the ROV's in the back of my truck, all ready to go. How do you want to work this? When do you want to do your training? It's a three-day program, you know."

"Yeah," Red commented. "After you told us the make and model, we checked on the VideoRay website, and saw that. We really only need to make one dive to check the site's condition. I don't think it makes sense for us to spend an extra three days training so we can do it ourselves. We hoped maybe you could go out with us, and run the ROV."

"It's generally unwise to bring someone outside your team to your wreck site," Arnold advised. "Cheryl, you should know that."

"We figure you already know the site," Bud said. "It's the *Castillo de Santa Guadalupe*. We found her bell set up as a lawn ornament in Miami Beach. That means somebody's looted the site, and Wheeler wants us to assess the damage."

Arnold blanched when he heard that. He stood for a moment with a stunned expression, then exclaimed: "That's Bill's ship!"

“Yeah,” Bud said with a note of anger in her voice, “and I want to know what happened. Who’s been messing with her? That wreck means a lot to me, and to Wheeler and the rest of the team. Wheeler’s been dragging his feet on excavating her because he didn’t want her disturbed because of Bill and his partner. We sure don’t want her looted!”

Arnold became very serious. Looking down at the ground, he said: “Yeah, for sure I’ll go with you. They were my friends.” Looking up at Red, he added: “Forget the five grand. This is now personal. When do we sail?”

“I figured we’d load the ROV aboard tonight, check to make sure we have everything we need, and head out first thing tomorrow morning,” Red explained. “How long will it take to reach the wreck site?”

“That depends on how fast your boat will go,” Arnold pointed out. “You got down here in no time, flat.”

“*Strange Brew* can do over a hundred knots, when needed,” Doc said. “There’s seldom a need for it, though. You tell me how far we have to go, and how long we need to be on site, and I’ll set the throttles to make it happen.”

“Let’s get this equipment stowed, then we can go up to the house to plan,” Arnold said.

## 29

By the time they had the equipment tied down in *Strange Brew's* deckhouse and the weatherproof folding doors closed and locked, the mood had brightened considerably. The trip might have a serious purpose, but Red and Doc saw no reason to be somber. To them, it was an interesting adventure to help their friend, Bud.

Bud, who's natural instinct was to have fun whenever possible, put her anger away. She could be angry later, when she knew whom to be angry at, and, more importantly, just how angry to be.

Arnold, who had a naturally sunny disposition, fell in with the lightened mood. Finding that Red liked standing close to him made him feel even happier. He liked having Red stand close to him.

Before loading the gear, Doc had gone off to find the harbormaster and arrange for transient docking. With a wink to Red, Bud had trotted along with him.

That left Red alone with Scott, and gave her a chance to get acquainted.

"I hope you folks will stay at my house tonight," Scott opened with. "There's plenty of room, and nobody else there."

"What about Mrs. Arnold?"

"There is no Mrs. Arnold. I've been divorced for three years."

"Oh," Red replied, "I'm sorry to hear that." Privately, she thought she might want to change that. It would at least be fun to try.

Divorces did not fit into her long-term plan for raising kittens and puppies, and, most importantly, babies, but she wasn't going to pre-judge. Greg, for example, had been divorced, but that had been because his wife had run off to shack up with her therapist and her therapist's husband. The only mistake Greg had made was marrying the ditz in the first place. Red had since sworn to make sure marrying her turned out to be a *good* move for whoever did it.

Scott and Doc made an extra effort to become friends. When Doc had commented to Suby that "most males automatically feel some aggression toward people exhibiting many of the more overtly male characteristics," he was speaking from experience. He naturally felt on guard when presented with a potential rival.

He recognized that for what it was: nature's way of keeping males on their toes in case the new guy turned out to be unfriendly. Doc's limbic system recognized that Scott would be a formidable adversary, should an adversarial relationship arise, and raised its alert level to orange. Doc's cortex, however, realized that making Scott an enemy would be the stupidest thing he could do. So, it told his limbic system to shut up, and be nice.

Scott was nobody's fool, either. When he found his limbic system having a similar reaction to Doc, he told it to shut up and be nice, too.

So, when Doc and Bud returned with a slip assignment, Doc and Scott went out of their way to get along, and work together as a team while transferring the gear from Scott's truck to the boat, and moving the boat into its slip.

They worked so hard at team building that they ignored the girls, whom they left standing in the parking lot behind the sea wall. The girls did not like that. They had plans for these men, and weren't going to put up with their paying more attention to each other than to them.

Red and Bud disappeared as soon as Scott finished giving the grand tour of his house. They'd used the old "powder our noses" excuse and headed off in the direction of the big bathroom off the master bedroom.

Scott led Doc back to the living room, where he pulled out a bottle of single-malt scotch and two glasses that were a little large for drinking whiskey straight. Scott sat in the middle of a long leather couch, and put his feet up on the glass top of a rattan-framed coffee table in front of it. Doc settled into a large leather easy chair nearby, and hooked his heels on a corner of the same coffee table.

"Mmm. Good choice," Doc had said, approving of the whiskey. "However, I promised the ladies margaritas at the end of the day."

"It's not the end of the day, yet," Scott replied. "Let's see what they want, now. We can always take them out to dinner later at a nice Mexican place I know, where they can get all the margaritas they can hold. They usually have a pretty good band as well."

"Sounds good. I know Red likes to dance whenever she gets the chance," Doc replied before starting the get-acquainted conversation by asking about the salvage business: "How does your business really work? I hear about big, fabulously rich finds that come after decades of research and are followed by years of recovery, then more years of legal wrangling. I can't see making a living that way."

"Large, glamorous recoveries *are* few and far between," Scott said. "Of course, if you can manage one, it will set you up for life. But chasing those is like the old adage about the easiest way to make a small fortune being to start with a big one."

“Then, there’s the odd modern shipwreck,” he continued, “which provides a lot more steady work with less risk. At least, there’s less business risk. The customer there is usually the insurance company. They’re a bunch of accountants with no way to pull anything out of the water themselves. Once they pay up on a claim, they hire us to try to get the goods back to reduce their losses. So, you’ve got a good idea going in how much you’re going to come out with, and if you’re going to make anything at all.”

“If it’s technically easy, we’ll make a deal for a flat fee, or something based on hours. If not, and the potential payoff is worth the risk of no payoff, then we might go in for a percentage of what we recover.”

“Around here, lots of vessels go down in storms as well. Those often have cargoes of value as well as hulls that need to be recovered, or at least removed. We can do that on an hourly rate basis. In the Gulf, there’s a lot of hourly work around oil and gas wells, but not around here.”

“Mostly,” Scott continued, “we do a lot of clearing junk out of navigation channels, and some insurance work. We also do a lot of underwater survey work supporting marine construction projects – bridges and such. That’s a better use of our equipment and expertise.”

“Since I’ve a degree in archeology along with field experience, we do a significant amount of emergency archeology when somebody turns up a site while doing something else. For example, we did a three month dig last year when a marina construction project turned up a pre-Columbian fishing camp that had been drowned by sea-level rise. It wasn’t important enough to force abandonment of the marina project, so the state hired us to get out as much information as we could before they let the dredgers in.”

“Once in a great while, somebody locates a treasure ship, such as the *Castillo*. That can set a salvage crew up for life, but mostly it’s just headaches. The Federal government claims ownership of all wrecks where legal ownership has been abandoned or can’t be established. Any warship is owned by the country under whose flag it flew. Since the *Castillo* was basically an armed freighter, there’s some question whether it would be owned by the United States or Spain. I believe the United States, but I’m not sure if it’s been settled. If it has any historical significance, you have to get permission from the Feds to touch it, anyway. Actually, around here it’s administered by the State of Florida, since it’s Floridian waters. Trying to recover the treasure would open up a big can of worms.”

## 30

“The reason Cheryl is so worked up about finding the *Castillo*’s bell is that the wreck has historical significance. Years ago, Wheeler went through all the hoops to get permission to study it as an archeological site. At the time, excavating it was technically very difficult, and extremely dangerous. Cheryl’s brother died surveying it.”

“Can you tell me anything about that?” Doc asked.

“Cheryl’s older brother, Bill, and his dive partner were surveying the wreck,” Scott replied. “One day, they just didn’t come back. Nobody knows what happened to them. They went out in the morning, and never came back. The Coast Guard found their boat drifting a week later off South Carolina. No bodies. No gear. No damage to the boat, except the fuel tank was empty. They just vanished. It looked like for some reason they’d run out of fuel, tried to swim in, and didn’t make it.”

“Would they be likely to shove off without enough fuel to get back?” Doc asked. “Cheryl seems to know her way around boats, and she’s way too smart to get herself into that kind of fix. I can’t imagine her having an older brother who didn’t know better, too.”

“The wreck’s about twenty-three nautical miles off Vaca Key,” Scott said, “so they were out of radio range of the Marathon Coast Guard station, and out of sight of land. There are any number of things that might have happened to put them into a fix they couldn’t get out of. We’ll probably never know.”

“Could they have become disoriented and motored out to sea instead of where they were supposed to go? Where were they based, anyway?”

“They were based here,” Scott replied. “The wreck’s about 56 nautical miles to the southwest from here. It would have taken them about an hour and a half to get to there with their boat. It was a twenty-five foot center console with twin outboards. The boat’s range would have been about a hundred-fifty miles, so they could make the round trip with about a third of a tank left. That’s pretty reasonable, but if they became disoriented and went the wrong way, yes, they could have run out of fuel. In fact, that’s the only scenario that makes any sense at all.”

“How might they get disoriented?” Doc asked.

“That’s the problem with the theory,” Scott admitted. “They used GPS to find the wreck site, so it’d be easy to navigate back. They had a magnetic compass, too. Plus, the weather wasn’t bad, so they could find their way to safety by orienting off the Sun. It’s

hard to imagine those guys getting that lost.”

“What’s the official Coast Guard explanation?”

“Unexplained,” Scott said. “It’s another Bermuda Triangle mystery. For some unknown reason, the two men abandoned their boat at sea, and drowned trying to make land. The boat drifted with the Gulf Stream until the Coast Guard intercepted it.”

“How’d they find it?”

“It was spotted on a satellite image. It was a big enough piece of flotsam to attract attention while the DEA was looking for smugglers.”

“Any reason to connect them to smuggling? I ask only for completeness. It’s always a possibility.”

“No,” Scott said. “Nothing official, and privately I doubt either of those boys would be involved in smuggling anything. They were too heads-down involved in their work. Something like that would be a distraction that I don’t think either would tolerate.”

“What do you know about the wreck?” Doc asked.

“The *Castillo de Santa Guadalupe*,” Scott replied, “was a Spanish galleon that went down in a storm off the Florida Keys in 1597. She was a little larger than average for the Spanish treasure fleet at 700 tons, four masts, and 155 feet in length. Crew, marines, and passengers totaled 294. She carried 40 cannon on her last voyage, which is a little heavy, and might have contributed to her sinking by raising her center of gravity.”

“Basically,” he continued, “she was a giant floating armored truck carrying precious metals, mostly silver in the form of ingots. The silver came from mines throughout Mexico. She loaded in Veracruz, and rendezvoused with the rest of the Spring treasure fleet in Havana bound for Seville in Spain.”

“It is not clear whether poor seamanship, bad luck, or technical issues caused her to capsize. *Castillo* was the only one of the flotilla, consisting of twelve armed cargo transports and two dispatch boats, to succumb to the storm. She capsized and sank rapidly about twenty-five miles off Vaca Key, where the Marathon Coast Guard station is today. She went down with all hands, making the wreck a mass gravesite.”

“Where are those girls?” Scott interrupted himself, looking around. “They’ve been gone a long time.”

“Probably fooling around in your bedroom,” Doc suggested. “They promised Red’s mother to be discreet around the yacht club

up in Miami Beach, so they haven't had a chance to get together in days."

"Uh, oh, ahem," Scott said with a confused look. He obviously wanted to say something, that was important to him, but couldn't figure out how to.

"Yes," Doc said, doing his best "Amazing Kreskin" mind-reader imitation, "Red is trying to get into your pants. And, if you let her, she'll do her best to make you glad you did. I don't want to say too much, except to recommend being nice to her. She's definitely worth it."

"On the other hand," he continued, "she and Cheryl very much enjoy fondling each other's private parts."

"So, she's bi?" Scott tried.

With a pained look, Doc said: "I don't like labels. Look. She clearly likes what you've got. Let it go at that. Ignore the occasional fluid transfer between her and Cheryl. They've been best friends for a long time, and they like to play together. Think of it as play. Don't try to be too conventional."

Scott sat, pensive, looking confused and unsure.

"How do we know what happened to *Castillo*, if all hands went down with her?" Doc asked to get the conversation going again. He still had things he wanted to know.

"She was the westernmost ship of the fleet," Scott said, breaking his reverie, "and about four miles from the nearest other ship. Sailors reefing the sails of the other ship saw her go over. They tried to get to her to rescue any survivors, but were unable to because of wind, which was estimated at over fifty knots, and waves up to sixty feet high."

"She lies now in about one-hundred-sixty feet of water near the outer edge of the continental shelf."

"How was she found?"

"Wheeler got lucky," Scott replied. "Of course, he was familiar with *Castillo's* story, but he wasn't seriously looking for her. Even with a pretty good location, actually finding the wreck would be the longest of long shots, and Wheeler's not that much of a gambler."

"He had gotten a grant to experiment with some new magnetometry equipment. He gave the equipment to two of his post-docs, Bill Thompson and Harold Sparks, to play with. It was basically a big metal detector with a long range. They ran it up and down over

part of the continental shelf off Vaca Key. It's pretty flat there, and they figured they understood the geology pretty well. There were a number of known wrecks out there to give them live targets to compare with the barren areas. Plus, they thought the *Castillo* might be out there, too. If they got lucky, it would be a pretty nifty find, as well as proving the technology."

"Well, they did get lucky. On the third day out of seven, they got a whopping signal from *Castillo's* wreck. The next year, they went back to verify it, and do a preliminary survey. They spent a week diving, and shot photos of enough artifacts laying out on the seafloor to prove it was a galleon. They found the bell, and uncovered enough to positively identify it as belonging to *Castillo*. They emailed their pictures and data to Wheeler, and went out for a last dive. I'm not sure what they hoped to accomplish. Maybe they thought they could get some mileage out of picking up some artifacts to wave at potential sponsors. I don't know. Anyway, they never came back from that trip."

"Has anybody been there, since?"

"Well, obviously *somebody's* been there. Otherwise that bell would still be there. *Officially* nobody's been there. Wheeler's the only one with a legal right to touch the wreck, and he apparently hasn't. From what Cheryl said, he doesn't want to."

"No, he doesn't," Bud said as she and Red walked in from the direction of the bedroom, "but he probably doesn't have any choice, now. Somebody's been there, so it's no longer safe where it is. Wheeler'll probably have to excavate her just to protect her from looters. The treasure's too big, and dive technology's gotten too good. If we don't take care of her now, looters will pick her apart piecemeal until they've scrambled everything. They'll melt everything down, and we won't learn a thing."

Scott hadn't been listening to her. He froze as soon as he looked up to see both women standing nude in his living room.

Seeing his reaction, Red said: "We've had to wear clothes at the yacht club for *days*, so we took the opportunity to strip down. We decided you wouldn't mind."

She didn't mention that it was also motivated by the desire to capture Scott's and Doc's attention. It obviously worked.

Speechless, Scott turned to Doc in surprise.

"Remember what I said about not being too conventional," Doc reminded him.

## 31

Doc and the women gave Scott time to figure out how he wanted to react. Doc thought it was pretty impolite of Red and Bud to have turned Scott's house into a nudist ranch without so much as a "by your leave." He realized, however, that they'd taken the time to consider what they were doing.

Doc had been on intimate terms with Red for months, and was quite used to the fact that she was a nudist by both preference and long habit. She "wore skin," as she called it, whenever there was no reason to do otherwise. In the week that he'd known her, it had become clear that Bud had the same habit. Likely, they'd developed it together when sharing a room in the Freshman dorm.

On the other hand, Red, at least, had always been pretty careful to make sure the people she appeared nude in front of wouldn't mind. It was clear to him that the ladies, for their own reasons, had decided to be impolite this time. He would not interfere.

The women were waiting for Scott's reaction. It was entirely possible that he'd send them back to put on their clothes, and they were prepared for that. It would not be hospitable on his part, but they'd started the rudeness, themselves.

To Scott, this was like some sophomoric male fantasy come true. He knew that conventional behavior required him to be offended, but Doc had warned him twice not to be too conventional. While he didn't know Doc very well, the guy did not seem to be a nut case, so he'd consider carefully how to react.

On many occasions, he'd worked hard to convince a woman to take her clothes off in this very living room – usually successfully, but not always. Here were two stunningly beautiful women who'd just "decided" he wouldn't mind. He knew he should object, but couldn't think of a reason why he'd *want* to object.

Finally, he figured out that if he did object, he'd be kicking himself later, and every time he thought about it for the rest of his life. Better to just go with the flow.

He gulped.

"Oh," he got out, trying to sound nonchalant, "I don't mind."

"Don't worry, Scott," Bud told him with a wicked smile, "we won't flash your neighbors."

“Better not,” Scott retorted, regaining his footing now that he’d decided to participate in this new adventure. “They’re old. The shock might kill ‘em.”

“Besides, this may be a beach resort, but it is deep in the Bible Belt,” he warned. Having heard their seriously-Yankee Harvard accents, he figured the warning might be needed.

“If you really think there might be a problem,” Red said, suddenly getting serious, herself, “we can cover up. It’s just that we *like* wearing skin, and don’t always get the chance.”

“No, it’s alright,” Scott affirmed. He still wasn’t sure, but figured he could handle any bizarre fallout. *He* walked around here nude once in a while, and didn’t think anyone could see in past the dock, the lawn, the swimming pool, and the privacy hedges. He’d gone skinny dipping with girlfriends in the pool before with no complaints, too.

Yes, it would be okay.

Relieved, Red pointed to the glass in Scott’s hand, and asked: “Is there any more where that came from?”

Realizing he’d neglected his duties as host, Scott started to get up from the couch to get another glass.

“No,” Red stopped him. “Just point me to a glass. I can see the bottle at your elbow.”

Scott pointed to a tall dish cabinet against a wall near the dining-area table.

“Thanks,” Red said. “Bud, do you want anything? There’s good looking scotch out.”

“No, Baby,” Bud replied. “I’m going to drink *my* rocket fuel from Doc’s glass.”

So saying, she trotted over to the armchair Doc was sitting in, and slid onto his lap. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she planted a wet kiss on his lips, which he allowed to expand into an impromptu make-out session. Coming up for air, Bud reached over to take his glass from his hand, which was resting on the chair arm.

Red stifled the automatic jealousy pang that wrenched her guts, and reminded herself of Scott’s muscles. She got herself a glass, filled it with two fingers of scotch, and settled herself on the couch next to Scott. Scott had been sitting with his long arms stretched out over the sofa’s back, so when Red sat down, she was able to rub right up against his side without his moving. She sat with knees crossed, and her body turned so her breast pressed into his ribs.

“You don’t fool around, do you,” Scott said in surprise.

“Whenever I want to,” Red replied, making a pointed pun. She looked up into Scott’s face, and added: “And, I want to.”

Again going with the flow, which seemed to be flowing in a nice direction, Scott leaned over to kiss her thoroughly on the lips.

“Mmm,” Red said. “That was nice.”

Suddenly getting serious, however, she said with her best Mistress Judith demeanor, “So, before this party degenerates into an orgy, let’s plan what we have to plan.”

Surprised – and a little dismayed – by the sudden change, Scott lifted his arm from the back of the couch in preparation for putting it down at his side between Red and him. Feeling the motion, Red grabbed his hand, and put it right back where it had been, then grabbed the fingers to place them over her shoulder. She added a pat to the back of the hand to signal that it was supposed to stay there.

Doc laughed.

Bud, still sipping Doc’s drink, looked over the rim of his glass with excited eyes.

“Red,” Doc said, “you’re being mean. Give Scott a chance to catch up.”

Addressing Scott, he explained: “You’ve just met Mistress Judith, Nymphomaniac Executive. I pay her one-point-three shitloads of money to have her brain working twenty-four-seven. This is not the first time she’s run a strategy meeting while making out with a man. If you stop to analyze what’s going on, you’ll fall behind. She always has a plan, so just go with the flow.”

Settling Bud into a position where her hip was less likely to cut off circulation through his femoral artery, Doc reported: “Scott had just given me a *précis* of the situation as we know it. I don’t think it included anything Cheryl doesn’t know. Do you need a recap, Red?”

“Ancient shipwreck,” Red started summarizing what she already knew. “Sunk in the water too far down for amateurs to dive, but not for professionals. Loaded with treasure – gold?”

“Silver ingots,” Doc corrected.

“Probably tons of the stuff,” Red returned to her summary, “making it a juicy temptation for anyone able to make the dive and

desirous of having more wealth than they already have. To get it, they're likely to wreck the site's information value. For that and other reasons, my fuck buddy over there wants to get at it first. The first thing to do is to go down, look around, and see what the situation is. Then, we can figure out what to do next. Do we know what happened to her brother?"

"No clue," Doc responded. "He and his partner separated from their boat, which drifted with the Gulf Stream for a week before the DEA ran across it on satellite photos, and the Coast Guard picked it up. No clues there except an empty fuel tank."

"Where is it now?" Red's experience hunting her father's killer came to the fore, and she suddenly found herself figuratively wearing a deerstalker hat, and smoking a calabash. It looked like one of Sherlock Holmes' two-pipe problems.

She hadn't realized that amateur detective had become part of her personality. The software application had somehow been downloaded and installed, and set as the default application for processing certain types of data. It suddenly seemed like solving mysteries would be fun, and here was a mystery to be solved.

"The boat's probably in some impound yard in South Carolina," Scott speculated.

"Let's start looking for it once we've secured the shipwreck," Red ordered, thinking like a project manager, and expanding the Gantt chart she'd started on the porch in Miami Beach. Finding out what happened to Bill had become an additional project goal for her. "We want to know what happened to Bill," she added.

Securing the wreck site for Bud was still an important goal as well. Being Miss Rich Bitch already, and knowing that her family was in the process of developing a mine to tap a mineral lode likely to net more silver than the Spanish extracted from the whole of Spanish America, she didn't give a shit about a pile of silver bars on the bottom of the ocean that would probably cause more trouble than they were worth. Recovering it wasn't even on her goals list. That would be Bud's and Wheeler's problem when they came to it.

## 32

“The only thing I think I need to know now is where the wreck is,” Red concluded.

“It’s about fifty- ... six? ... ” Doc looked to Scott for confirmation, and got it, “nautical miles southwest from here, near the edge of the continental shelf. Figure one to two hours depending on sea conditions to get there. No, if it’s too rough for *Strange Brew* to make fifty knots, it’ll be too rough for a novice crew to fish the ROV over the side. Better to wait for calmer waters. So, figure an hour, plus a half hour to get out of the harbor.”

“We have to be back in Miami Thursday to meet with Suby,” Red pointed out.

“So,” Doc responded, “we’ve got Monday and Tuesday to play ROV. Worst case, we can motor back to Miami Beach Wednesday morning, which leaves you guys at least half a day to prepare for your meeting.”

Red took a few seconds to fit the new information into her mental Gantt chart, then asked: “Scott, have you any idea what the sea conditions should be tomorrow?”

“Let’s check with NOAA,” Scott replied, reluctantly disentangling himself from Red, and going over to the computer set up against the wall between the dining area and his living area.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s National Weather Service provided a website where one could obtain forecasts of wind and sea conditions for all the navigable waters of the United States. Scott had the page for the waters off the northern Florida Keys set up as a Web browser favorite on his computer.

“It looks like we can figure on two to three foot swells offshore for most of the day,” he announced. “Wear a life jacket when handling the ROV over the side, but I’d want you to do that, anyway. That’s about it.”

“Plan on making fifty knots or so – about an hour’s run once we clear the harbor,” Doc repeated. “I’ve a thousand feet of anchor rode aboard for both bow and stern hooks. That’ll be more than enough.”

“I’d say shorten up to five hundred feet, or even three hundred, to control the boat position better,” Scott advised. “We’ll be right there monitoring our position with GPS, so there’ll be no problem if we drag an anchor.”

“How long should it take to do what we need to do?” Red asked.

“That’s hard to tell,” Scott said. “We’ve got a good fix on the wreck, so theoretically we can just go there and snap some pictures. Things rarely go that simply, though. Figure at least four hours on site. If there’s trouble, it could take two or three times that.”

“So,” Doc suggested, “try to cast off by eight o’clock? Get there by ten? That gives us eight hours until six, when we should decide whether to come home, or stay a second day.”

“Decide earlier,” Red advised. “Scott, how long does it take to retrieve the ROV?”

“Not long,” he replied. “A couple of minutes for it to motor back from the tether’s farthest reach, then reach down and pick the thing up. If we have to go faster, we can pull it in by hauling on the tether.”

“Not long enough to affect our schedule,” Red decided. “Doc, how long to haul the anchors?”

“About the same,” he replied. “Figure ten minutes at the worst to weigh both hooks. There’s no need to figure it that closely, though. We’ve no buses to catch around here tomorrow night. I know you’re thinking about getting back before dark, and I agree that we’d rather not come into a relatively unfamiliar harbor after dark. It wouldn’t be a big problem, though. I assume Scott knows the place well. Besides, if in doubt, we’ll stay out. Have you any problem with that, Scott?”

“No, I figured on spending three days this week teaching you folks how to pilot the ROV. This is less time than I’d planned.”

“Scott,” Red said, suddenly. “I want to pay you that five grand for renting the ROV. I realize you said this has gotten personal, but that ROV is still part of your business – what you do for a living. We can afford to pay for renting it more than you can afford to give it away for free.”

“But, it’s your grant money,” Scott objected.

“It’s okay,” Doc jumped in on Red’s side. “If she runs short, she’ll just give herself a bigger grant. She can afford it.”

“Oh,” Scott said, thinking that helped explain the independent attitude. He was wrong, of course, Red didn’t need money to be independent. It’s just the way she’d always been. But, Scott didn’t know that.

Scott had run into highly independent women before, but as business acquaintances, not anything deeper. He had a commanding presence, and women tended to either stand in awe of him, or avoid him. The high-dominance types tended to avoid him.

Here was a highly independent woman who obviously found him attractive, and wanted to do something about it. He found her attractive, too, but was trying to figure out how well he could get along with her. He, in fact, had no idea *how* to get along with her.

She and Doc obviously worked well together. It seemed like their brains synched up almost instantly. He'd watch how Doc managed to work with Red, and try to imitate whatever his strategy was.

That oughta work.

For her part, Red realized that Mistress Judith, Nymphomaniac Executive might not get along with Scott. It had happened before, many times.

Six months ago, she would have tried to modify her behavior, trying to be more what she thought Scott would like. Remembering Doc's warning about that being unfair to both of them – and certain to fail in the long run – she decided to just be herself. If that scared Scott off, then he wasn't the man for her.

Doc saw these thoughts playing out in her eyes, and in her body language. His smile assured her that he thought she'd made the right decision.

### 33

“Ooohh-kaay,” Doc said. “I’m up for dinner. Scott mentioned a Mexican place. It’ll be my treat. Anyone interested?”

“In a minute,” Bud said. “I want more kissing, first!”

Since she was already sitting in Doc’s lap, with her legs hanging over the chair’s right arm, she was in a perfect position to enforce her demands. This she did by wrapping her right arm, still holding Doc’s now-empty whiskey glass, around his neck, then reaching around the other side with her left arm to pull him close for one of the shut-out-the-world kisses she so liked to have with him.

She ground her naked breasts into the shirt covering his chest at the same time. Red was right. It was definitely worth doing.

Seeing Bud and Doc disappearing into their own private world, Red felt another little jealousy pang. This time, however, she thought she had a solution to the problem. She sat down on Scott’s lap, and tried the same thing with him.

Scott was sitting in the secretary-style rolling chair he used at his computer, so she did not have a padded chair arm to hang her legs over. Instead, she sat on his lap facing him and straddling his torso, pressing not only her breasts into his chest, but her pubic mound into his belly. Her labia quickly separated to engulf his fly. Finally, her clitoris found the bulge of his erection.

She liked that. It was a position she filed away for future re-use.

A few minutes of that action had her approaching one of her Niagara Falls orgasms.

Realizing what that would mean, and how embarrassing it would be to soak Scott’s shorts from the outside, she stood up. Stepping away from his lap, she said: “Unnnh! Oooh! I think I need to get dressed.”

With downcast eyes, she turned away, and walked unsteadily toward the bedroom.

Not quite sure what that meant, Scott was reassured by a tinkle of laughter from Bud’s direction.

Looking over, he saw her getting up from Doc’s lap. She stood up to watch Red trying to simultaneously run to the bathroom and walk in a dignified way. It didn’t work. Bud laughed again with bright, excited eyes.

Still wearing a lascivious grin, Bud walked over to where they'd piled their sea bags when coming into the house, and asked: "Scott, where do you want us" indicating with an index finger alternately pointing to she and Doc and back "to sleep?"

Scott pointed to the bigger of the guest bedrooms.

"Don't expect her out for a few minutes," Bud pointed with her nose in the direction Red had disappeared, her eyes still twinkling. "It'll take her a while to cool that off. Otherwise, you'd be wearing it!"

She turned, and carried her and Doc's sea bags into the bedroom.

Scott looked over at Doc, who was laughing silently, himself.

"What's that all about?" Scott asked.

"Um," Doc said, not quite sure how to say it, "I'm not quite sure how to put this, but Red is famous for voluminous ejaculations. Apparently, she likes you an awful lot. Cheryl was suggesting that you were nearly drowned. She thinks Red will have to work on it to get her excitement level under control."

"You mean, she's going to masturbate," Scott stated.

"That's one way to put it. Cheryl was suggesting that would be a very mild way to put it."

Peeking her head out through the door, Bud asked: "How should we dress for that restaurant?"

"It's pretty casual," Scott replied. "They like you to be wearing shoes and a shirt when you come in."

"Ahhh! Perfect!" Bud said, cryptically.

A few minutes later, she came out wearing the top of her string bikini along with the yellow, orange, and white striped skirt from the dress Red's mother had bought for her to wear to the yacht club party. She had on a turquoise bib necklace that Doc recognized as belonging to Red, along with matching earrings. She also had a silver waist chain threaded through her navel ring. On her feet, she had yellow sandals that matched the skirt.

Doc smiled appreciatively at how long that skirt made Bud's legs look. Bud noticed and smiled back.

Picking up the remaining sea bag by the door, Bud said: "My Baby's had time to get her rocks off by now. I'll just go get her dressed. Be back soon."

Then, she walked off toward the master bedroom.

“I feel like I’m being railroaded into something here,” Scott complained to Doc.

“You are,” Doc agreed. “When those two see something they want, they go get it.”

Getting no response from Scott, Doc added: “I had a girlfriend once, who said she never got anything she wanted by reaching half way.”

“Did she get what she wanted?”

“Well, she asked me to take her to a strip club that night. She brought home one of the strippers. Beautiful little blonde girl. They’ve been living together in Phoenix ever since. Yeah, I’d say she got what she wanted.”

Scott chuckled.

“Cheryl used to be so shy,” he observed. “Obviously a little tomboy, but afraid to say a word. Now, she lets it all out.”

“How old was she then?” Doc asked.

“Sixteen or seventeen. It was just before her brother disappeared.”

“She might have had a crush on you. Maybe wanted your body, but didn’t know how to ask, or quite what to ask for. I think the raunchy act started out as how she thought a boy would act if he was a girl. Then, it became a habit. Now, I think it’s a defense strategy. She’s a little afraid of being rejected.”

“Why would she be rejected?” Scott asked.

“She’s outspoken, sometimes rude, often crude, and makes no bones about liking to have sex with anything on two legs. All of those can get a young woman in hot water.”

“What about Red?”

“In a lot of ways they’re two of a kind, except that Red’s mother insisted that she learn how to act like a lady. I think things are going to change, though. Mary – Red’s mom – has developed a soft spot for Cheryl. Mary won’t put up with any nonsense, and I think she’ll straighten her out.”

“What’s with the ‘Mistress Judith’ business?”

“You have to remember that Red has an outstanding, genius-level analytical mind. She can solve a problem and go on to the next one in the time most people take to realize there’s a problem to be solved. That brain is on all of the time, too. Usually, she’s just playing around in the world, like it was a big sandbox full of fun toys.”

“Red *knows* she’s smarter than most everybody else. She doesn’t let it go to her head, but if someone tells her to do something or not to do something, they’d better have a good reason and be ready to explain it, or Red will simply ignore them. She figures if they’re not ready with an explanation, they don’t have one, so they’re not worth listening to, anyway. Since ninety-nine percent of the population does what they were taught as kids without any clear reason why, she figures none of them are worth listening to. So, she doesn’t.”

“I notice she listens to you a lot.”

“I know to be prepared with an explanation before I open my yap,” Doc explained, “and I know she’ll demand it if I don’t volunteer it. In fact, she knows I’d be disappointed with her if she *didn’t* demand an explanation.”

“Mistress Judith,” Doc returned to his previous line of explanation, “comes out when she stops playing, and sets about to achieve some goal. It’s the same girl with the same brain and the same personality. The difference is whether she’s going with the flow, or directing the flow. The shift is startling because she does it fast, while most people don’t make such shifts at all.”

“How can she do it so fast. I keep getting caught flat footed.”

“For her, it’s not a shift. She’s just going along having a good time doing this and that as the opportunity arises. When something comes up that requires her to be the director, she directs until that thing is done, then she sits back and waits for the next thing to come up. If it requires her to direct, she directs. If not, then not.”

“In a nutshell, she’s independent because she knows she’s the only one she can really depend *on*. She likes to hang around with me because she knows that if she gets in a jam, I’ll at least try to pull her out. But, if she gets in a jam, it’s going to be *her* jam, not someone else’s that she got into by trusting them.”

“So,” Scott speculated, “the best way to get along with her is to let her do her thing ...”

“... and be around to pull her out if she gets in over her head,” Doc finished the thought.

“Can you do that?” Doc asked, seriously.

“I can try,” Scott said, sheepishly.

## 34

Bud came out of the bedroom accompanying a once-again-calm-and-confident Red, who had put on her equivalent of the outfit Bud wore: her red bikini top along with the southwest-print skirt of the outfit she'd worn to the party.

For jewelry, she wore the rhinestone-and-silver necklace that had accompanied her on her adventures from Boston, to Miami, to Texas, to Arizona, to Nevada, and back to Boston. It was now back in Florida. She'd added a Texas-star pendant Doc had bought her in Austin, adjusted to hang between the rhinestone necklace and her collarbone. In her triple ear piercings, she'd hung the Texas star earrings that went with the pendant, which were hanging within big silver hoops, and the large CZ studs that had so impressed Cheryl in Boston.

Both women had added an assortment of bangle bracelets on their wrists.

"Doc, should I get my navel pierced?" Red asked suddenly.

"Why, all of a sudden, do you want to do that?" he retorted.

"I dunno. It looks kinda plain down there with all this other stuff everywhere else."

"Well, I've never thought of your navel as actually *plain*. I've always thought it was spectacularly sexy all on its own. But, then, I've always been prejudiced. I see what you mean, though. You've decorated everywhere else, so ..."

He did not speculate that she might be thinking her navel was plain compared to Bud's, with its navel ring and waist chain. At least, he did not speculate about it out loud.

"So, it's okay?" Red asked.

"Baby, you don't need my permission. You do, however, have my enthusiastic approval and support if it's needed. I assume you'll do a proper job by finding a real professional, and so forth. Okay?"

Red broke into a big grin and, reaching up to kiss Doc lightly on the lips, said: "Thank you."

While the ladies were already dressed appropriately for a casual Mexican restaurant where "they like you to wear shoes and a shirt when you go in," the men decided to at least put on long pants. The ladies' jewelry had elevated their outfits a little too much for

the men to feel comfortable wearing old shorts and worn-out tee shirts.

A few minutes later, Scott reappeared wearing a summer weight suit over a black tee shirt. The suit was white with thin vertical blue stripes. That left Doc the odd man out, now in faded jeans and white polo, which was all he had in his sea bag.

He asked if they could stop by the boat so he could get something else, too.

By the time they reached the restaurant, they all pretty well matched, with Doc now wearing the white suit he'd worn to the Art Museum on Friday over a blood-red silk shirt open a couple of buttons down to show off a couple of neck chains and his dark brown chest hair. As at the blues bar they'd found Friday night, the four of them were overdressed for the crowd at the restaurant, but, once again, they didn't give a shit. They commandeered a table at the edge of the dance floor right in front of the bandstand.

Scott ordered Steak Fajitas. Doc ordered a big Burrito *al Pastor* – with shredded pork. Red wanted *Carne Asada*, and Bud went for the Steak Ranchero. They all had Mexican beer with their meals.

After dinner, Red and Bud started swilling margaritas like somebody'd passed a law banning them starting tomorrow. Doc ordered his usual Bass Ale and Jack Daniels boilermaker, which he planned to nurse all night. Scott stuck with the beer.

After dinner, the band played mostly salsa interspersed with waltzes. Scott and Doc engaged the women in vertical cuddling during the waltzes, and sat out the salsas. They enjoyed watching Red and Bud shock everyone else by rubbing their bodies together to the wild Latin beat.

At first during the waltzes, Red danced with Scott, and Doc danced with Bud. As the evening wore on, the partner assignments got looser while the dancing got tighter. Red was forgetting her brother-sister fantasy with Doc in favor of feeling up his muscular body. Bud was living out her teenage fantasy of making out with Scott. Alternatively, they'd switch back to dance with their intended partners, or each other.

An awful lot of the other patrons were enjoying the show while wishing they or their partners dared follow suit. Scott, being the oldest by several years, found this scene more over the top than he was used to, but enjoyed it nonetheless.

At one point, a relatively tall, good-looking, young Hispanic man tried to cut Bud out for himself. He suddenly found himself backing away from an manacing-looking redhead who towered over him, only to bump backward into the chests of two giant weightlifters with glowering expressions. He beat a hasty retreat back to his table and the protection of his friends. Bud felt sorry for him. Nobody else did.

“That’ll teach him to make a move on *my* girlfriend!” Red grumbled, and swooped Bud up in her arms to dance closer than the tempo was intended to allow.

At the band’s first break, the girls failed to come back to their table. Scott, concerned, spotted them sitting and talking with a group of young women at a table near the wall. He pointed them out to Doc.

“Women like to chat with other women,” Doc said philosophically. He hadn’t needed Scott to point out what was going on. He’d been watching carefully all along.

Noticing that the other women’s outfits displayed bare midriffs, Doc had a thought: “I’ll bet Red’s looking for a local place to get her navel pierced! Whatcha wanna bet she’s got a lead on a place two doors down from here?”

“There is one,” Scott said. “Should we get involved? I feel kinda responsible for protecting them, especially after that incident on the dance floor.”

“Let’s see what they come up with,” Doc replied. “I *am* responsible for Red’s safety. We keep her surrounded by bodyguards all the time, anyway. She’s been kidnapped before. Let me see who’s where.”

He pulled out his cellphone and speed dialed. “Pete,” he said when the call connected, “is there a body piercing studio near here? ... Do they look professional? ... I think Red’s about to go on a navel-piercing expedition, and we may not be invited. ... The hair on the back of my neck is suggesting that she wants to make it a surprise. She’s drunk enough already to think it would be a good idea. ... If you would. It looks like she’s made three new female friends, and might sneak off with them to do the deed. ... It looks innocent so far. It looks like Cheryl will stick with her. Maybe we should have someone in the shop as backup, along with a perimeter watch. ... Okay, thanks.”

“We’re off the hook,” Doc told Scott. “The guys say the shop looks good, so she won’t come back with typhus or AIDS. As long as Cheryl goes along, nobody’s going to mess with her. The two of them together are pretty formidable.”

Scott got that “I’ve fallen down a rabbit hole!” look again.

“You should know that Cheryl is a pretty tough cookie,” Doc said. “She’s had to be to lead the life she’s led. And, Red is downright dangerous.”

That didn’t alleviate Scott’s cognitive dissonance.

“What are you having trouble dealing with?” Doc asked.

“A lot of things,” Scott admitted.

“Pick one out to start with,” Doc advised.

“Red has bodyguards around here?”

“Yes, we *always* surround Red with bodyguards. Her stepfather started it years ago to prevent people trying to get to him through her. He owns Gulf States Petroleum, which makes her a target. It’s all very quiet and discrete, which is the way Red wants it.”

“She was kidnapped?”

“Last Spring. It was a setup job as part of a sting to catch her natural father’s murderer, but it happened. There’s a lot of money on the table, so it’s a constant threat.”

“You?”

“I’m a volunteer. Red and I like hanging out together, so it’s no problem for us to stay close. As long as I’m around, I keep watch. Mostly my job’s to spot potential trouble before it becomes actual. Like now.”

“Cheryl?”

“She’s always been a tomboy. So, she’s been getting into and out of scrapes all her life. She grew up to be pretty wild as well, so she’s pretty good at spotting potential trouble. She’s gotten into plenty. And, she loves Red like crazy. You saw how Red reacted to that guy cutting in on Cheryl. Cheryl would do the same thing if she thought there was any danger to Red. They’ve been taking care of each other on adventures since they started college.”

“Red’s dangerous?”

“She’s a top amateur athlete. Her bodyguards started her studying martial arts years ago, and made sure she was trained to have a hair trigger. My biggest problem is usually to keep her from hurting someone else. Witness what happened to Cheryl’s volunteer lover.”

“Doc,” Red said, finally coming over to their table with Bud and the three girls in tow, “would you mind if we went out on a little shopping trip? We’ll be back in, like, a half hour.”

Her eyes were sparkling with excitement, which told Doc his speculations were probably correct.

“You don’t want us along?” he asked.

“It’s a girl thing. You don’t mind do you?”

“I don’t mind anything you do,” Doc reminded her.

“Cheryl, you stay close,” he said. “I want my baby sister back safe.”

Bud answered by kissing him on the lips and stroking his hair.

“Baby sister?” Scott asked after the women had left. “I didn’t know you were related.”

“We’re not. It’s a game we play,” Doc replied. “It gives Red an excuse to stay close and play with me without the complication of being lovers.”

In answer to Scott’s questioning look, he said: “Don’t ask.”

## 35

It was only ten minutes later that Red and Bud were back, with Red hiding her navel behind her pocketbook. Presenting herself before Doc and Scott, she pulled away her pocketbook to reveal a big diamond stud in her now-freshly-pierced navel.

“That was quick,” Doc said.

“It took longer to pick out the stud than to put it in,” Red explained. “It’s CZ, of course. They wouldn’t have a real diamond this big. It’s just a little tattoo studio down the street. I’d have to go to a big jewelry store for that – and I will later.”

“Pete was in there adding to his collection,” she added, slyly. “I don’t think he can walk into a tattoo studio without getting *something!*” she laughed.

“Very nice,” Scott said, indicating the piercing. Then, he took a longer look and smiled lecherously.

“Oh, yes,” he added, “Very, very nice!”

“Why thank you Doctor Arnold,” Red said appreciatively, adding a playful little curtsy.

Scott stood up, approached her, and placed his hand over the stud to caress her flat belly.

“Careful,” Red winced, “it’s still tender.”

In answer, Scott slid his hand around to caress the side of her waist, then led her out to the dance floor. Bud pulled Doc out from behind the table to join them.

Doc’s slow nursing of his boilermaker left him with the ability to pull the plug on the party at around eleven. Scott’s large bulk and drinking experience left him with the ability to drive home safely. Red and Bud, however, had been belting down margaritas, and were left with little more than the ability to do as they were told.

What they were told – by Doc – was to brush their teeth and go immediately to bed. They needed to get up around six to be ready to shove off by eight.

Red, whom he’d told to slip between the sheets of the bed in the master bedroom, fell asleep almost instantly, and soon entered

an erotic dream in which she encountered a huge masculine beast with whom she fell violently in love. She knew it was a dream, and quickly realized that it was a version of the story of Europa, which she'd particularly liked as an adolescent.

Europa was a nubile maiden from Greek mythology whom Zeus, the father of the Greek gods, seduced when in the form of a white bull. Their union was censured by her family, who didn't approve of bestiality. So, the lovers eloped to the island of Crete, with Europa riding on the swimming bull's back. There, they enjoyed themselves in ways that the ancient authors left to our imaginations.

When Red had first read the story as an adolescent, she'd found it tremendously exciting. She was old enough to read between the lines and fantasize some extremely lewd details – acts that would have gotten both Zeus and Europa arrested had they done them in Maryland at the time. Red never told anyone, but just after reading that story was the first time she'd masturbated to orgasm.

In short, she really enjoyed Europa's story. In her mind, it combined her attraction to big strong males with an extremely naughty fantasy. She'd read it again, and again until it was burned into her memory.

So, it was not surprising that her half-drunk subconscious incorporated it into an erotic dream. In her dream, she equated the bull with Scott Arnold. That was probably what her subconscious had in mind, anyway. The dream beast variously appeared as a bull; a minotaur with a very muscular man's body that resembled Scott's, surmounted by a bull's head; and as Scott, himself. All of them *felt* like Scott, though.

In the dream, Red started by fondling the bull's enormous penis. When she took it into her mouth, it morphed into Scott's penis, which she slid down her throat until her lips pressed against his pubus.

She was glad it was no longer the bull's because she didn't think she could have gotten it all into her throat. But, then it began to grow, and grow, until it turned back into the bull's penis, which felt like it was reaching an impossibly long way down her esophagus. It felt like it was tickling her uterus *from the inside*.

That gave her her first climax of the dream.

When her spasms subsided, she turned her back on the bull, which mounted her from behind. Supporting the bull's huge weight on her knees and buttocks, she felt it thrusting deep into her vagina. The bull then morphed into a minotaur on his knees pounding her doggie style. She liked that even more, and arched her back to receive his penis deep into her vagina, and had her second orgasm. This one lasted a long time, with pulsation after pulsation for what seemed like forever.

The minotaur pulled out of her, and tipped her over onto her back. It turned once again into Scott, and entered her again. This time, he pulled out again before she could have another orgasm. Instead of getting off her, however, he raised her legs high, and

pushed his penis deep into her anus.

Again, the penis grew impossibly long. She felt it reaching deeper and deeper inside her, reaching up through her body. This brought her to her third orgasm. Again, she enjoyed a string of repeated climaxes, where the excitement of one orgasm induced the next, and the next, and the next.

But, she wanted that penis in her vagina. Since it was a dream, she could do that with no concern about his having an orgasm in there. So, she pushed him back far enough to get it out, and, saying, “I want it in there,” moved the hard, stiff member into her vagina.

She wrapped her legs over his back while he pushed with all his weight into her vagina. The force pushed the tip of his glans hard against her cervix, and even into her uterus a little way. This induced pounding multiple orgasms for Red until her dream beast started ejaculating directly into her uterus.

In the pale pre-dawn light, she woke up on her back, her buttocks in a pool of ejaculate, and with Scott’s arms and legs tangled up with hers. Scott’s body lay nearly on top of her, just off center enough that she was able to breathe under his weight. She was filled with an overwhelming sense of peace and ultimate fulfillment. I had been a wonderful dream, which satisfied her every female instinct.

She stroked Scott’s big, hard V-shaped *latissimus dorsi* muscles, then his sides. Letting her hand slide over his hip onto her leg, she began caressing her own inner thigh, then reached up to her labia, and slipped her finger into her vagina.

It was full of semen. Part of that dream had been very real.

Instantly fully awake, she did a panicky mental calculation of where she was in her menstrual cycle. Relieved by the answer, she relaxed with the knowledge that she had *not* screwed up.

Well, she told herself, she’d screwed up royally, but had gotten away with it. If her calculations were correct, and she was sure they were, she was not ovulating, so she hadn’t gotten pregnant.

Opening her eyes, she saw Scott fully awake and smiling at her.

“That was wonderful,” she told him, smiling back. “I want to do it some more – a lot more.”

“But,” her tone suddenly became stern, “from now on *you wear a condom!*”

His smile fell. “Whoops!” he said. “I ...”

“It’s okay,” she soothed. “It’s not that time of the month. I didn’t get pregnant, but that wasn’t your doing, or mine. We both screwed up, but got away with it. Let’s not take a chance again, okay?”

“Okay,” he promised. “I thought you said that’s what you wanted. I figured you knew what you were saying and doing.”

“Scott,” Red explained, “I was asleep, or passed out, or both. I thought I was having one of the best wet dreams ever.”

Scott looked slightly disappointed. Men like to think that when their lovers have a good time, they know it’s with *them*, not some imaginary dream lover.

Seeing this, and realizing what was bothering him, she explained further: “I knew it was you, I just thought I was dreaming that it was you. Does that make any sense?”

It did make sense to him, and he rewarded her with a sunny smile.

“I *did* want you to come in there,” Red continued, “but I thought it was all a fantasy. Since I thought I was dreaming, I thought it would be okay, and I really, really liked having you do it. You can now truthfully claim to be at least one woman’s fantasy lover.”

“Maybe sometime in the future, we’ll make babies together,” she suggested. “In fact, I think I’d like that, but *NOT NOW*.”

“Okay,” he promised again.

“Now,” she said wickedly, “be a good boy and suck that stuff out of me, and put it in my mouth so I can swallow it.”

Scott was so surprised by this demand that it took him many seconds to break into a grin, and do as he’d been ordered.

## 36

That was around five thirty. At six, with dawn fully under way, the alarm went off, annoyingly. They'd fallen back asleep.

"Ohh! Why did I agree to this?" Red asked, rhetorically. "C'mon my dreamy bull, let's get outa here. I'm dirty, smelly, and hungry, and if we miss the schedule, Doc will scold. First one in the shower gets the hot water."

Not waiting for Scott to make it a fair race, she bounded out of bed, and sprinted in the direction of the bathroom.

Scott was left with covers half over his face, and the knowledge that he'd lost the race to pee. Soon, he heard the sound of the shower, and decided that was his cue to get out of bed. His bladder was urgently motivating him to do so.

An hour later, they were on their way to the marina. Doc suggested breakfast on the boat, which he offered to prepare while Red and Bud took her out of the harbor. He figured a half hour would be enough for him to boil up a couple of eggs each for everyone, heat up some breakfast sausages, pour orange juice, and make a big pot of coffee.

Red was surprised when Doc trusted her and Bud to prepare the boat for sea on their own. *She* didn't trust them to do it. Why should he? But, he did, and went down into the galley to cook breakfast as soon as his feet hit the deck.

Percieving that Doc had ordered operations on his boat the way he wanted them, and that he had been assigned no task, Scott pulled out one of the deck chairs, and settled down for a snooze.

Doc's faith in Red and Bud was not misplaced. Together they figured out how to get the engines started, cut shore power and water, drop the dock lines, and get under way. Between themselves they agreed that Bud would take the boat out through the channel, and Red could take over at the outer marker.

It took Bud only twenty-five minutes to thread the boat through the narrow channel, by which time Doc had set up a small breakfast buffet in the deck house. At the outer marker, Red took over the helm, while Bud piled a plate for both of them. The two women shared the food standing around the helm, with Bud's left arm around Red's waist while she fed mouthfuls to Red with her right.

At the outer marker, Doc loaded the wreck's coordinates into the GPS as a waypoint. Then, he settled down into a second deck chair, put his feet up on the transom seat, and focused on the wake. He was trying to encourage the two women to take responsibility

for operating the boat on their own, figuring that was the best way to make them experts.

“Baby, you’re a sick woman,” Bud said after Red quietly related her dream. They were far enough from the men and there was enough background noise that they figured nobody would overhear.

“Didn’t it bother you to be screwing a mythological animal?” Bud asked. “Non-humans would be over-kinky even for me. That’s downright perverted!”

“I knew it was all a dream,” Red replied defensively.

“Except that it wasn’t,” Bud pointed out. “Some of it was very real!”

“Yeah, but that part turned out to be okay,” Red countered.

“Sure, in an almost-got-yourself-pregnant-like-a-stupid-slut way,” Bud asserted.

“I figured it was all symbolic, anyway. I didn’t feel threatened or scared at any point. Besides, it was all kind of a fantasy. The sex was really good! I figure that was mostly courtesy of Scott, and I look forward to trying it again when I’m awake. I just need to figure out what the symbols mean.”

“It sounds like you want to be dominated by a man,” Bud suggested. “I guess there’s nothing wrong with that, as long as you make it a man worth being dominated by. Apparently, you think Scott’s a good candidate.”

“I hope he is, anyway,” Red agreed. “You don’t think it means that subconsciously I want to get pregnant?”

“Baby, you want to get pregnant sub-consciously, consciously, and any other way possible. That’s no news at all. You’ll get there soon enough,” Bud assured her. “Don’t worry.”

“So, in the final analysis,” she continued, “I guess your dream was perfectly natural for you. If you start developing an uncontrollable urge to visit the barn after dinner, however, I’ll get concerned. For now I’d say: ‘Chalk it up to having a really good time,’ and let it go at that. But, next time make ‘im wear a condom even in your dreams, Baby.”

Chuckling, Red said “Amen” to that.

Bud snickered, giving Red an “I forgive you, besides it was fun” look. Red gave her a “thank you for understanding” look accompanied by a hug and a kiss.

By the time the GPS said they were nearing the wreck site, the weather had started getting warm. Red and Cheryl shucked the jeans and sweatshirts they'd worn against the morning air. For them, still acclimatized to New England weather, it was heat-of-the-day-hot. Eighty degrees was beach weather up North, so they stripped down to their work outfits – nothing.

That's what they wore when working at home. Since anywhere was home to Red when Doc was there, and Bud had come to feel the same way, they'd be damned if they'd let anybody object to their wearing skin on Doc's boat twenty-five miles out to sea!

"Doc," Red said from behind the wheel, "we're here!"

"Okay," he said, stowing his deck chair and coming forward.

Bringing the turbines back to idle roused Scott, who yawned and wiped sleep from his eyes, then stowed his deck chair as well. He did a double take when he saw the women nude, but then guiltily remembered not to notice. He'd finally figured out that this wasn't an erotic display. It's just the way these two lived. Salivating would be impolite.

"Scott, I assume we should position the boat at the waypoint over the wreck," Doc suggested, breaking Scott's train of thought, "then move it forward to set the bow anchor, then move it back past the waypoint to set the stern anchor, then use the anchor lines to steady the boat at the waypoint. Is that the way it should work?"

"That will do it," Scott confirmed. "Four anchors would make it steadier, but the two should do it, today."

"Cheryl, please go forward and get ready to drop the bow anchor," Doc said.

Bud headed up the starboard-side catwalk toward the forward deck.

"Red," he said to her, "you'll handle the stern anchor. See that locker door farthest aft on the port side? The anchor's in there. Please bring it out, and lay it on the deck."

When Red had pulled the anchor out of the locker and laid it on the deck, Doc said: "Scott, there's a toolbox in there, too. Please show Red how to run the anchor rode up the hawse pipe and attach it to the chain."

While Scott and Red were doing that, Doc maneuvered the boat to within a few feet of the GPS waypoint, then eased it forward a few hundred feet to the southeast, more-or-less parallel to the edge of the continental shelf, and pointing upstream (which is southeast, there) in the current.

"Drop anchor," he called to Bud, who paid the chain out hand-over-hand until she came to where it was shackled to the five-

eighths-inch nylon rope – the anchor rode – which she continued to pay out the same way until she felt it go slack, meaning that it had reached the bottom.

Doc allowed the boat to drift northwest with the Gulf Stream, which is a great loop of moving seawater hundreds of miles wide. As it circulates, it carries heat from the tropics to the Arctic Sea. On the way back, it brings cold water back down to the tropics in an enormous stream running along the bottom.

They weren't in the Gulf Stream proper, which moves at around five knots, but were near enough that the water they floated in was being pushed along parallel to it, but at a slower pace.

Doc put the transmissions in neutral, and allowed *Strange Brew* to drift downstream with the current, taking up slack in the anchor rode. As soon as she felt the anchor rode slipping through her hands again, Bud gave a slow tug on it to set the anchor. She then tugged a couple of more times to make sure it had set.

"All set!" she called aft to Doc.

Watching the GPS display, Doc allowed the boat to drift aft past the waypoint to a point a couple of hundred feet further downstream. By that time, Scott had finished attaching the stern anchor chain to its rode, and was standing on the swim platform dangling the anchor by the chain over the water.

Doc put both transmissions in forward, and fed a little power in to counter the rearward drift.

"Drop anchor," Doc ordered, again, when the GPS showed the boat was creeping infinitesimally forward.

Scott started paying out the anchor chain, then the anchor rode as Bud had done in the bow. When Scott signaled that the anchor had reached bottom, Doc raised the engine power a little more to start the boat moving forward slowly. Scott set the stern anchor by tugging on the rode, as Bud had done.

"Bud, start hauling in the slack," he called to her. She started pulling in rope hand-over-hand to keep it taut.

When *Strange Brew* got back to the waypoint, Doc told Bud to tie off the line at the mooring post mounted between the deck-mounted winch and the forward hatch. Then, she raised her hands in the air to signal that it was tied off.

Doc eased off the engine power levers to allow the boat to drift back against the bow anchor. When he was satisfied that the anchor was holding, he brought the power levers back to idle, and put the transmissions in neutral.

“Okay, Scott, you can tie it off, now,” he called aft.

Scott paid out a few feet of slack, then tied the stern anchor rode off to the port stern cleat.

Satisfied that the stern was tied off, Doc looked forward to see that Bud had already dropped the bow anchor rode into the port-side bow chock, and was feeding the extra line down the hawse pipe. He then shut the turbines down.

“Alright everybody,” he said, “all hands aft, and let’s break out the ROV. Scott, it’s your baby, so what do you want us to do?”

## 37

Scott arranged Doc's folding table just ahead of the transom seat, which was higher than the deck chairs and would be more comfortable for the ROV pilot. The pilot would sit in the middle of the seat with the integrated control panel (which was a ruggedized laptop computer mounted in a carrying case) and hand controller on the table top.

He placed the case containing the tether spool on the deck to the port side of the table. The person handling the tether (Scott assigned this job to Red) would stand between the tether case and the aft-port corner of the cockpit. To keep it out of the way, he removed the stern-anchor rode from the port cleat, and tied it off to the starboard one.

Then, he pulled the ROV itself out of its carrying case, and placed it on the folding table near the control console in view of the pilot. With all the various components thus arranged, he set about making all of the connections between them. Finally, Scott handed Doc the male end of the 120 VAC power cord to plug into the nearest ship's-power outlet.

Ship's power on *Strange Brew* was derived from a prototype twenty-four-hundred-Watt fuel cell "burning" diesel fuel, which Doc was beta testing for a Norwegian company. An inverter converted the fuel cell's direct-current output to alternating current. The cell provided enough power to keep the inverter operating at an output of twenty Amperes at 120 Vac while trickle charging an emergency battery. There was a backup conventional diesel-powered generator as well, which automatically started up if the fuel cell failed. The fuel cell's main advantage was that it was silent, allowing *Strange Brew* to have reliable ship's power without constant noise from a generator running.

Doc went below to get a fifteen-foot extension cord to reach the outlet, which was in the forward part of the deckhouse to keep it out of the weather. Once he made that connection, Scott was ready to do his pre-dive checks.

"Bud, sit over here," he said, indicating a place on the transom seat just to starboard of where he was sitting in front of the control-panel monitor. "You need to learn how to operate one of these things, so you might as well start now."

He handed her a dog-eared copy of the ROV operator manual open to a page near the front of the thick book, which provided a checklist of pre-dive tests to perform.

"This is a P4 CD 300XSV commercial dive ROV system built by VideoRay in Pennsylvania," Scott explained as if he were starting a lecture in a college classroom. "VideoRay manufactures a basic platform, which they then optimize for different applications

with add-on hardware and software subsystems, such as side-scan sonar. This one's optimized for just the kinds of marine salvage work we do."

"Like any complex piece of equipment," he said, "you always need to test it before you use it. Here's the checklist. We start by testing the circuit-safety components, then boot up the system. When it comes online, we'll test the system functions. At that point, we'll be ready to launch the ROV.

Scott had Bud read the checklist items while he performed the tests, showing her how each is done and what to look for. There were inspections to make sure the thrusters were in good condition, that no water had leaked into the unit on previous dives, and that the electrical connections were correct.

As they made these checks of the ROV's systems, Doc hovered around watching everything they did as if memorizing every detail.

After verifying the ROV's condition, they booted up the software.

"The integrated control panel consists of two displays," Scott told Bud. "It looks like a small laptop mounted on top of a bigger laptop built into the control-panel case. That's only a surface appearance, though. In reality, what looks like a little laptop is actually the computer that operates the ROV. The monitor screen built into the case lid is just that: a second, larger screen built into the lid. It provides extra display space. In fact, you can move windows directly from the laptop screen to the monitor by simply grabbing and dropping them, just as if the second display was part of the first."

Doc moved around to sit on the narrow stern deck by the taffrail almost directly behind Bud. Thinking he just wanted to be near her, Bud turned to smile up at him only to find him intently watching the computer screens.

"Most of the electronics built into the case consists of power supplies, safety circuits, and so forth. The computer is just that computer," Scott said, pointing to it.

"All of the control panel functions," he continued his overview of the controls, "are run by software: widgets and windows that can be rearranged at will on the display screens, just like the windows on an ordinary computer. I like to put the widgets for piloting the ROV on the front screen, and windows for data gathering and recording on the monitor behind it, but you can arrange it any way you want."

"You operate the controls using the keyboard, mousepad and touch screen, just like you would on any tablet computer. You pilot the ROV using this separate hand controller, like it was a model airplane, car, boat, or any radio controlled vehicle. In fact, any

game controller can be set up to work instead of this controller, which came with the system.”

“The system has the usual navigational and piloting instruments you’d expect on a surface ship. For example, there’s a magnetic compass and a speed sensor. In addition, there are instruments for depth below the surface and tilt, which are important for controlling the ROV, but would mean nothing on a surface ship. There’s also an ‘engine room’ widget that displays information about the thrusters, such as power and internal temperature.”

“We’ll start by making sure everything on the ROV works,” he explained. Then, he showed her how to perform the various tests of the ROV’s onboard functions from the checklist.

“Don’t leave the lights or motors on very long with it out of the water,” he warned. “They’re designed to be cooled by the surrounding water, and can overheat fast. Just flip ‘em on then off to verify that they work.”

## 38

Having done everything they could do with the ROV out of the water, Scott told Red she was to pick the ROV up by its tether and lower it over the side, then pay out a couple of fathoms of tether, using her outstretched arms to estimate length. At six feet to the fathom, that would give the ROV about twelve feet of slack to start with.

“But first,” he said as Red reached for the ROV, “put on a life jacket.”

“Why me when nobody else has to wear one?”

The life jacket looked really hot and uncomfortable, and she always enjoyed working nude.

“You’re the one leaning over the side,” Scott replied. “If you’re leaning over too far, and we get hit with a rogue wave at just the wrong time, SPLUT!” He made a hand gesture like someone making a dive over the side.

“Rogue wave!” Red said, looking mildly confused and uncertain, but inclined to think he was putting her on. She’d seen the TV programs about enormous waves overtopping ships and capsizing them, but that was supposed to be well out to sea, in more difficult conditions than today, and extremely rare, anyway.

“Yes, rogue wave,” Scott emphasized, not looking like he was kidding at all. “They’re more common than people want to think.”

Red looked to Doc for confirmation.

“Chaotic system,” Doc pointed out. “Your the math genius here. You should understand this stuff, already.”

Just his tone told Red this was important. He never spoke to her like that unless he was worried about her safety. Even when she was being stupid, he kept his Zen calm with her. Somehow, his tone told her, he was actually afraid for her life.

“Look out there,” he nodded his head toward the horizon. “That’s the turbulent flow field you’ve been yammering on about for a week. It’s a fractal with an inverse-frequency height distribution, which is the hallmark of chaos. It’s not hypothetical, or some abstract concept. It’s real. It’s right there in all its glory. Learn to love it, and to fear it! It gives no quarter and takes no prisoners. Just ask the crew of the *Castillo*.”

“Most of the swells out here today are about two feet. The significant wave height – the average height of the biggest third of the waves – is around three feet, I can see several out there making four to five feet right now. Rogue waves start at around double the significant wave height, which today would be six feet. All you need is superposition of two significant-height waves to make a rogue wave. We’ll be hit by several of those today. For anyone sitting in a deck chair, it won’t do more than spill their drink, but for someone leaning over the side trying to pull a twelve-pound object out of the water, it’s another story. Put on the jacket!”

When he saw she was still looking stubborn, he added, crossly: “I don’t want to find myself fishing you out of the water with a boathook, with nothing to hook onto but your asshole!”

She went and got a life jacket to put on. She did not look thrilled, though. She thought it must look amazingly stupid, like a toddler running around wearing a tee shirt and no diapers, not to mention being tremendously un-sexy.

Red faced and grumpy, she put the ROV in the water as instructed. As she did, the boat rose on a wave that first pulled her face four or five feet away from the water, then brought it rushing down to within inches.

“Shit!” she screamed, dropping the ROV, grabbing the taffrail with white knuckles, and pulling her head back.

Looking around, she asked: “Was that one?”

Her three companions simultaneously said: “No.”

She silently thanked the men for taking care of her in spite of herself.

She’d once told Mark and Mary that if she told Doc she wanted to jump off the Empire State Building, he would probably let her do it, but would ask her to wait until he invented something to keep her safe. It came home to her that maybe that scenario wasn’t as far fetched as she’d thought.

“Now, let’s play around with the ROV on the surface,” Scott said. “First, however, take a look to make sure it’s floating well. It should be submerged near the surface, and neither sinking nor floating.

Bud stood up, then stepped around the table to take a look. “Looks good to me,” she reported. She noticed Doc was still sitting quietly, watching everything that happened. Red had picked a seat on the back deck in the corner by the stern cleat, with her legs dangling over the combing into the cockpit. She still had a death grip on the taffrail (somehow the sea seemed a lot rougher since her scare leaning over the side), but her interest was being drawn to the display on the screens.

Scott, who was closer to the port gunwale than Bud, as well as being nearly a foot taller, just stood up in place to look over the side. “Unh-huh,” he observed. “Looks good.”

He used the hand controller to pilot the ROV away from the hull to make it easier to observe, then brought it up to just below the surface. With most swells running one to two feet, the ROV bounced between having the flotation tanks on its back pop out of the surface, and having them several inches underwater. Every time the ROV sank low, its vertical thruster came on automatically to bring it back up to the surface.

“I’ve turned on the system’s Auto Depth feature,” Scott explained, “and set it so the ROV tries to keep it’s back just about an inch under the surface. With so much wave action, however, it’s having trouble holding that depth. It’ll work better when it’s down below the surface turbulence.”

Bud nodded her head to signal that she understood. She was generally pretty laid back about people telling her things she already knew – such as how waves would affect a neutrally buoyant object at the surface. Generally, she listened to everything she was told, eager for any scraps of new information she might catch – such as how the ROV’s Auto-Depth feature worked.

Yesterday, she’d crossly set Doc straight about her seamanship skills because she’d felt he was patronizing her. On another level, arguing with him gave her an excuse to further connect with that yummy-looking older boy she’d secretly had a crush on in high school, and which she suddenly found herself, years later, sleeping with.

Between getting on regular fluid-swapping terms with Doc, and doing some vertical cuddling with Scott last night on the dance floor, this trip had already afforded her the chance to live out two of her adolescent fantasies. On top of that, she’d renewed her relationship with the other big love of her life: Red.

The fact that this trip was working out so well for her on a personal level was one of the reasons she’d so quickly put aside her anger over some pot hunter molesting the wreck that had claimed her brother’s life. Bud was otherwise having the time of *her* life! She thought that if he were here, Bill would have approved.

“Here,” Scott said, handing her the controller, “you practice maneuvering. Red, you just try to maintain that same light tension on the tether. Don’t let it pull so hard that you feel the ROV straining, but don’t get too much tether floating around in the water, or it might get tangled. This tether is neutrally buoyant, so it won’t cause trouble by floating or sinking, but if you get loops of the stuff in the water, it can get tangled up – especially if we accidentally make a knot by running the ROV through one of the loops.”

Seeing Red start to look concerned over the responsibility, he added: “Just keep an eye on it, and you’ll do fine. You’re way

smarter and better coordinated than most of the people who do this for a living.”

Feeling better, Red stood up in the cockpit, hip jammed between the aft-deck combing and the port-side gunwale. Somehow, the boat’s motion felt even more violent than when she was sitting on the aft deck, but she was getting more confident that she could find a way to stay in the cockpit. She was starting to enjoy the excitement of the movement – like a carnival ride.

While Red had spent plenty of time looking pretty on the decks of her step father’s gyro-stabilized hundred-footer, bobbing around on something half that size was a new experience. She thought about what it must have been like for Bud’s brother out here working on a boat down in size by another factor of two – half of *Strange Brew*’s length.

Scott let Bud practice steering the ROV on the surface while watching it. Then, he had her maneuver it back close to the hull.

“Now, try turning it to run away from us on a course due East,” he ordered, “and try to hold the heading by the magnetic compass.”

At first, Bud kept overcorrecting her course, but she quickly got used to the steering’s sensitivity. Scott had her steer the ROV back and forth several times until she got good at holding a course just by watching the compass display on the computer screen.

Seeing that she’d already gotten the knack of piloting it on the surface in conditions that were not ideal, Scott showed Bud how to set the ROV’s Auto Heading feature. Then, she could just set the course, and let the ROV run on autopilot until it reached the end of its tether. He had her run it back and forth that way several times, until she got competent at controlling the vehicle by switching and resetting its autopilot.

Scott then dug a big bait-casting reel out of an equipment box. Where it should have attached to a fishing rod, however, Scott had bolted a clamp designed to fit around a standard seven-eighths-inch stainless-steel handrail. He used an Allen wrench to attach it to the taffrail near where Red was standing.

The line on the reel, however, wasn’t a fishing line. It was almost an eighth inch in diameter, and bright fluorescent yellow. Once the reel was secured to the rail, Scott pulled out a few feet of line by a spring clip attached to the end, and clipped on a long leader with a huge fishing weight at one end. Between the clip and the weight were a dozen hard-yellow-plastic balls spaced a foot apart.

“Red,” he said, passing the weight to her, “please hold this over the side, then lower it when I tell you to.”

After attaching the leader to the line, Scott flipped off the reel’s drag, and told Red to let go of the weight. The line zinged out

of the reel, allowing the weight to drop rapidly beneath the sea.

Over the high-pitched buzzing of the drag's ratchet, Scott said: "The weight will hold the balls on the bottom and they'll float up to make a vertical pylon twelve feet high that will be easy to see for both the camera and the side-scan sonar. We'll use it as a fixed point for our search pattern."

It seemed to take forever for the weight to reach the bottom a hundred-sixty feet below. When it did, Scott flipped the drag lever back on, and reeled in the line until it just became taut when *Strange Brew* rose to the top of the swells, but didn't lift the weight off the bottom. Then, he let out a few more feet to provide extra slack to accommodate extra-large waves and a rising tide.

"Now," he explained, "we'll have something to orient on as the ROV descends to the bottom to search for the wreck. Of course, if we've positioned the boat properly, and if the coordinates we have are correct, that weight should be practically on top of the wreck, and we won't need to search much at all. But things don't always work out that nicely."

"Why don't you use the transponder?" Doc asked. "I see you have one."

"The water's too deep to get really accurate horizontal position with a transponder near the surface," Scott explained. "This fishing-reel rig is also easy to pick up and move if we need to. It doesn't move with the boat's rocking. Now that it's down there, it'll be stationary. It also gives us a vertical line between the ship and bottom that the ROV can follow down. It's a nice, simple, low-tech solution to several problems."

## 39

“Bud, come sit down here and dive this thing,” Scott ordered in an almost playful tone.

She had wandered over to the breakfast buffet to secure another cup of coffee while Scott and Red rigged the pylon. Delivering a second cup to Red, who had gone back to sitting on the edge of the back deck with her feet dangling into the cockpit, Bud stepped around the table edge, and sat down.

Sliding the handheld control over in front of her, Scott said: “Auto depth works the same way as Auto Heading. Turn the control on the left side forward past its neutral point. That’ll turn Auto Depth off, and turn the vertical thruster on to push the ROV directly down. If it starts descending too fast, rotate the control back toward the neutral point and it’ll descend more slowly. While it’s descending, turn it about its axis until you see that yellow line about in the middle of the camera’s field of view. Once you have it in view, just keep rotating the ROV as necessary to keep it looking directly at the line. The line won’t be straight all the way down, so it will get closer or farther away as the ROV descends, and likely to move side to side. Just keep it centered, and close enough to be visible, and you’ll be okay. If it gets too far away, so that you’re afraid you might lose it in the murk, move the ROV closer. If it gets too close, so you think you might hit it, back away.”

As the ROV descended, Bud could see the underneath of the foamy waves at the top of the main camera display, and a uniform blue below. As an experienced SCUBA diver, she was used to that view.

What was startling, however, was being completely unable to see the bottom. The water just got darker until it became a deep, dark blue. She just hadn’t been diving in water this deep before.

She was unprepared for how dark the water underneath appeared. Human vision, which has a logarithmic response to light intensity, compresses contrast variations, making the dark depths look lighter. The camera had a linear response, so the water beneath the ROV looked very dark, indeed.

“Tilt the camera down a bit while descending,” Scott advised. He showed her how to use the camera tilt buttons on the hand controller to tilt the camera. “You naturally look down when descending, and up when rising. It’s a good idea to do the same thing when looking out through an ROV.”

Without the surface in the picture, however, she found it disorienting at first. The background was mostly a uniform medium

blue darkening as she looked down.

She was also surprised by how few fish there were. The waters near shore, where she was usually diving, are much more productive than water farther out. Fish are attracted to smaller fish, which are attracted to nutrients in the water, growing plants, and hiding places along the bottom. Out where they were, there was relatively little to attract marine animals, who found better pickings closer to shore.

It was almost startling when the yellow line came into view, Bud was surprised by how close it looked, as well as how bright. As the ROV descended into the gloom, however, it didn't look so gloomy after all. She'd expected it to look dark, like gathering dark after sunset, but the light level didn't seem to change at all.

"I thought it would get darker," she told Scott in surprise.

Scott chuckled. He'd seen this reaction from newbie ROV pilots before.

"The camera automatically changes sensitivity as we lose the light," he explained. We're about a third of the way down, now, and have lost half the light. The camera has compensated by increasing its sensitivity by about a factor of two, so the brightness *looks* the same. Notice that the colors are changing, though. Everything looks paler and bluer. There's practically no red light left at this depth. Everything looks blue because the light's blue."

"The line still looks bright yellow, though," she observed.

"That's because it actually glows. The fluorescent dye in the line absorbs ultraviolet, much of which still makes it through the water to this depth, and retransmits the energy in the yellow. That, along with the increased camera sensitivity, makes it look brighter and yellower. It's why we use that line."

So, when the bottom began rising out of the gloom, Bud was not surprised by how bright it was, and how spectacularly the column of plastic balls stood out when they reached them.

Another surprise was the landscape. She'd expected featureless sand without the usual forest of bottom plants, but how desert-like it actually looked was startling.

"Where's the wreck?" Bud asked when the bottom turned out to be nearly featureless. She didn't expect much. Any wood exposed above the bottom would have rotted away centuries ago. Metal objects would have picked up a thick stony-looking encrustation. Everything would be blanketed with drifted sand. She had, however, expected to see *something*.

She started turning the ROV in place to scan around in search of something – anything – that looked like wreckage from a four-hundred-year-old ship.

“There it is,” Scott practically shouted. “I’m amazed at how close we came on the first try! We’re either very lucky or very good.”

He was pointing at a bunch of lumps and hollows on the bottom, with a few rocks visible. It took Bud nearly a minute to recognize it as a wreck site. Red and Doc, who’d been drawn involuntarily to the screen like moths to a flame, couldn’t see anything different from anything else on the bottom.

Well, maybe it was a little rougher, as if it had been disturbed. Yeah, there were actual hummocks and depressions in the sand, where everywhere else was pretty flat. And, there were some rocks that were a different size. Everywhere else, visible rocks were pretty big. That place had more rocks that were smaller.

“Unimpressive” was the word that sprang to mind.

“Let’s get a heading from our pylon,” Scott suggested. “Bud, bring the ROV up as close as you dare to the pylon, then turn it to point toward the wreck site.”

Bud was starting to get pretty good at piloting the ROV. A lot of it had to do with her experience growing up around boats. That experience translated well to piloting the ROV. Some of it was the ROV cockpit software, which was pretty intuitive.

Scott, however, thought most of it was due to Bud’s being smarter than the average TV talk show host. Her brother had told him she was smart, but that *could* have been bragging by a doting older brother.

After spending some time working with her, he’d come to realize that it wasn’t. She’d seemed bright when he’d met her years ago as a teenager. Now, he could see she went well beyond “bright” into “picks up on things awfully damn fast” territory. No wonder she and Red, who generally seemed to Scott to display maturity far beyond her age, and perception that bordered on clairvoyance, had become so close. They probably had trouble finding anyone else their age to have a conversation with.

Wheeler had himself an exceptional grad student in Cheryl.

The thought made him regret his choice to leave academia. If he’d stayed, it would be *him* teaching bright, energetic grad students with a thirst for the knowledge he could offer them. Just this little bit of teaching Bud how to pilot an ROV reminded him how much fun teaching was – especially with bright students – and how much he missed it.

## 40

After Bud had the ROV tail first practically against the pylon and pointed at what Scott had identified as the wreck site, he showed her how to record a still image of the site from there. She wrote down the ROV's heading from the magnetic compass display in her research notebook, and started driving toward the site. Without having to be told, she stopped several times along the way to snap still images as more detail of the wreck site became visible.

"Why don't I just record what the main camera sees while I fly over the site in a raster pattern?" Bud suggested.

"Why don't you just do that," Scott agreed. "But first, get a better location for the wreck. Go out into the middle of it and turn around to view the pylon. Use the imaging sonar to get a range and the compass to get a bearing. That will give us an offset from the coordinates we have. Maybe we can get a better fix."

"So, where's the middle?" Bud asked.

"Pick out a good feature that will stay put," Scott replied, "and use that as your datum for the wreck. There, see that long rock peeking out of the sand. That would be one or more cannon locked in a concretion. That could be your datum. Just go over and sit on it."

Bud drove the ROV over to the rock and a little past, then spun it around to face back to the pylon, which was quite visible. Then, she slowly brought the ROV up to the rock, and settled down on top with the vertical thruster still spinning just fast enough to push the ROV down against the top, but not so fast as to make it unsteady. She snapped a picture, and recorded a sonar image. As Scott had predicted, the pylon showed up as a bright point on the sonar image.

"Now you can fly over the site shooting video," he said.

He showed her how to start and stop the recording using the button on the side of the hand controller. They did a test video clip for practice, and reviewed it to make sure Bud got what she intended.

"Since this isn't an actual survey, we don't have to be very precise today. I suggest starting from where you are, moving toward the pylon until it looks like you're back to barren seafloor, then turn to follow the wreckage outline. In actual fact, there's probably stuff buried in the sand all over. The wreck site's probably several times bigger than what you see right here. But, you won't know without a survey using a magnetometer. We can do that later, and we'll use precision methods for locating the ROV. Right now is

triage to judge how much has been disturbed.”

Bud started the video recording from the main camera feed, and brought the ROV up a few feet. The depth gauge said the ROV had risen three-point-two-five feet above its perch on the cannon. With the camera tilted below horizontal, that gave a good view of that portion of the bottom approaching and passing below the ROV and as far into the distance as practical. She set the Auto Depth and Auto Heading features, and started the ROV moving forward.

As she approached what looked like the undisturbed part of the bottom, she slowed the ROV to a stop, rotated it ninety degrees to port, and started it moving slowly forward again. Soon, she seemed to be out of the wreck site again, and turned to port a second time.

This time, the disturbed area seemed to angle off to starboard, so she overrode Auto Heading to follow it. Soon, it seemed to start angling back to port, so she followed that. When she ran out of disturbed bottom again, she made another turn to port. Eventually, she'd traced the entire perimeter. She turned to port earlier this time, and started viewing the wreck site's interior.

“Those depressions are pothunter excavations,” Scott pointed out. “They were deeper originally, but have been filled in by drifting sand. Likely, they used an airlift to dredge material from the bottom. They would go deep enough into the sand to reach small artifacts, such as coins, buried there. Then, they'd suck the stuff up through the dredge and sieve it through a basket, which would pass the sand, but collect anything bigger than whatever the basket mesh size was. Likely, they'd use something like a quarter- or three-eighths-inch mesh.”

“If they found valuables, such as gold or silver coins, they'd collect them, melt them down, and sell the metal. If not, they'd discard them in a trash midden near the periphery. In either case, the stratigraphic and layout information would be lost for both the recovered items and anything else that was disturbed.”

As Bud maneuvered the ROV over the site, Red quietly walked over to stand beside Doc.

“I've been watching this. It's great software, but I think we could get a lot of mileage by incorporating Robotic Systems' technology. Waddayathink?”

“I'm thinking the same thing,” Doc agreed. “We'll work on it when you get back to Boston. I think we'll be talking about developing a physical platform to go with the software that takes advantage of Greg's ideas as well. I'll work on that.”

Greg was Greg Michels, Chief Technology Officer at Robotic Systems. Doc was thinking about some way to lose the tether, while Red was thinking of how to make the ROV pilot itself.

Sometime later, the ROV came to a larger depression that had significantly less drifted sand in it.

“Uh, oh!” Scott said. “That looks like they found something worth spending some time on. All I can think of is that they found at least one cache of silver ingots. They probably pulled out as much as they thought they could dispose of without attracting attention, and left the rest in place. They may have come back multiple times, taking a little bit out each time.”

“Why would they pull the ship’s bell out?” Doc asked. It seemed to him to be an extraordinarily stupid move that had backfired by alerting them to the theft.

“They probably pulled it, along with other salvageable items, early on to help fund their work. Ships carry a lot of stuff that would be worth pushing onto the antiques market. I’ve no idea what the story is on that bell, but they must have thought it was worth the risk of having it identified later. People do surprising things to keep their dreams alive. A galleon’s bell would be worth a lot of money on the antiques market.”

“This one was donated to my yacht club to use as a lawn ornament,” Doc reported sarcastically. “I don’t see much profit in that.”

“Likely what happened,” Scott suggested, “is that the pothunter sold it to a dealer for several hundred to several thousand dollars. The dealer then sold it to a collector for much more. The collector later, for his own reasons, decided to donate the thing to your club. Rich people often want to use their money to buy prestige, and donating something like that would net a lot of prestige. Likely, the bell had changed hands several times before being donated. Knowledge about its origin probably disappeared after the first time it changed hands.”

## 41

“So, you’re saying the site has been disturbed, but not ruined,” Doc concluded to make sure he’d gotten the result of their dive right. They were back in Scott’s living room Tuesday morning reviewing their results, and preparing a formal report for Wheeler.

On the boat returning from the site, Bud had text messaged Wheeler with a quick summary: “REC HRT NT BAD. ND XCAV. - T”

“The wreck was disturbed, but not badly. It needs to be excavated. – Thompson.”

After Bud had completed her flyover, their job was done. They’d packed the equipment up, and left the site in early afternoon. By mid-afternoon, they were back at the dock cleaning salt water off the equipment, and loading it into the back of Scott’s truck.

They’d offered to help Scott stow it wherever he kept his equipment – he must have a warehouse or something as a base for his operation. That surely must be necessary to run a salvage business. There was equipment to store and maintain, and recovered material to warehouse until it could be sent along to whoever ultimately wanted it. All that required some kind of building, somewhere.

While searching for an ROV to rent on Sunday, Red had noticed that Scott’s website gave no hint as to where this base might be. There was telephone and email contact information, but no physical address.

That was not unusual, though. Many companies not dealing directly with the public failed to publish their physical locations on the Internet. They could tell you how to find them if and when they decided they wanted to, and nobody wants a lot of nuisance visits at their place of business from casual Web surfers.

Red was a little surprised, however, that Scott remained secretive about this base after they’d worked together. She thought they were a team, now, and one didn’t keep secrets from one’s team members.

“I’d really like to see your operation,” she probed.

“I’d rather not take you there right now,” he retorted. “We just finished a project that left the place an awful mess. I’ll bring you over when we’ve had a chance to clean up a little. Leave the ROV in the truck for now. I’ll bring it in and have the guys unload it after you’ve left.”

Put off, Red let it drop. But, she had alarm bells jangling in her head. It all sounded plausible, but she couldn't shake the feeling of there being something wrong.

That had been yesterday afternoon. They'd all gone back to Scott's house for the night – nobody suggested starting back for Miami Beach with the Sun slipping down in the sky. For one thing, they'd all had way too much fun Sunday night to pass up the chance for a reprise on Monday. Besides, they had a lot of data to mull over while they were still all together.

On the way back from the wreck site aboard *Strange Brew*, Scott had downloaded everything they'd recorded from the ROV computer to a USB thumb drive, which he'd then given to Bud for the archeology team's archives. After they got back to Scott's, they still had to upload that data to Bud's and Red's computers, and Wheeler's database on the Harvard computers. It made sense to distribute copies as soon as possible to everyone who might need them. If one copy was lost for any reason, there would still be three copies available.

Actually, there would be four copies. Red had uploaded the data to her personal database on the SST server, too. She'd learned from Doc to always have a Plan B for every contingency. Even if there were multiple other copies around, she didn't want the one on her laptop to be the only one under her control.

Instead of going out again Monday night, they'd decided to have a pizza and movie party in Scott's den. He had a great entertainment center with an eighty-four-inch high-definition display and theater-quality sound system. They'd ordered out for four assorted pizzas, and raided Scott's DVD collection for sailing-treasure-ship movies.

They started with Peter Yates' 1977 thriller *The Deep*, starring Jacqueline Bisset, Nick Nolte, and Robert Shaw as treasure hunters who get tangled up with criminals who were after a load of heroin ampules on a World-War-Two wreck lying on top of a Spanish galleon like the *Castillo*. The similarities to what they were doing were too close to pass up watching it.

After that one, they watched Peter Weir's *Master and Commander*, starring Russell Crowe as Patrick O'Brian's fictional naval hero Jack Aubrey. Watching the sequence where Aubrey's ship encounters a Southern Ocean storm with fifty-foot waves helped them imagine what it was like for the *Castillo*'s crew when the galleon capsized in a similar storm.

Finally, they ran through the first three installments of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series, starring one of Doc's favorite actors: Johnny Depp. By the time all that was done, Red and Bud had forgotten, or at least shelved in the back of a dark closet of their minds, their misgivings about Scott's secretiveness. The guy was a great host, as well as charming, and witty. They both also found him to be great eye candy. It seemed impossible that he wasn't being completely honest with them.

Besides, Red had been serious about wanting to reprise her erotic dream with him when she was fully conscious. That she started even before Captain Barbosa presided over Will and Elizabeth's marriage in the third part of the *Pirates* series, with Red demonstrating her sword swallowing trick on Scott's erection. After the film, they copulated themselves to sleep in his bed.

Scott wore a condom, and Red was quite satisfied with the results.

They'd adjourned to Scott's living room after breakfast Tuesday morning to review the results of the ROV dive, and outline their formal report. It was after re-running Bud's flyover video for the fourth time that Doc wanted to summarize their results.

"That's right," Bud agreed. "The damage is nowhere as bad as I'd feared, but we can't just let it go. That big excavation with little drift sand in it shows that the site's still being actively looted. That's pretty fresh."

"As time goes on, the damage is just going to get worse. And, there's obviously still enough treasure down there to make it an irresistible target. Of course, if word gets out about what's happened, we'll get a horde of copy cats swarming over it like ants at a picnic. The looting going on now proves that the technology is there to make it happen."

"We still need to look into Bill's disappearance," Red added. "I can't shake the feeling that it's tied up tightly with that wreck site. Until someone shows me otherwise, I'm going to believe that's the best place for us to look for clues."

"As you pointed out, Red," Doc pointed out, "there's also Bill's boat, which may be sitting in some impound yard in South Carolina. We won't know if there are any leads there until we look."

"So," he summarized, "our plan of action is for Bud to convince Wheeler to mount a full excavation of the site. Meanwhile, Red will start looking into that boat, and whatever the Coast Guard turned up in their investigation."

Throughout the discussion, Scott had been uncharacteristically quiet. Except when someone specifically asked for his opinion based on his archeological expertise or diving experience, he'd said practically nothing. It was as if, having done his part by supplying the ROV and supervising Bud in using it, he'd backed away from the effort.

## 42

With action items listed for Red and Bud, and it becoming clear that Bud wasn't going on a tour of South Atlantic archeology connections, Doc seemed to feel that his role was now reduced to corporate support. He expected Red to manage the project as part of her joint research with Bud – she'd bury her time and any expenses in the Wavelet project budget with Doc's approval. It would also be up to her to prioritize work on solving the Bill-disappearance mystery alongside what she and Bud had to do to keep their research going. He made it clear that he would expect to see progress on both fronts.

Without saying anything, Doc had started his own project for adapting Robotic Systems' technology to ROVs. He'd have to bring himself up to date on existing ROV technology, then look into finding a partner among existing ROV manufacturers. The final step would be to develop a new platform combining the existing technology with selected features from Greg Michels' ideas. He'd bring Red in for software development at the appropriate time. But, that would be something he had to go back to Scottsdale to concentrate on.

They broke their meeting in Scott's living room up by ten o'clock, and were shoving off from the marina by eleven. They pulled into *Strange Brew's* slip in Miami Beach around noontime.

Doc put the girls in charge of getting the boat back to Miami Beach. He was serious about having both of them become competent at running *Strange Brew*. He went so far as to insist that Red finally take her out from the marina in Key Largo, and, more importantly, back her into the slip in Miami Beach. It was the first time she'd brought a boat into a dock.

He also pushed their cruise speed up higher than the fifty-five knots he'd been setting previously. By the time they reached the outer marker for Miami Beach, he had Bud pounding the boat over the swells at eighty knots. Red, with less boat-handling experience, had done a stint at sixty-five knots.

Red at first wondered why all the pressure. Then, she realized that it was all a training program, which included Bud. She was not surprised, although she wasn't quite sure how she felt about it, to find that Doc was starting to include Bud as a permanent part of their little family.

No matter what, Doc felt that he and Red were inextricably linked. Red felt the same way, and neither wanted that to change. He also saw that Bud was one of the most important persons in Red's life. They treated each other as sisters or lovers depending on the situation, and neither seemed to want that to change, either. Nor did he want it to change. Bud had become one of his favorites, too.

But, they all had work to do. Begging the excuse of a company to run in Arizona, he left the marina in the early afternoon after they got back. He'd treated them to lunch in the yacht club's dining room, then closed up his boat and disappeared.

That left Bud and Red on their own for the rest of the week.

They had two tasks to complete. Their highest priority task was to prepare for their meeting with Suby on Thursday. A close second was writing a formal report for Wheeler.

Of course, this second task was for Bud to do. Red helped because the girls liked to do everything together when they could. But, it was Bud's job.

With Doc gone, the girls moved back onto the *Mary McKenna*. Actually, saying *back* is inaccurate, since neither had slept aboard Mark's boat even once since they'd gotten there. By the time they boarded the private jet to go back to Boston Friday morning, they'd been in Miami Beach for eight nights, during which they'd slept aboard the *Mary McKenna* a grand total of three times.

Doc was right when he predicted that Red's Mom would informally adopt Bud. Mary accommodated the girls' lesbian relationship as far as turning a blind eye when they indulged in nightly pajama parties – *sans* pajamas, of course – as long as they were discrete in front of the crew and, of course, the public. Red had already turned up her nose at most of the prospects the yacht club had to offer, and had told Mary in ways Mary could accept.

Mary used her indulgence of the girls' relationship as leverage to start sprucing up Bud's image. The Suicide Girl wardrobe was out, as was the raunchy act. The new image would be important for Bud's growing role as an academic professional. If she was going to be a college professor, she'd better be able to look and act the part. She could do anything she wanted on the weekend, but she would have to inspire confidence and respect when standing in front of a classroom come Monday morning.

One of Mary's greatest fears for Bud was that the still-discrete body piercings would escalate to the non-discrete, and even tattoos in potentially embarrassing places. She'd had eighteen years to pound into Red the notion of not putting anything on that wouldn't wash off, so she wasn't really worried about her daughter.

She knew she didn't have that luxury with Bud. Mary was relieved, and frankly amazed, to see that Bud had managed to reach twenty-two years of age without succumbing to the temptation to ink her skin, but her ersatz-mother nightmare was to see Bud come home with "SEX MACHINE" tattooed in gothic letters across her forehead.

What Mary didn't know was that Doc had quietly taken care of that issue months before. The first day he'd met Red – the day he'd invented her nickname – he'd taken her on a cruise through Daytona Beach dives catering to hard-core bikers in town for Bike

Week. In the process, he'd joined her in browsing through the sample books in more than one tattoo parlor, but advised her to make sure any pattern she chose was something she'd want to wear for the rest of her life. He'd gently repeated the advice enough times that Red got the idea that it was really important.

In the end, she'd realized that she'd never seen, or even imagined, a pattern she'd want to wear the rest of her life, and she'd come to expect she never would. She'd left empty skinned. And, she'd passed that attitude on to Bud.

Of course, Bud, being smarter than the average TV talk-show host, was pretty careful about what she did to herself, anyway. She went through life with the understanding that the only one really taking care of her was her. She'd avoided the temptation so common among teenage girls to follow whatever her companions did, and thought carefully about what she was getting herself into before doing something that couldn't be undone. So, Doc's advice about tattoos, transmitted through Red, fell on receptive ears. It was giving voice to an idea she'd already conceived, herself.

In fact, everything that Mary was trying to teach Bud was stuff she wanted to learn. She just hadn't had a good teacher.

Her mother had disappeared from the family early on, leaving Bud to be brought up by an older brother in a family consisting of a commercial-fishing crew. They'd loved her, and taken care of her, and taught her good values. They, however, did not know how to act like ladies.

Now, not only had Bud been invited to move in with the great love of her life (Red), her lover's mother was helping her grow up to be the woman she wanted to be.

This was turning out to be her best week in a long, long time.

## 43

“Why do you want to go to South Carolina, anyway?” Doc asked Bud when she called out of the blue first thing in the morning three Mondays later. “That’s Red’s job!”

As arranged, Bud had moved in with Red, and they had enjoyed an idyllic week working and loving together before things went bad. They were supposedly working feverishly on their interconnected tasks, but that’s where things started to go haywire. Red’s part was to concentrate on Bill’s disappearance, and keep Bud up to date about progress. But, she started getting secretive. Bud thought maybe Red had figured something out that she didn’t want to tell her, at least not yet.

The first hint to the outside world that all was not well was Bud calling Doc with a desperate plea for funds to go to South Carolina to get Bill’s boat.

“It may be her job, but she’s not doing it,” Bud reported. Doc could hear in her voice a complex combination of disappointment, anger, and concern bordering on fear. She sounded lost and abandoned.

What Bud was telling him did not sound like his Red. Mistress Judith, Nymphomaniac Executive had always been the most reliable of managers. He’d never seen her allow anything to interfere with the performance of her assigned duties. She was almost compulsive about completing tasks on time, within budget, and with superior results. He was always careful to monitor her workload because if overloaded she’d kill herself trying, rather than fail.

Something must be *very* wrong!

“She’s down in Florida working with Scott Arnold,” Bud further disclosed.

“What?” Doc yelped. “On what?”

“I don’t actually know,” Bud said, sounding like she was approaching tears. “Scott called a week ago yesterday to invite her down to see his operation. You know how she was unhappy that he wouldn’t show it to us when we were down there. He said they’d gotten the place cleaned up, and he wanted to show it to her. It sounded like he was trying to make up for putting us off before, but the invitation was for just her. Why just her?”

“And?” Doc prompted, trying to get enough useful information to piece together what was going on.

“She went down the next day. She’s been there since, and, as far as I can tell, she hasn’t done anything on anything. When she didn’t come back for a couple of days, I guess I got jealous. I went through her notes – we keep an online journal so that if anything happens to one of us, the other can pick up from where she left off – and found that she’d located Bill’s boat, and was supposed to go to South Carolina Thursday to check it out, but she hadn’t even arranged transportation. I called her about it, but she said she couldn’t do it. Would I look into it? When I called back later to have her buy a ticket for me to go down, myself, she said she’d decided not to pursue it. That was last Thursday. We argued, and we haven’t spoken since.”

Then, it finally all came out: “Doc, I’m scared for her. Something’s wrong. I don’t know what, but she hasn’t come home, and won’t talk to me. Maybe she’s just balling his brains out, but she wouldn’t let that stop her work, and she’d want to brag to me about it. This isn’t like her.”

“Hmmm ... ,” Doc said, then lapsed into silence for the better part of a minute.

“What, specifically, do you want me to do?” he asked, finally.

“I called to ask you to buy the tickets, so I could do go get the boat myself, but I don’t know if it’s the right thing to do. I think my Baby’s in trouble and I don’t know what to do!”

“Do you think checking out that boat is important right now?”

“I dunno. It’s the only thing I can think of that might tell me something. But, I wouldn’t even know what to look for, or how that might help Red.”

“Hmmm ... ,” Doc repeated. “Okay. Calm down so you can think straight. She can’t be in physical danger, or I’d have heard about it from her bodyguards. They’d kill anyone that tried to hurt her, then call me or Mark to report where they’d hidden the bodies. If she thought she were in danger, she’d scream for them, and they’d swing into action. So, at least *she* thinks she’s okay, and so do her bodyguards.”

Doc lapsed into silence again.

“I think maybe your following up on the boat is a good idea,” he said, eventually. “What you’ve said points to that being involved in whatever is going on. Maybe not, but maybe. In the meantime, I’ll make inquiries. ... She told you *not* to investigate? She didn’t just put it off ‘til she got back, or something like that?”

“Correct,” Bud replied. “She told me specifically *not* to go to South Carolina, or try to check any further on the boat. It

sounded like she didn't want me to look into Bill's death at all. That's what we argued about. He was *my* brother, who's she to tell me not to look into it?"

"Okay. Here's what you do. I'm going to have a detective named Tom Devore contact you. He worked with us on Red's father's disappearance. Tell him what you've told me. Tell him everything you know about Scott Arnold. Answer any of his questions, then let him tell you what to do. He may or may not want you to go to South Carolina. Whatever he says, do it. He'll report to me, but I want to hear from you, too. I want to hear your voice!"

Feeling better, she said: "Thanks, Doc. I'll wait for the detective's call. Thanks, again. Goodbye."

"Cheryl," Doc called her back to the phone before she could sever the connection.

"Yes, Doc?" she asked.

"I love you, you know."

"I love you, too."

Doc's next call was to Mark Shipton.

"Mark, what do you hear from our girl?"

Mark knew exactly who Doc was talking about. "Our girl" could only mean Red.

"Why? Is something wrong?"

"I don't know. I just got a panicky call from Cheryl Thompson. She thinks Red's gone off the reservation with a guy we met down in Key Largo. She hasn't been home in a week and a half. I assume your guys are still keeping tabs on her?"

"Of course! But, unless something came up that indicated she was in physical danger, they wouldn't do or say anything. They're supposed to leave her free to do as she likes."

"That's what I figured. It's possible that she's decided she likes sleeping with Scott more than she likes sleeping with Cheryl, and is indulging herself in ways that are none of our business. Cheryl might be jealous enough to try to cause trouble. I don't know her well enough to be sure."

## 44

“What do you know about the guy?” Mark asked.

“Not much. His name is Scott Arnold. He’s a marine salvage operator we worked with in Key Largo. Red was the one researching him. Cheryl met him briefly years ago, when he was working with her older brother. I just met him the last time I was in Florida. Dinner and dancing with the girls, and we worked with him as a team for one day. I’m planning to have a private detective check him out. We’re also looking into the idea that this may be linked somehow to Cheryl’s brother’s disappearance, although I don’t know.”

“He started out as a marine archeologist,” Doc started the story, “but has gone into salvage diving. It looks like he does pretty well. We rented an ROV from him when we were down there to see you about Red’s research project. You know about that business with Cheryl’s treasure ship, right?”

“Yes,” Mark said. “You folks went down to Key Largo for a couple of days to check on it. Something about the professor Cheryl works for.”

“Yes. You know that bell on the yacht club’s front lawn?”

“Sure. It was donated by Jack Ippolito, who collects such stuff. I guess he paid a pile for it, then donated it to the yacht club. That’s about all I know about it.”

“Well, it turns out that it was taken from a sunken wreck illegally. Cheryl knew about the wreck because her brother was the one who found it in the first place. That’s how she got involved, and she got Red and me involved in checking on it. That’s what we were doing down in Key Largo, and that’s how Red met Scott Arnold. Apparently, it was a case of love at first sight.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

Doc knew that Mark was giving his condolences to him for losing Red.

“If he’s what will make Red happy,” Doc said, “I want her to have him.”

“I was hoping she’d settle down with you,” Mark said.

“She obviously doesn’t want to, and I can’t force her to. I wouldn’t if I could. It’s her decision.”

“Anyway,” Doc went on with the story, “he wouldn’t show us his operation when we were down there. He said it was a mess because of a project he’d just finished. Red was unhappy about that, and pushed to see it. He called a week after Red got back to Boston, and said he’d gotten things cleaned up and wanted to show it to her. Cheryl said Red went down the next day, and just stayed. The girls got in a fight over the telephone a couple of days later, and haven’t spoken since. Cheryl’s worried and called me a little while ago for help. That’s about all I know at this point. I’m trying to find out if there’s really anything to worry about.”

“Have you talked to Red?” Mark asked.

“I wanted to do some checking first. My next call is to get the detective started, and then I’ll call Red.”

“What if she just wants to marry the guy?”

“She’s still my ersatz baby sister, and my star employee. She’s your step daughter. I think we both want to know everything about the guy, first. It makes little difference whether you do the honors, or I do. I figure I have a leg up, with more information to start with, so it makes sense for me to do it. Is that okay?”

“Sure,” Mark said. “Of course, I want to know whatever your detective turns up.”

“Of course. Okay, I’ll get things started and let you know what turns up. Bye.”

“Goodbye, and thanks for calling. I’ll let you know if I hear anything from my guys.”

Doc’s next call was to Tom Devore to get him started on finding out what was really going on.

“So, there are two things I’d like you to find out,” he said after briefing Tom on the situation as he saw it. “First, I want a background check on Scott Arnold.”

“You want to know if he’s after Red’s money,” Tom pointed out.

“Well, nobody’s suggested that, yet, but it’s a safe bet he is. He’d be an idiot not to want it, and he’s no idiot. I’m more interested in whether there’s any reason to believe he wouldn’t be good to her. He seems like a really nice guy, and physically and mentally perfect for Red. On the other hand, we don’t want her getting involved with a bigamist, for example, or a veteran philanderer who’ll break her heart.”

“Cheryl, however, seems to think there’s something more that she can’t put her finger on. She actually sounds scared. She may be being melodramatic, though. A background check is the first step, and we’d do it, anyway.”

“The second thing I want you to look into is Cheryl’s brother’s disappearance. I’m sending you her phone number. Please connect with her and help her get to the bottom of it. She’s scared and lonely, and needs help. Red was supposed to help her with it, but seems to have dropped the ball. Our picking it up will help the girl a lot.”

“Why are you getting involved in that?”

“I care a lot about Cheryl, and don’t want to see her unhappy. She needs help. So I want to make sure she gets it while I find out what’s going on with Red. In fact, helping Cheryl is top priority. Do that and the background check in parallel if you can, but she’s highest priority.”

“Okay,” Tom said. “I’ll call her right away. What about going to South Carolina?”

“That boat may be the only lead we have. Use your judgement on what you need to do. Please keep Cheryl involved, though. You’ll find she has a first class mind, and knows how to keep her eyes open. Being closer to it all, she might even notice things that mean nothing to you. In any case, working on her brother’s disappearance will keep her mind off Red until I get to the bottom of that.”

Doc’s final call was to Red, herself.

He got her voice mail.

“Hey, babe, it’s Doc. Just checking in to see how you’re doing. Cheryl tells me you’re in Florida with Scott Arnold. I hope that means you’re having a really good time. I need an update on your work, however. Please give me a call at your earliest convenience.”

Twenty-four hours and half a dozen calls later, with still no response, he was less friendly: “Red, it’s Doc. I need a report. What’s happening? Call or email *tout de suite!*”

“Mark,” he said when his next call connected, “your daughter’s not responding. I’ve been leaving messages on her voice mail since yesterday, and she hasn’t called back. Can you verify with her bodyguards that she’s okay? *I’m* starting to get worried.”

“Why don’t you call Pete, yourself? He’s point man right now,” Mark rejoined. “You can get faster response that way.”

“True. I just wanted to talk to you first. They’re your guys.”

“They take orders from you all the time, and like it. Let me know what happens.”

Doc then speed dialed Pete’s cellphone.

“Pete,” he said when the call connected, “is Red okay? She hasn’t responded to voice mail for twenty-four hours.”

“What?” Pete barked. “I’m looking at her right now. She’s in Scott Arnold’s shop cleaning something with a wire brush. They have the doors open and she’s sitting in front of a swamp cooler working. Looks happy as a clam, despite what that must be doing to her nails.”

“Put a phone in her hand, will you? I don’t like being ignored.”

Three minutes later, Scott’s work crew was startled when five large, burly young men wearing loose sport jackets and stern expressions walked into the warehouse from different directions, and gathered around the boss’s current squeeze. One of them addressed her, while the others looked around for anyone stupid enough to interfere. Nobody interfered.

“Ma’am,” Pete said to Red, holding his cellphone out to her, “Doc wants to talk to you. He sounds pissed!”

## 45

“I didn’t call back because I don’t want to talk to you,” she told Doc crossly. “Did Bud put you up to this? I’m mad at that bitch!”

“Who’re you calling a bitch, bitch?” Doc yelled back. “She loves the living shit out of you and is scared to death there’s something wrong. But, she did *not* put me up to this. *You* put me up to this by ignoring urgent messages from your employer.”

“Not anymore!” Red yelled. “I quit! I’m working for Scott, now.”

“Bullshit!” Doc shot back. “As your employer, I am limited by fair labor laws as to what I can do to an insubordinate employee. As your big brother, I am not. You’ve got twenty-four hours to present yourself at Mark’s boat to explain your behavior and beg my forgiveness, or I’ll come get you, and bring you back in a sack.”

“You are *not* my big brother!” she yelled, with her voice cracking. Pete noticed tears welling up in her eyes.

“Then, you might consider what happens to people who cause problems for Mark’s family. What do you think those men around you would do to that piece of real estate you’re sitting in if I asked them to? Twenty-four hours. Miami Beach. The *Mary McKenna*. Mark’s office off the forward salon. Be there!”

“You bastard!” Red yelled, preparing to throw the cellphone against the wall before Pete grabbed her wrist to stop her.

“Red?” she heard Doc say. Calmer, she pulled the phone slowly to her ear.

“What?” she yelled.

“I love you,” she heard Doc say, then the line went dead.

“Do you need a ride, ma’am,” Pete asked her, taking his cellphone back before she could do something destructive with it.

“No,” she said, hiding her tear-streaked face in her hands.

“Is your cellphone working?” he asked.

“It’s back at the house,” she said, shaking her head yes, but still covering her face.

“When you’re ready, just wave and we’ll pick you up,” he promised.

She ran from the room.

The five burly young men with stern expressions quietly evaporated from the building.

Red ran from the shop floor to the office, and crumpled into the chair behind an empty desk, sobbing uncontrollably. Scott, sitting behind his desk near the wall farthest from and facing toward the door, looked up.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Oh, Baby,” she said through the tears, “I have to go back.”

“No you don’t. Tell them you don’t want to. We’re going to get married. They can’t stop you. They just want to control you, anyway. What? Did Doc threaten to carry you home in a sack? He can’t do that. We wouldn’t let him, anyway.”

“Scott, you don’t understand,” Red replied. “Did you see those guys out there? They work for my stepfather. They’re killers. If my stepfather tells them to, they’ll kill you. They’ll kill Sean, and Pedro, and Philippe. Then, they’ll carry off everything of value in this building, and burn the building to the ground. Then, they’ll do the same thing to your house. Then, Mark will pay everyone from the Governor on down to the beat cop to hush it up. He’ll sell everything you have to pay them off, and use what he pulls out of the *Castillo* wreck to make up the difference.”

“I *have* to go see him,” she continued. “I have to talk to him to explain. Otherwise, he’ll just hear what Doc tells him, and he’ll never leave us alone. Doc would probably talk him into disinheriting me, and giving it all to *him*! We’d have *nothing*.”

Scott looked angry. He didn’t want to let her go. He was afraid that once she was out of his control, she wouldn’t come back. He might lose everything he’d worked so hard for. By now, she knew too much, anyway. No, it was too dangerous.

“C’mon Scott. Don’t worry. I’ll come back. I promise,” she said as if she’d read his mind. She had, in her way, read his mind. She’d had a week and a half to figure out what made him tick, and, by now, she knew just which buttons to push. “I’ll rent a car, go up to Miami Beach tomorrow, talk to Mark, and be back here the next day. Otherwise, we’ll lose it all. I’ve got to get Mark on our side. If I do it right, we can freeze Doc out. If I don’t, he’ll freeze *us* out.”

That did it. Scott understood how that game was played, and he believed that he’d won Red over. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have

let her know so much about his operation. He was just suffering jitters.

When he'd seen how badly she wanted his body, then found out she was rich, he'd wondered whether he could use her lust to get her money. He'd done something like that before with his first two wives, but on a smaller scale.

Her intelligence scared him, though. One momentary slip and she'd know everything. But, when he found out how much money she had, he figured it was worth the risk. He'd hidden all the obvious shit out of sight, and invited her down to see what he could arrange.

She'd come down in a heartbeat, which meant she was really hot for him. He was disappointed, however, to find out that she didn't have any money of her own. It was all her stepfather's. The old man was rolling in it, but just gave her bits and pieces, which she had to beg for.

When he'd realized she wanted to score her old man's money for herself *now* instead of in twenty, thirty, or forty years from now, when she was too old to enjoy it, he'd begun to trust her a little more, and to believe he could use her to get the whole pile at once.

His plan wasn't fully formed, yet, but basically he'd marry her, then find a way to wipe out the old man so she'd inherit. Then, he'd take care of *her*.

He wasn't sure whether he wanted to keep her alive as a sex slave, or take the safe route and inherit it all from her corpse. Probably, he'd do both: keep her around 'til he got tired of her, then the corpse.

Of course, the joker was Doc Manchek. He was, if anything, even sharper than Red, and probably had a plan similar to his. He'd certainly resent Scott's trying to horn in on his action, and might be able to do something about it. Manchek certainly had the old man's ear. There's no telling what he could accomplish.

Red didn't trust Manchek, anyway. He'd almost had her, but apparently failed to make Red an ally, and then couldn't keep his dick in his pants long enough to close the deal. Now, he was reduced to porking the lesbian girlfriend while playing up to Red just to hang around so he could work on the old man.

He could beat that game. He'd thought he already had.

But, now Manchek had come back even stronger from a different direction. He was using his influence to cut both Scott and Red out of the deal. Red was pretty upset about that, and Scott could use that anger plus her influence over the old man to freeze Doc

out.

It's what Red wanted to do. It was in her best interest. That, plus the fact that she was such a whore for his manhood, would keep her in line. Yes, it would work out.

"Okay, Baby," Scott said. "Go ahead and rent a car to drive up there. Do you need me to help?" He wasn't sure he wanted to be in the same room with Manchek just now.

"No, Scott," Red replied. "That would just set people off. I can handle Doc by myself. In fact, I don't have to rent a car. All I have to do is wave to my bodyguards, and they'll drive me up. They suggested it. It might look better that way. You know: 'Dutiful daughter comes to her father when summoned.' Yeah, that would be the smart way to play it."

## 46

“Oh, Doc, I’m so glad to see you,” Red effused twenty hours later. As soon as she saw him standing in the main salon aboard the *Mary McKenna* she ran to his arms and buried her face in his neck. “I’m sorry to put you through all this, but I was trying to keep you and Bud out of it.”

“Mark, the guy’s a total psychopath,” she explained to her stepfather while still clinging to Doc. “I know he’s been looting the *Castillo*, and maybe other wrecks, too. I think the sonovabitch might have killed Bud’s brother.”

“Okay, young lady, explain yourself,” Doc ordered, without releasing the bear hug they were sharing. “What in Hell are you playing at?”

“Hell is the right place,” she said seriously. “Those guys are evil. The first sign was his all of a sudden becoming so anxious to please after having a chance to think about Mark’s money. It doesn’t take a week and a half to fumigate a warehouse, no matter what he’s been storing. After being so standoffish, he was suddenly so desperate for me to see his operation that he called me in Boston from Florida, and offered to pay my airfare down here. Instead, I used our usual charter service and paid for it myself. I’d already seen a bunch of things with Bill’s disappearance that pointed vaguely in Scott’s direction.”

“Then, when I got down there,” she continued, “there was still a storage area that he kept steering me away from. I’ll bet that’s where he keeps the bright and shiny stuff out of sight.”

“He kept pumping me about Bud’s plans for excavating the *Castillo*. How long would it take them to get started? Did they have funding, yet? What would they do to guard it against looters? That sort of thing. He’s probably hoping to empty it out before Bud gets to it. Mark, can we put some SEALs around there to protect it? I’d hate to see Bud lose it.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Mark said, making a notation in a notebook open on his desk.

“Just park a ship over it with half a dozen tough guys and a hydrophone,” Doc suggested. “They’re burglars, not bandits. We should discuss it with the Coast Guard, too. They might have some suggestions.”

“I’ll get it started after we’re done here,” Mark agreed.

Obviously pleased at how fast he’d resolved the problem, Red smiled up at Doc, held his face with an outstretched hand at

each side, and said: “Ohhh, I love you so!”

“Then marry me,” he said for the umpteenth time.

“Maybe later,” she said, laying her head on his shoulder. She knew now that it was what she wanted to do – what she *needed* to do – but she had something else to do first. After she’d done it, he might not want her back. He might not understand it. She wasn’t sure *she* understood it. She just knew she had to do it.

“Okay, but right now you still have more explaining to do,” he reminded her.

“Yes. Then, he didn’t want me following up on Bill’s boat in South Carolina. At first, he tried to tell me what a wild goose chase it was. Then, when I asked Bud to do it for me, he had a conniption fit. He never gave me a good reason, though. He did say something about doing it putting her in danger.

I figured that *if* he’d already killed twice, he wouldn’t hesitate at a third. That could mean the danger to Bud. So, I promised to kaibosh the trip, which I said I could do just by refusing to pay for it.”

“That’s when I had the fight with Bud. Oh, Doc, please tell her I still love her and I didn’t mean any of the awful things I said. I was afraid he might really mean it about putting her in danger.”

“She didn’t believe what you said,” Doc assured her. “It’s what made her think you were in trouble. She sat around for days trying to think what to do, then she called me.”

“It’s what made me sure Scott had something to do with Bill’s death,” Red explained. “Thinking that he might have done murder made me afraid for Bud, but that boat’s got to be the key to Bill’s disappearance. Is there something we can do about it?”

“I’ve already put Tom Devore on it. He and Bud may be on their way to South Carolina, already. Mark, do you have anyone available to cover them? I doubt if Arnold has a big enough organization to threaten the two of them, but we don’t know, yet.”

“Another action item,” Mark made a notation.

“Okay, what else?” Doc asked Red.

“You guys are going to be mad at me about this,” she said guiltily.

They just waited.

“Promise not to hate me?”

“I think we can promise that,” Mark said, almost laughing.

“Oh, Doc, Mark. It’s awful. I’m so embarrassed to tell you.”

“C’mon, Baby, spit it out. I promised to love you forever, remember?”

She shook her head up and down quietly, refusing to look him in the eye as if she was ashamed for having doubted him. She was such a mass of conflicting emotions that she wasn’t sure what she felt.

“It was clear that Scott wanted to marry me for my money,” she began. “Then, he found it was Mark’s money, not mine. So, I told him I wanted it, too. I wanted to stay close to him to find out what his game is. The plan is for me to marry Scott, then Scott would figure out how to kill Mark and Mom so I could inherit. I get chills just thinking about it. ... *Mom!*” She buried her face in Doc’s shoulder again, shaking.

It took her half a minute to regain her composure.

“Of course, he hasn’t told me what plans he has for me afterward,” she pointed out. “Probably to chain me to a bed naked until he gets tired of that, then something untraceable so he can inherit.”

Thinking about that helped her erase the image of her helping Scott kill her mother.

“The fly in the ointment is you, Doc,” Red continued. “He’s afraid of you. I told him you were after me for my money, too, but I’d seen it coming and told you no. But, I told him that you were buddy buddy with Mark, and could influence him to cut me out of the Will. That’s how I got away to come here. I’m supposed to be here countering your influence over Mark.”

“Sounds like a good ploy,” Doc judged.

“You don’t hate me for it?”

“I don’t hate you,” Doc stated.

“Mark?” she looked to him for forgiveness, too.

“There isn’t much I like about what you’re doing, but *you* I do *not* hate. Doc, how far should we let this go?”

“That’s up to Red,” Doc opined. “I don’t think we have enough to do anything about Arnold, yet. Certainly we have no actual physical evidence, just a lot of stories that could land Red in jail for conspiracy as well as Scott, if she could ever get a jury to believe them at all.”

“We have to keep going!” Red yelled. “I’ve been through too much already to quit, now!”

“Remember about sunk costs,” Mark reminded her. “You have to be ready to cut your losses to protect what you have left.”

“What does he mean by that,” she asked Doc. She asked him because she already knew, but wanted to know how he felt.

“He means: you’re still alive. We all want to keep it that way. If all you’re saying is true – and I don’t think you could convince a jury beyond a reasonable doubt that it is – going back could mean not being alive, anymore. If Scott’s a psychopathic killer, and he realizes you’re out to expose him, he’ll kill you without blinking. We’ll go after him for that, and turn him into shark bait, but that wouldn’t help you. It wouldn’t make us feel any better, either. We’d rather lose him than lose you.”

“Oh, shit,” he added. “Now *I*’m scared.”

## 47

It took Red all night to convince Doc and Mark to let her go back. It's not like she begged and pleaded. She didn't say much of anything, actually. All she had to do was to convince them that it really was what she wanted to do. This she did by pointedly not listening to any arguments in favor of her not going back.

Red, of course, couldn't consider not going back. She knew she had a job to do, and that it was not done. Doc was right: her particular personality disorder was that she'd rather die trying, than fail. This time it was literally true that she might die trying, but that wasn't going to stop her.

As soon as they'd finished the debriefing part of their meeting, Red went in search of her mother. Mary knew something was up, but not exactly what, so she worried. On the other hand, she had two strong, competent men with all the resources they were likely to need there to protect her daughter. She knew they'd take care of her as well as was possible.

"Are you causing trouble again?" Mary scolded.

"Mom," Red explained, "this guy's a psychopath. I think he killed Bud's brother. I can't let that go. I'm pretty sure he's the one who's been looting her ship, and that'll keep happening unless I put a stop to it. He wants to marry me for Mark's money. To get it, though, he'd have to kill Mark and you, too. There's no way I could let that happen. I have to go back to stop him."

"Very commendable," Mary agreed, "but the downside is that if he starts to suspect – even for a minute – what you're really up to, he'll kill you before Doc can get you out."

"Why do you say Doc would get me out?" There were probably a dozen people around who might compete with him in a race to save her.

"Because he'll be the first one there to grab you and pull you out, dead or alive. He'll stay closest, and won't slow down to wait for anyone else to catch up when the time comes."

"What do you think I should do?"

"It looks like you have three goals: punish the guy for Bud's brother; stop his looting of Bud's ship; and keep him from using you to get Mark's money."

“Let’s take them in reverse order,” she continued.

“The third one is easy. You don’t marry him. As Nancy Reagan likes to say: ‘Just Say No.’ Nobody can force you. It’s illegal, at least in the United States, and therefore null and void. He can’t inherit based on an illegal contract. It’s ridiculous.”

“The second is harder, but I think doable. You said Doc was going to set up a ship to guard the wreck. Well, don’t tell Scott about that. Talk him into dipping in for a little more loot. That shouldn’t be too hard, but it’s dangerous. Then, have Doc right there to nab him.”

Mary knew her daughter well enough to not bother trying to talk her out of going back.

“The third one is even harder, as well as being vastly more dangerous. You have to uncover evidence that proves Scott killed Bill. If you even *look* like you’re trying to do it, you’re for the chop instantly. My advice is to drop it. Tell him you tried to talk Mark and Doc out of it, but you don’t know if you succeeded. Then, let it lie. You can always go looking for evidence after you’ve nabbed him for looting and you’re safe.”

“It’s still unspeakably dangerous, but that’s the best I can suggest.”

“Mom, you may have just saved my life. I think I can get Doc and Mark to go for it. At least, they’ll go along with it once I tell ‘em it’s what I’m going to do.”

Searching out Mark and Doc (which wasn’t too hard because they were still sitting glumly in the salon not wanting to admit what they knew they were going to help Red do) Red explained her plan. They agreed that it reduced the danger level from suicidal to exceptionally gutsy. It also reduced their fear level from hollow-eyed-waiting-for-death to hoping-they-could-pull-it-off.

Unfortunately, they’d found that it was too late to head Tom Devore and Bud off. They’d already gotten to the boat and were combing it for evidence. With any luck, Arnold will have no way of knowing it was happening. Red should pretend she knew nothing about it. If necessary, she’d tell Scott she’d asked Mark about Bud’s efforts, but was told Bud wasn’t doing anything. If Arnold found out about it, she hoped he’d chalk it up to Doc countering her move after she went back.

Maybe that would work.

As for marrying Scott, she’d keep that fantasy alive for him. She hoped she would never get to the point of having to pull the plug on that one. She wanted to be clear of him long before she had to answer that final question.

To the world, keeping up the fantasy would be a harrowing sacrifice. Imagine having to fuck that monster two or three times a day!

Inside, however, Red admitted to herself that the sex was still awfully good. The danger made it even more exciting. Part of her motivation to go forward with her plan was that she wanted more of it. That was the part she thought Doc wouldn't forgive when it was over. She decided that Bud had been right: she was a sick woman!

Before Red left for Key Largo the next morning, Tom Devore called with preliminary results of his background check.

"The guy's been married twice," Tom's voice announced over the speakerphone. "His wives have lousy luck, though. The first one drowned while helping on a salvage dive. The second in a car crash."

"So, he lied about the divorce," Red said.

"Yes, if he claimed to have been divorced. The insurance company for the second raked him over the coals, but couldn't find any way to pin the blame on him. They even investigated the first one, hoping to cast doubt on his claim for the second one. They ended up paying him half a mil."

"Other than that," Tom continued, "he's clean. Bachelor's in history from UMass/Amhurst. Master's and Ph.D. in archeology from Boston University. Three years on the faculty at Miami State. Didn't get tenure, so he quit to start his salvage business. That's when the first wife died. It took him two years to find the second wife. She lasted a year. He's thirty-four, now."

"Basically, Red," Tom opined, "we wouldn't let him near you on a bet. Doc, you should have done this earlier."

"Don't blame him," Red jumped to his defence. "I jumped the fence without telling him. I knew there was something wrong, and wanted to find out what. If Scott had been alright, I would have had a really good time, and nobody else would have known about it."

"Then, young lady," Tom lectured her, "you shouldn't have left without telling them. They just want to protect you from creeps like this. They can't do it if you don't cooperate. Next time, tell Doc before going off on your own. You could have already been dead."

Red clamped her mouth shut, and looked guiltily at Doc. He seemed to be meditating on a painting. It was a very nice, though relatively small, Jackson Pollock secured to the bulkhead.

## 48

“You’ve got to believe me, Baby,” Red told Scott desperately. “Mark told me Bud wasn’t going anywhere near that boat. He said she was up in Boston crying her eyes out because I called her ‘Manchek’s little whore.’ Are you sure she got to the boat?”

“She went to the impound yard with some ex-cop detective while you were in Miami Beach. They had a court order to secure the boat. They moved it inside where the forensics guys do examinations.”

“Is there any chance they’ll find something to connect you with Bill and his partner?”

She was trying to distract him from his anger over her telling him that Bill’s boat was safe, when Bud and Tom Devore had already gotten to it. She was hoping she was a good enough actress to convince him the genuine fear in her voice was fear *for* him, instead of fear *of* him.

“Who knows? Everybody knows it was their boat. The bodies were on it for hours with me before I got the sharks to come. Then, I was on it for hours alone waiting for Sean to pick me up. Maybe my boat bumped with it when I climbed over, and transferred some paint. Maybe I dropped something. Who knows?”

“Would anything still be there after years outside in the sun and rain?”

“Who knows? That’s not the point. You said she wasn’t going near it. I trusted you and you let me down. You lied to me.”

“Did you find out who the detective was?”

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Just answer me!” Red was grasping at straws, now. Her plan had gone horribly wrong horribly fast. She was waiting for him to crush her head between a dock and a boat, then say she slipped.

“Tom something,” Scott said.

“Tom Devore!” Red practically shouted with a triumphant air. “No wonder! He’s Doc Manchek’s favorite detective. Doc always goes to Tom when he wants something like that. He used to be a bent cop, but now Manchek uses him whenever he wants to manipulate the police. I’ve some stories to tell you later.”

That would be after she'd made them up.

"What are you talking about?" Scott asked, suspiciously.

"It's obvious. When I told Bud to stay away from the boat, she went crying to Doc. He paid Tom to help her get to the boat, while he told Mark she was holed up in my apartment playing the brokenhearted lover."

Red hoped that would convince Scott she was still on his side. She needed more out of him. Maybe she could use this development to move things along.

"If there's a chance they can find something, we've gotta raise some traveling money. I don't want to be on the run with the shorts. If we've got to get out of Dodge, I want to land someplace like Monaco, not hustling tequila in some shithole in Mexico."

It wouldn't be tequila she'd be peddling, Scott thought, and he'd collect the cash. He didn't think she'd do it for him, though.

"What are you worried about?" Scott asked in surprise. "They won't be after you."

"Where you go, I go, Baby," Red promised. "I don't want to sit around on Mark's boat in Miami Beach with nothing, while you give that thing to a string of *señoritas* on the beach at Acapulco." She emphasized it by grabbing his cock through his pants. "How much do you have hidden away?"

This all sounded plausible to Scott, but he figured that if she was setting him up, she'd say the same thing. He'd have to keep her close from now on. No more day trips! He wasn't going to trust her out of his sight again.

"The first thing is to convert what you've got stashed into cash," Mistress Judith kicked into high gear, "then stow the cash where we can get to it. You've got an offshore bank account somewhere, haven't you?"

"Bahamas," Scott said, starting to feel he was getting left behind, again.

"Aw, shit! It'll take them about an hour to get to that!"

"Let me think," she seemed to turn inward.

"I know a guy in Cuba," she lied, "who'll wash our cash into Euros, send it on to Europe, and hide it where the Feds will never find it."

"Europe? Where in Europe?"

“All over the place. That’s the trick. Split it up into lots of little bundles in big banks where it won’t attract any attention. They’ll find a few, but not enough to make a dent.”

“How do you know how to do that?”

“It’s what I *do*. I’m a computer whiz, remember? You know how to pull shit out of the water. I know how to stash money where the Sun don’t shine.”

It was actually fun figuring this stuff out! She’d have made a great crook. Then, she thought about the looks on the faces of the people she’d have to hurt. It reminded her of a line from an old Beatles song:

*She could steal, but she could not rob.*

That was her. Doc had shown her how to see everything from all points of view. Now, she’d never be a good criminal because she’d always empathize with her victims. She’d never have the heart to hurt them that way.

“Damn you, Doc!” she thought, with loving gratitude.

Back to the task at hand. She had to talk Scott into dipping into that treasure chest on the *Castillo*, but not too soon. Give Doc enough time to set his trap. Three to five days ought to do it.

“We can’t do it too fast,” she told Scott. “Let’s plan three to five days to cash in what you’ve got in that store room you won’t let me see.”

“How do you know about that?” Scott yelled. She was, maybe, more dangerous than he’d thought.

“Baby, this is *me*! You’ve got to be a lot more clever than you’ve been to finesse the likes of me.”

“It’ll take them at least two weeks to go over Bill’s boat with a microscope,” She calculated. “Then, a few days to get off their asses to come after you.”

“How do you know that?” Scott asked, again suspicious.

“I’ve been through this before, remember?”

“Yeah, and last time you handed the guy over to the cops!”

“The filthy motherfucker hit me on the head, chained me to a wall, and jerked off on my tits. You think maybe I’m going to kiss him for that? This is different.”

“In what way?”

“I *like* fucking you. I like it a lot. I could walk away and let you pull your own chestnuts out of the fire, but I’m not. I’m here now because I like your chestnuts, and I want them available to fondle for indefinitely. I don’t want them banging trannies in some Federal lockup, somewhere.”

That seemed to satisfy Scott. Red figured that Scott not suspicious – she added paranoia to her list of armchair-psychiatric disorders for him – was at best a temporary state. She’d have to be more careful. This was getting more dangerous, but, perversely, more fun.

“I figure that gives us about two weeks to get ready to move,” she calculated. “Figuring a few days to fence what we pull up, minus the time on this end to clear out what you’ve got already, and we’ve only a one-or-two-day window to hoist as much metal out of the *Castillo* as we can.”

“We can pull up a lot of metal in that time,” Scott opined.

“Then, pull up a lot of metal. Don’t worry,” she promised with a smile, “I’ll help you hide it, *and* spend it.”

## 49

Red was actually pretty disappointed with Scott when she finally saw his secret store room. As a pot hunter, he was okay. He'd managed to pull out and fence about a hundred thousand dollars worth of trinkets from *Castillo* and other wrecks. But, then he'd gotten greedy at the same time he ran out of capability.

She'd finally gotten access to that barely hidden storeroom where he kept "the bright and shiny stuff." There, instead of fabulous treasures, she found piles of old boating junk – bent propellers, crushed life rings with names of boats painted on them, outboard motors that would never run again. It was basically the stuff left over after he'd sold everything for which he could find a buyer.

What he was *hiding* in there, however, was an old palette in a corner covered by a tarp, with a pile of junk on top of it. When he peeled back the tarp, Red saw the white gleam of pure silver. He'd stacked silver bars from the *Castillo* about three feet wide by three feet deep, and four inches high, then covered them up to put them out of sight.

"How much is here?" she asked.

"A little over a ton," Scott replied.

"How much is it worth?"

"I don't know in the current market. Last time I checked, about one-and-a-half-million dollars. It's just a sample I pulled up to get started."

"How long has it been here?"

"Two years. I haven't found a buyer, yet."

"Let me get this straight, Scott," she put on her most critical Mistress Judith expression, which she reserved for subordinates who had fumbled badly a task she thought they should be able to handle easily. "You killed two men so that you could commit a Federal crime by looting a wrecked galleon with, what, a hundred-fifty tons of silver aboard, and a few hundred pounds of gold, now worth tens of millions of dollars. Then, you spent time looting minor stuff laying around to raise working capital to hunt around until you could find the hold with the treasure. Then, you hauled up less than one percent, and stuck it in this storeroom under an old tarp.

Finally, after all that, you just left it here because you couldn't come up with a bent precious metals dealer to unload the stuff for you? Does that about sum it up?"

Chagrined, Scott hung his head, and nodded, "yes."

"Baby, you need my help more than you know!" Red advised him.

Before she went any farther, she decided to check the current value of the ton of silver they had.

"Do you have an accurate figure for this load's actual weight?" she asked him.

"Two-thousand-one-hundred-sixty-three pounds," he replied from memory.

Red used her cellphone to get a price per ounce for silver. She disappointed Scott by reporting: "I don't know when you got your silver price, but this load's only worth one-point-one million, now. But, you won't get anywhere near that from a fence."

She figured she could find a bent metals dealer easily using Mark's contacts. She started ticking off in her head the people she'd met at various Gulf States Petroleum events, or anywhere else. Contacts she made while developing the mine her natural father discovered would actually be a better place to start. Whom did she know with access to cash, and a way of pushing large quantities of silver onto the commodities market with no questions asked?

Suddenly, an alarm bell went off in her head. She was getting caught up in this game, and forgetting that it wasn't a game at all. It had huge stakes: her life, for one; her self respect if she carried out what she was considering, for another; and her freedom if she got caught.

The alarm bell told her that if she really did it, she'd become part of the theft. She'd be a criminal and go to jail for less money than she could raise at eleven o'clock on a Saturday night with a phone call. Of course, her stealing any portable amount of money was idiotic.

She'd seen Mark doing some shady things – things that bent the law like a pretzel – such as paying off the president of a South American country for exclusive access to an oil field the size of Connecticut. He did not, however, go in for petty theft.

So, how could she make it *look* like she was spending three days fencing a load of hot silver, without actually doing it?

Doc would know how to do it. How to ask?

She had a direct line to him through Pete!

“Baby, trust me,” she said to Scott. “I’m about to do what you weren’t able to do in two years. If I pull it off, I want you to promise to love me forever, and never, ever doubt me again.”

Skeptically, Scott nodded.

She dialed Pete’s cellphone number from memory, rather than using speed dial.

When the call connected, she said: “*Hola, Señor Olmos*. This is Judith McKenna. We met at a Gulf States Petroleum party last year. I’m Mark Shipton’s step daughter. ... Yes, I’m glad you remember me. I was wondering if you were still interested in commodities. ... I recently acquired a small load of silver bars weighing a little under one-thousand kilograms, and I’d really like to get rid of them – no questions asked. Do you know anyone who could help me with that? ... Right now, they are in Florida in the U.S.A. ... I was hoping we could complete the transfer in three to five days. ... The actual weight is nine-hundred-eighty-one kilograms. ... I understand, but there will be several larger shipments coming during the next few months. ... The first might be as much as ten tons in a week or so. ... No, that would not work. We would want more. ... More. ... Ahh, five-hundred-thousand is *much* better, *gracias*. ... We would want you to wire the funds into an account in Cuba. I’m texting you the account number now.”

She started rapidly hammering cellphone keys with two thumbs.

“There, did you get it? ... Good. Where would you want the silver delivered. ... No, we would rather deliver it to a neutral location. ... Yes, that would be fine. If we see the funds are there by, say, Saturday midnight, we will deliver the silver to you by three o’clock anywhere in Miami. ... Yes, you can text message the address to this number. ... I, too, am glad to finally be able to do business with you, and hope to do more in the near future. ... *Adios*.”

“Olmos is a lawyer in Miami,” Red explained to Scott. “He has clients with large cash flows who are always looking for ways to invest for spectacular returns.”

“Drug money?”

“What do you care?”

“How much will we get?”

“Five-hundred-thousand dollars.”

“That’s less than half of what it’s worth!”

“Sitting here, its value is zero. Welcome to the real world.”

Scott sighed.

“How do you know these people?”

“I go to parties. At parties, men like to brag to women before fucking them. I try to fuck the ones who might be useful later.”

Outside, about a block away, Pete was having trouble taking a breath because he was laughing so hard. Sam was trying to find out if he was alright. Sam had seen him taking a cellphone call, then looking confused, which changed to a look of recognition. Then holding his hand over his mouth, Pete started to double over. She thought he was laughing, but when he sat down on the grass next to the sidewalk and couldn’t get his breath, she thought maybe he was sick.

When she reached him, Pete held his hand up for her to be quiet while he listened. He was trying to breathe and laugh silently at the same time, and was having trouble accomplishing it.

“Yes, ma’am, I got it. I’ll call you back Saturday at midnight,” he finally said before cancelling the call.

He sat, knees up, on the grass grinning like he’d just heard the best joke of the year. Sam started to ask what was going on, but Pete held his hand up, again, then speed dialed a number.

“Doc, our girl’s set up her sting,” he said to the phone. “They have about a ton of silver in the warehouse, which they’re going to deliver to us in Miami Saturday night. I’ll email you the details. We need to make it look like we’re a Cuban gang fencing the stuff with drug money. We’re to text her the address Saturday at midnight. They’ll probably already have it loaded on a truck, and will start for Miami when they get the address. If I read her code right, they’ll be diving on the wreck to pick up more next week. So, we should probably be on station Sunday, and expect to nab ‘em when they start bringing stuff up Monday or Tuesday.”

Then, he ended the call.

“*That’s* what was so funny?” Sam asked.

“You shoulda heard her: ‘*Hola, Señor Olmos ...*’ Then, she went through this whole thing about having met Olmos at some Gulf States party, and she was so pleased he remembered her. ‘I have two thousand pounds of hot silver that I want to fence. Can you help me, please,’ in that sweetness and light voice she has. I could almost hear her batting her eyelashes! I about burst. And, I couldn’t

make a sound that might be heard on the other end. I had no idea what she was going to say next, so I just tried to follow what she was trying to tell me. You never know what that girl is going to come up with!”

## 50

Scott was taken aback by this new Red. Actually, he'd seen this side of Red once before, when she was planning their ROV dive. But, that was when she had her clique of friends (Bud and Doc) around her. When she'd come back down from Boston on her own, she'd been very different. She'd been more submissive, easier to bend to his will.

Now, however, after coming back from Miami Beach, she'd been more confident – quicker to take charge. He tried to think what could have made the change.

Doc had warned him that she could switch from submissive to dominating and back in a heartbeat. He'd pointed out that she typically went with the flow, but that was because she actively *chose* to go with the flow minute-by-minute. Mistress Judith was always there, he'd said, but mostly she chose to have others take the lead.

Scott hadn't really believed that, but now he'd seen Mistress Judith reappear, just the way Doc described it. She'd judged that he'd flubbed fencing the silver, and just took over, handled the situation, then handed the reins back to him. All of a sudden, it had gone back to, "what do you want to do now?" and "is that okay?"

So far, however, Mistress Judith had jumped in to do things he wanted done, anyway, but was having trouble executing. He had to admit, they made a good team. He developed the overall strategy, and when, once in a while, there was a tactical issue that was more in her area of expertise, she'd jump in.

Maybe the change came from increased urgency to put together a traveling-money nestegg. She was right: now that Bud had gotten to Bill's boat, he had to worry that there might come a sudden knock on the door. It was best to be prepared. If the detective found nothing in the boat, they could relax. They could be even more relaxed knowing that if something went bad in a hurry, they would have their escape plan ready. Yes, she was right – if there was a problem now, they'd be caught flat footed.

The problem was, if she got too assertive, she might be harder to dispose of when the time came. On the other hand, maybe she would be so useful that he wouldn't want to dispose of her.

But, and here his paranoia reared its ugly head, what if she were playing *him*? She obviously wasn't playing straight with her friends, or her family. What made him think she'd play straight with him? She could be planning to have him help her bump off the old man and old lady so she could inherit, then bump *him* off to keep it all for herself.

Maybe she and the girlfriend were planning to set him up to take the fall for everything, while they disappeared to the island of Lesbos with the loot.

It's the old dilemma faced by every criminal, and put succinctly by one of the characters in the film *Harlem Nights*: "Everyone in the business is a criminal, and how can you ever trust a criminal?"

Yes, he'd have to watch her very carefully. Let her do her thing, but make sure she was close by whenever anything went down. If she tried to double cross him, he'd shove her into the spotlight while making his escape. That would work.

Let's see, what were the critical steps where a setup was most likely? There wouldn't be anything until they'd gotten married and set her up to get the inheritance. So, he'd be safe from her setting a trap for him until then.

After that, she'd be dangerous. He'd need some way to knock her off quickly at just the right moment, but that moment would have to wait. Too quickly after the old man went down, and somebody'd get suspicious.

The waiting would be when it was dangerous, though. How to control her, then? Maybe a drug habit. Start shooting her up and say she went wild after the old man died. He'd say he'd tried to hush it up – keep her in seclusion while he tried to dry her out. Then, he'd say, she'd escaped. By the time he'd found her she'd died of an overdose.

That would work.

Then, there was that damned Manchek character. He could set both Red and Scott up to take a fall at any time to discredit her with the old man, and get all the loot for himself.

There would be two danger points: fencing the loot, and diving on the wreck. It would be easy to set up a trap at either of those points. But, Manchek would have to know about them, first.

"Is there any way Manchek could know about Saturday night?" he asked Red.

"I don't think so," Red opined. "He was at the same party where I fucked Olmos, but he made a move on Olmos' wife. Olmos didn't like that, and they argued. I don't think Olmos would tell Doc about this, or anything that he thought would help Doc in any way. In fact, if Doc asked Olmos the time of day, I think he'd lie."

"What about Shipton?"

"I don't think Olmos gets along too well with Mark, either. They do business, but Mark washes his hands afterward. He makes

no bones about the fact that he thinks Olmos is a sleazebag and only uses him when he needs to. Olmos knows this, and is insulted. It's one reason he wanted to pork me. It was a way of thumbing his nose at Mark."

"Yet, you did it."

"Of course I did it. I figured that some day I'd want to make the phone call I just made. The point is that he wouldn't tell Mark anything unless he thought he could make more by telling him, than by dealing with us. I don't see that happening."

Had Pete heard this conversation, his sides would have been splitting with laughter all over again. Olmos was a fictional character Red had made up on the spot out of thin air. She'd never behaved anything like what she described at one of Mark's parties, partly because Mark did not throw those kinds of parties. Finally, Pete had seen what Red did to characters like Olmos who tried to pick her up. He'd figuratively heard their egos go "plop" before Red flushed.

It all sounded like something she'd read in a Mickey Spillane crime novel.

Because it was. Or, at least that was where the inspiration came from. Red liked mystery novels about seedy characters. She was having fun actually being in a story like that.

Satisfied that neither Manchek nor the old man would know about their operation Saturday night, Scott decided to concentrate on completing it, then worry about the next step: diving for more treasure on the wreck.

"So, how is this supposed to work?" he asked, not quite sure what Red had in mind for details, and needing to know the details.

"I assume you have a truck capable of carrying a ton of silver as far as Miami," she explained. "Saturday sometime, we pull it into the workshop, close the doors, and start loading the silver into it. Make sure the tarp is tied down securely so it can't slip and expose the silver. Then, we load a lot of other junk into the truck, too, as camouflage. You'll have to tell me how long you think it will take, so we can start at the right time to finish loading before midnight, but not too much before midnight."

She was making this up as she went.

"At midnight, Olmos will text the address of the drop site to my phone. I'll make sure the money has hit my account, then print out directions for Sean. He, Pedro and Philippe will drive the truck to Miami, and unload it. Then, they'll come back."

"Do we trust them to do what they're told? Shouldn't we go with them?"

"Hey, they're your guys. If you can't trust them, why do you have them around here? But, if we go with them and Olmos really

is setting us up, we get nabbed. We might be able to shift the blame on them if we're not there, but not if we get caught with our fingers on the stuff. It would be game over."

"Won't Olmos want to verify the silver before giving you the money?"

"Yes, but he figures he knows where I live. I can't screw him over, then split, because I have to stay around for my inheritance. He'll figure this is just something I'm doing for pin money or for fun. There are ways he can protect himself with this kind of transaction, and he'll do them, but he's not going to be worried this time. There might be more trouble later, because there'll be more money involved."

## 51

Even Doc was surprised at the cooperation he got with setting up his trap around the wreck of the *Castillo de Santa Guadalupe*. The Federal government and State of Florida, it seems, were not at all happy about somebody planning to loot tens of billions of dollars worth of treasure from under their noses. That was equivalent to the annual receipts from millions of ordinary taxpayers. While governments tend to be very liberal when doling dollars out, they get miserly about money coming in.

As soon as Doc contacted the Coast Guard with his information, and asked for help to set a trap for Scott, the flood gates opened. His hardest job was keeping gung-ho cops on script with Red's plan instead of trying to go off on their own – which could have gotten her dead. It was a simple plan, and Doc had to show them the elegance in its simplicity.

Luckily, the Federal Bureau of Investigation quickly took point for the operation. He'd had plenty of contact with them as a specialized-technology supplier, so the agent in charge was willing to listen to the details of his proposal.

Special Agent Damon Wells had received phone calls from several folks responsible for keeping the FBI supplied with up-to-date tools, who all told him that Doc wasn't just some hare-brained joker out of the blue. They explained that Doc was the inventor of several of their favorite tools, and anything Doc suggested was at least worth listening to. Most importantly, one of those calls was from local office's supervisor in Washington.

"I want to say," Wells began, "that the Bureau was very impressed with the way your team worked with local authorities in Nevada during the McKenna affair. I've been instructed to take you into fullest confidence during this operation. In fact, I've been instructed to make sure you are very happy about what happens."

Doc wasn't entirely sure what Wells intended that to mean, but it sounded good.

"I understand that one of your team is now undercover with the thieves."

"Yes, and I'm desperately concerned for her safety," Doc replied. "A clinical psychologist on our staff believes that the gang leader may be a paranoid psychopath. Also, we've uncovered information that leads us to believe he has done four murders in the past. We're hoping to prevent his making her the fifth."

"Was your agent involved in the Nevada operation?"

“She led that operation. She’s Red McKenna.”

“Oh. She’s high profile. We don’t want her hurt or killed in an operation run by the FBI!”

“I don’t want her hurt or killed at all! That would make me *very* unhappy, indeed! She’s been undercover in Scott Arnold’s shop for almost two weeks. Unfortunately, she’s not trained for that kind of work, so we’re very worried. The longer she’s in there, the more dangerous it is.”

“How did she get in that position?”

“Frankly, she’s very headstrong. She went undercover on her own before she realized whom she was dealing with. By the time she realized, she was already in too deep. The rest of us didn’t know anything about what she was doing until a week later.”

“At first, she just thought Arnold was just a greedy salvage operator. Only later did she realize he was unbalanced. She’d been there three days before she began to suspect murders as well. Our psychologist, analyzing his statements and actions, confirmed Red’s suspicion of psychopathy, and added paranoia to the diagnosis. We haven’t been able to warn her about that, and we don’t know if she’s figured it out on her own.”

“That’s bad. Do you have a plan?”

“It’s her plan. The first part is clear, and we’re already working on our side of it. She’s talked Arnold into trying to fence what he already has in his warehouse with us as the receiver. That’s to happen Saturday night and into Sunday morning. They’ll be delivering the silver to us in Miami between midnight and two o’clock Sunday morning. We’ll have team members pretending to be a Cuban gang ready to receive it. The payment will be a fictitious wire transfer into one of Red’s bank accounts. Actually, I’ll make a real deposit that she can show Arnold as proof that it all happened.”

“We need to make sure the people making the delivery believe the ruse. That’s very important for her safety, and for the rest of the plan to go forward.”

“The rest of the plan is less clear. We believe she’s talked Arnold into diving on the wreck early next week to bring up more treasure. We need to monitor the wreck to know when they do that. We’ll know when they go out to dive, but can’t follow them. What we want to do is surround their boat when they finish the first dive. At that point, they’ll all be aboard, and a significant amount of silver should be there as well.”

“Fencing the already removed silver proves they are out for personal gain, not any legitimate activity. Catching them with a

fresh haul proves where the stuff is coming from – illegal looting of an archeological site, and who’s doing it.”

“What about the murders.”

“We can work up a case for that when they are in custody and Red is safe. We did secure the evidence – it’s in an impound yard in South Carolina – but we suspended the investigation temporarily. Frankly, we are concerned that Arnold may have a way of knowing what happens there. If you guys suddenly take an interest, it could be very bad for Red.”

“Why do we need to have Arnold make another dive? We should be able to trace the silver from the Sunday delivery to the ship.”

“Yes, but we can’t connect it to Arnold. Red made all the arrangements, and Arnold would be a fool to attend the delivery. I doubt if she’d allow him to, anyway. It would be out of character for the part she’s playing. Likely, we’d be able to prosecute everyone except Arnold, including Red, but not him. Let’s not do that.”

## 52

Red was having her own problems keeping the operation together. The difficulty was that she'd never made love to anyone she didn't really like. When she'd been head over heels with Scott solely on the basis of physical attraction, and had only unconfirmed suspicions about his character, it was one thing.

Sex with him did feel really, really good. But, not good enough for her to overlook his being a homicidal paranoid psychopath. When she got back from Miami Beach, she found she couldn't have an orgasm with him.

For many, perhaps even most, women that wouldn't have been much of a problem. If she was like most women, Red would just fake it. But, she wasn't most women. She was, as Bud once put it, a "world champion" ejaculator. Scott was used to seeing Red's famous Niagara Falls climaxes. When it didn't happen he wondered why.

"I'm sorry, Baby, I'm just so goddamn tense," she pleaded. "I'm scared about what will happen to us if Bud finds evidence in the boat. I know it's a long shot, but it winds me up, anyway. It'll be better, I promise."

But, it wasn't. When they made love the morning after she got back, which was Thursday morning, she still couldn't come. Scott started getting concerned. A large part of his hold over Red was based on her being desperate for him to fuck her – a lot. If that disappeared, she'd be a serious liability.

He knew it, and she knew it. More importantly, she knew that he knew it.

This problem was outside of her previous experience, and she didn't know what to do.

Yes, she was, and had been for some years, shopping for a husband. Yes, she considered having sex to be an important part of the interview process. "I'm not marrying any guy who's a bust in the sack," was something she'd said many times. Yes, most candidates had been eliminated, and yes, some had been eliminated for being a bust in the sack.

They had all, however, passed a battery of tests before getting to the "in the sack" test. She'd never had sex with anyone whom she hadn't already convinced herself was an excellent candidate for "Mr. Right."

Scott was the first lover whom she'd dismissed as husband material without dumping right away. She was concerned, however, that if things didn't change he'd be her last lover, unless she drew a necrophiliac mortician. If she couldn't convince him she still

lusted after him, it would be right down to the dock for a boating accident.

She worried about it all morning while helping out at the shop – ostensibly just to be near him to feed an insatiable lust. In early afternoon, she decided to take some time by herself to sort it out.

“I’m tired, Baby, I need to go lie down by myself. I’ll be back when I get rid of this headache.”

She decided to walk the short distance from the shop to Scott’s house. She’d take the main streets to make it easy for her bodyguards to keep tabs on her.

It took the better part of a half hour to walk to the house because she took it slowly, stopping frequently to look around at the ordinary life surrounding her on the streets of Key Largo. She even stopped to get some ice cream, which she sat in the shade by herself to eat while watching passersby.

That helped a lot. For a while, she forgot that she was an undercover agent with a killer for a boyfriend.

When she got home, she lay on the bed Bud had shared with Doc, and thought about them. She missed them. She missed them both.

Knowing that Doc finally had her back on this one helped her confidence. He’d never let her down before, and she was convinced he wouldn’t let her down, now. But, this was a problem she didn’t think he’d have an answer for.

She wished she could talk about it with Bud. She missed Bud desperately. If only she hadn’t been so mean to her, maybe she could help Red sort out what to do. But, she had been. She’d unfavorably compared having sex with Bud to having sex with Scott. “Why should I bother with a little cunt like you, when I can get off ten times as much with a big stud?” she’d said. She’d said she no longer loved Bud. She’d claimed that she never had. She’d said unkind things like “bitch,” “dyke,” and “carpet-muncher.” The worst had been when she’d called Bud “Manchek’s little whore.” Red couldn’t forgive herself for saying that, but she was trying to push Bud away to keep her safe.

Now, she was cut off from her best friend in the world – the one person who could help her save her own life. She wanted so desperately to say she was sorry. She didn’t want to die with Bud thinking she didn’t love her.

“Fuck it!” Red said aloud. “All I want to do is talk to Bud, so that’s what I’ll do. Maybe she’ll hate me forever, and won’t want to talk to me now, or ever again. But, if I don’t call her, she’ll never talk to me again, anyway. I *need* to talk to her.”

She dug out her phone and speed dialed Bud's number.

"Oh, Baby! I've been so scared for you, and I miss you terribly. Are you okay?" was Bud's greeting.

"I miss you so much, I just had to call you." Red gushed, unable to contain herself. "I'm *not* okay, though. I'm scared to death. I'm so scared of Scott I can't come for him, anymore. He's noticed. I'm afraid he'll take it as a sign that I can't be trusted, and kill me!"

Then, tears started welling up in Red's eyes.

"He'll kill you because you can't come?" Bud asked in surprise.

"He's paranoid on top of being psychopathic and homicidal."

"Aw, Baby, how could you get yourself into this? We've gotta get you out of there. Does Doc know about this?"

"No, well, not about the orgasms. I'm supposed to be setting up to marry Scott. Then he's supposed to be planning to bump Mark off so we can have Mark's money. In the meantime, I'm trying to set him up to get busted for looting the *Castillo*. But, it all starts with Scott's believing I'm so hot for his Johnson that I'll do anything. We fuck two or three times a day, but if I stop having orgasms, he won't believe any of it. Have you ever had to fuck anybody you didn't like?"

"I don't think so. ... Wait, there was this one time when a bunch of us were partner swapping at a party. There was one guy who wasn't being very nice. But his girlfriend was nice, and asked me to be nice to him – I think she wanted me to keep him busy while she banged someone she liked better. Anyway, I went out of my way to show him a good time, even though he kept saying things that made me want to punch him."

"What did you do? How did you do it?"

"Mostly I tuned him out. I imagined I was with someone else that I really liked, and concentrated on the sensations. Luckily, he was a pretty good lay. He was just a shithead. So, I could enjoy the sex while thinking about the other guy. I came like gangbusters, by the way. Does that help?"

"I don't know. I hope so. I'll try it when Scott gets home from work."

Two hours later, Scott let himself into the house to find Red sitting in the middle of the living room, meditating. After talking with Bud for twenty minutes, she'd slept for over an hour, then sat, meditating, the rest of the time.

She'd pretty much gotten her life back together: Doc loved her, and Bud loved her. Those were the important things. The sleep had refreshed her so she could be strong again. Finally, her meditation had centered her, so she was at peace within herself. She could do this.

"Mmmm!" she said when she saw him. "I feel better. I got in a *huge* nap. How'd things go this afternoon?"

"They went fine," Scott said, eyeing her critically. She did look better. She didn't look as tense. Mistress Judith seemed deeply submerged, and the amorous, sexy Red was close to the surface. She wasn't exactly playful, yet, but better. "Are you up for dinner, or is it too early?"

"Sure. Waddaya think? Italian? Spaghetti in meat sauce with spicy Italian sausage?"

He liked that. It showed she was at least thinking about the right shapes.

"Sound's good. We can walk to DiGiorgio's."

"I've walked a lot today, how about you put me on the back of that big Harley in the garage? I haven't cuddled a man while straddling a bike in months."

Scott hoped this meant she was back in form. He hoped he could shelve the Red Plan B he'd been working on that afternoon. That was the one with the diving accident out near the wreck. The one with the sharks. He wanted to keep her around a little longer.

"We could go to the Old Tavernier on Plantation Key," he suggested.

"Mmmm!" she said with a sensuous look in her eye. She held out her hand for him to pull her up out of her lotus position. When he did, she pulled him into a langorous wet kiss.

This was more like it.

## 53

Six hours later, they were cuddling in bed. Red had kept her *satori* throughout the evening, and managed to forget what was underneath Scott's surface. His surface, as is usual with psychopaths, was pleasant and charming.

After riding the bike down to Plantation Key and back, Red begged Scott to watch *Wild Orchid* with her. Scott had a copy of the version with the sneak peeks of Mickey Roarke's penis sliding in and out of Carré Otis' vagina at the end. She didn't tell Scott, but the Mickey Rourke character – Wheeler – always made her think of Doc. He was always in the background, leading and directing Carré's Emily Reed as if through magic. But he was always leading her to grow and mature until they were ready to be together.

By the end of the film, she had Scott's penis in her mouth, and was stroking it in and out of her throat. She thought back to what he'd seemed like before: her great masculine bull. While she engulfed his penis again, pushing it into her throat, she thought about Europa's bull's penis. She thought about Europa wanting the bull's penis ramming into her vagina and anticipating the rush of semen.

That did the trick. Red sprayed orgasm all over the couch, her legs shuddering spastically when it was over.

“Ungh – Ooooh!” she said.

That was better. They adjourned to the bedroom without even putting the DVD away.

As Scott entered her, she again thought of the Minotaur, but realizing that the Minotaur in Greek legend was code for homicidal monstrosity, she pushed that thought away. She tried to morph the Minotaur back into Scott as he'd been to her before – when she'd been in love with him.

It didn't come. Instead, the Minotaur morphed into Doc. Doc, who would always love her. Doc, who would always be there, protecting her back. Doc, who could bang her into next Sunday better than anyone else.

She exploded into another, if anything better and more violent, orgasm.

She didn't want it to stop. It didn't stop. While her legs twitched and shook, Scott kept pounding her vagina with his penis. Inside her head, it was still Doc pounding her vagina. Inside her vagina, climaxes continued to come one after another with no letup, and no space between.

“Ohh, Baby! That was great!” she enthused after he collapsed on top of her.

Her eyes filled with grateful tears. Her gratitude, however, was for Bud, who’d provided the trick that may have saved her life, and Doc, who’d given her somebody she really wanted to fuck. She remembered how much she wanted to fuck Doc. She longed for the time when she would do it again.

After disposing of the condom (She was definitely *not* having Scott Arnold’s child!), she curled back up with Scott, pretended it was Doc, and went to sleep.

As time went on – she was basically killing time until the next step in her operation, which was scheduled for Saturday afternoon – Red became more adept at mentally having sex with Doc, while physically having sex with Scott. It wasn’t entirely satisfying, but that just made her want to do it more. She pushed Scott to do it more often, increasing the frequency from two-or-three times a day to four-or-five.

Red realized that this was well into what Doc had told her was nymphomaniac territory, especially since she found herself still unsatisfied. But, that was better than becoming frigid, and subsequently dead – the ultimate in frigidity.

Perhaps this was what it was like to be a nympho. If she went off the deep end because of this, she’d go off the deep end because of this. Maybe becoming a nympho wasn’t so bad. Fuck it! No matter what happened, Doc and Bud would help her when she got back.

Hanging on to get back became the big goal in her life. That and having more sex in her mind with Doc.

She imagined talking about it with Bud.

“Baby, I told you that you were a sick woman,” Bud would say.

“But, I have to do it,” Red would counter. “If I don’t, Scott will turn me into fishbait.”

“You don’t have to do it *that* much,” Bud would point out. “You’ll wear him out.”

“Yes I do,” Red would scream. “I can’t get enough. I’m always afraid that if I don’t have another orgasm *right now* it’ll all come crashing down.”

Bud would then look into her eyes critically for a long moment.

Then, she would say: “You have to get it under control. If Scott thinks you’ve gone crazy, or if he thinks he can’t keep up, he’ll be just as dangerous as when he thought you’d gone frigid. Limit yourself to three times a day. Set up a damn schedule if you have to!”

“Thank you,” Red would say to her, crying grateful tears. “I love you, too.”

Then, they would make love to each other all night.

She had a fantasy conversation like this with Bud on an almost hourly basis.

Strangely, Red thought, these fantasies kept her from going insane, or worse.

Through them, she kept herself under control long enough to make it to Saturday afternoon. (Well, sort of under control. She set up her three-times-a-day schedule for fucking Scott, but she filled in by sneaking off to the ladies’ room in between. She did *not*, although she thought about it, fill in with any of the workmen. “That way madness lies,” was the Shakespeare quote the idea brought to mind.)

Using Scott’s guesstimate of how long it would take to load the silver into the truck, tie it down securely, and pile some junk on top for camouflage, they started loading at six o’clock, and finished at ten. Red thought that wasn’t at all bad for project management under the conditions.

They then had two hours to kill until midnight. Red was going after Scott to fuck for the third and final scheduled time that day, when she realized that Sean, Pedro, and Philippe were getting jealous seeing the Boss obviously dragged off for some nookie every few hours, while they got a golden opportunity to sweep the floor. That was no way to maintain their loyalty, which they’d need for the foreseeable future.

After decorating the inside of Scott’s mouth with her spit, she pointed this out to him. He almost instantly came up with a solution. He placed a call on his cellphone, which resulted in a knock on the building’s front door ten minutes later. Red opened the door to find three *señoritas* bearing a tequila bottle and kindly offering to help the workmen get their rocks off. They turned out to be the three ladies from the Mexican bar/restaurant who had shown Red where to get her navel pierced.

To show recognition for their help, Red pulled her tank top up to show off her pierced navel, still sporting its enormous CZ stud. The girls thought that was very nice, and the workmen thought it was even nicer.

Scott peeled off a few bills, which he handed to the girls. Then Red pointed them all to the conference room, but, to everyone’s

dismay, confiscated the tequila bottle. She wasn't having her crew getting pulled over for drunk driving half way to Miami with a ton of hot silver in the back of the van.

She took Scott and the tequila bottle into the office, where she cleared off that spare desk, and proceeded to make its upper surface resemble a shallow lake.

At midnight, as per arrangement, Red's cellphone buzzed with a text message giving her a Miami address to which she should send the silver. She showed Scott that there was, indeed, a fresh deposit of five-hundred-thousand dollars in her bank account. Doc was being his usual efficient, reliable self. Red wanted to show her gratitude by fucking him then and there, but he was inconveniently absent.

Instead, she shooed the girls out of the building with an extra twenty each and a kiss. The extra twenty was because Red was feeling generous. The kiss was because she was still horny.

After the girls left, Red printed out directions and a map that she downloaded from MapQuest, then programmed the address into the truck's GPS unit. Finally, she gave Sean, Pedro and Philippe a lecture on where they were supposed to go, what they were supposed to do, how they were supposed to act, and, above all, what she would do to them if they screwed up.

Sean suggested that they bring the remains of the tequila bottle – it was still nearly full because Red commandeered it before anyone could get seriously into it – as a present for the guys they were delivering the silver to. You know, to cement relations, and such?

Red put the kaibosh on that one, figuring the bottle would never make it, and the only way the contents would make it was in the bellies of Sean, Pedro, and Philippe. That would mean an approximately ten-percent probability that any of it, especially the silver, would make it to the rendezvous at all.

She told them what time she expected them to get back. She then couldn't resist reminding them of the lecture she'd already given them twice that week about how hard it was to fence hot silver, and that they could never manage to do it on their own without her contacts. That was to make sure the silver got delivered according to plan, and didn't end up wandering the streets of Miami in the possession of three intellectually challenged crooks who couldn't spend that much time in that close proximity to that much loot without trying to keep it for themselves. She hoped to impress on them that they could make a shitload of money working for her, and nothing trying to cheat her.

She figured that Sean, at least, understood. Since he was the biggest, smartest, and toughest, that would be enough. She hoped.

## 54

“We should have gone with them,” Scott opined.

“I keep thinking that, too,” Red agreed, “but if we did, there’d be a higher probability that we’d all get busted.”

“How do you figure that?”

“Those guys are low-level flunkies. We’re the leaders – the big fish. Cops don’t like to scoop up the flunkies while letting the big fish get away. It offends their sporting instincts or something. So, even if Olmos tries to roll over on us, the cops’ll let the flunkies get away with it in hopes of snagging us later. If we’re there, they’d bust everything and everyone without batting an eye.”

Red, of course, knew that there was approximately zero chance of a trap. The biggest danger was a traffic stop gone bad, and she wouldn’t want to be there for that!

Olmos wasn’t going to roll over on them to the cops because he never existed in the first place. In fact, she figured that by now Doc was in cahoots with the FBI, and they were monitoring the whole thing closely. Since he’d *want* the operation to go forward to set up the real sting at the end, he’d be their guardian angel.

Finally, she didn’t want to be cooped up in that truck cab with Scott, Sean, Pedro, and Philippe for six hours. Especially not the way she was feeling right now. She thought back to Doc’s description of Annie’s favorite sport – gangbanging strangers – and decided that particular temptation was to be avoided at all costs. She decided she’d much rather be in Scott’s master bathroom fisting herself, than be tempted to go down that route.

Briefly, she considered the idea that Doc or his buddies at the FBI would double-cross her. At this point, it might be very tempting for them to take the easy route and bust *her* instead of Scott.

She pushed that thought firmly aside. She trusted Doc. She *had* to trust Doc. If she couldn’t trust Doc, then there was nobody on Earth she could trust. This time paraphrasing Shakespeare’s King Lear instead of using a direct quote, she thought: “That way paranoia lies.”

She felt she was hanging by threads at the very ragged edge.

And they were unraveling.

“Another forty-eight hours,” she told herself. “I just have to make it another forty-eight hours.”

“Then rehab,” she added.

That night, she couldn’t sleep at all. The whole operation was out of her hands, and it scared the living shit out of her.

She couldn’t think of anything that could go wrong. She even convinced herself that Doc would have that routine traffic stop covered. She couldn’t figure out what there was to be scared of.

That scared her because she firmly believed it was the things you didn’t think of that posed the greatest danger. So, she was scared of what she didn’t know.

She cuddled up with Scott, but after an hour of staring at the ceiling, she got up to go to the bathroom. Then, she paced around the living room a while. Then she went back to the bathroom.

She was not peeing in there.

About three o’clock, she woke Scott up to fuck her again.

But, she still couldn’t get to sleep.

About six o’clock, with the sky turning lemony yellow, she woke Scott up again.

Still, she couldn’t get to sleep.

About seven o’clock, she got up to make breakfast for her and Scott consisting of coffee, tea, bacon, eggs, sausage, toast with a choice of strawberry or grape jelly, hash browns, honeydew melon slices, cantaloupe, and sliced bananas. When Scott came out to find out what the clatter was, she asked him how he’d like his steak.

Scott suggested that she was getting a little out of control.

It was well before nine o’clock – the time Sean, Pedro, and Philippe were due – when she arrived at the workshop to meet them.

She made coffee.

Then, she sat at the empty desk and tapped her teeth with her fingernails until nine thirty, when Sean, Pedro, and Philippe finally showed up.

She checked carefully.

Sean, Pedro, and Philippe were there. They were tired and grumpy, but present.

The junk in the back of the truck was there.

The silver was not there.

She hoped that meant Sean was telling the truth when he said they'd delivered the silver to the Cuban gang (which Red knew were really Mark's operatives led by Doc) without a hitch.

At that point, she handed Sean the tequila bottle and walked home. Then, she curled up in the bed in the larger guest bedroom – the one Doc and Bud had shared – and fell asleep until eight o'clock in the evening.

## 55

She was pleasantly surprised when she was ready for bed again by one o'clock Monday morning. She'd figured that her ten hour sleep through the day Sunday would screw up her sleep schedule for several days, but it really only repaid the deficit she was running from no sleep Saturday night along with a huge expenditure of nervous energy. One o'clock was at the late end of her usual going-to-bed range, and by six o'clock in the morning, she was back on schedule.

Even her nymphomania abated a little. She'd made love with Scott (still imagining she was with Doc) only once between waking up in the spare bedroom Sunday evening and going back to sleep with Scott in the wee hours Monday. She'd made love again with him when they woke up Monday morning, but had felt reasonably satisfied. She figured she was no longer desperate because she expected to be in the clear by the end of the day.

She actually felt cheerful.

Today was when they were going out to start bringing up more silver from the wreck. She expected to find Doc and the Coast Guard boarding their dive boat as soon as they had the first bar of silver aboard. Please, God, let Doc get there on time! She didn't want to have to sleep with Scott tonight, or ever again.

When they got to Scott's work boat about six thirty carrying a light breakfast in a bag from a local fast-food joint, Sean, Pedro, and Philippe were already there. They'd been there since five o'clock and were anxious to cast off. They had a long way to go in a slow boat, and a lot of work to do when they got there. Doc's boat had made the passage in an hour, but Scott's work boat would take four.

As soon as they cleared the harbor, Red made the excuse that the boat's rolling motion was putting her back to sleep, and made herself scarce down in the small cabin. She curled up on one of the dirty, smelly bunks, and really did go back to sleep.

She dreamed that Bud was down there with her. They curled up naked together and went to sleep. In the dream, she dreamed that they were back in the big bed in her apartment in Boston. Doc came by to see how they were getting on with their project adapting Wavelet for Bud's problem. Bud wanted Red and Doc to make love while she watched. And, that's what they did. Bud seemed pleased.

Before Doc could bring her to orgasm, however, Red was startled, and not at all pleased, when Scott woke her up to tell her

they were on station. She had to get ready to dive.

“I’m not going to dive!” she yelled.

“Yes, you are,” Scott insisted.

“No, I’m NOT!” she yelled. “It’s a hundred and sixty feet deep down there, and I’ve never worn any of that getup in my life. I’ll die!”

“No, you won’t,” Scott insisted some more. “I want you right by my side when we do this. I’ll show you how to do it.”

Red couldn’t think of any reason he’d want to do this, unless he was planning that she’d never come up. She was definitely *not* going into the water with him under any circumstances.

While killing time waiting for Saturday to come, she’d gone online to learn more about what they were proposing to do. From the website for PADI – the Professional Association of Diving Instructors – she got an idea of what training she would need to qualify for this dive, and she had none of it. She’d even downloaded and completed some of the online courses PADI provided, just so she’d know what the guys were getting into. She knew, however, that she just wasn’t ready.

In actual fact, Scott just wanted to keep his eye on her. He’d feel safer with her down there where he could see her, than with her up top doing God knows what. He’d seen her working on the courses, and figured that meant she *wanted* to go on the dive. He figured she probably knew enough to get there and back alive.

Of course, he was being criminally irresponsible, but he was a criminal, anyway, so what could you expect?

“Look,” she tried, “I can be a lot more use up here stacking bars and keeping watch. That way the four of you can go down, and get a lot more done.”

That made sense to Scott, but he didn’t want to have to trust her up here on her own.

“No,” he decided, “I want you down there.”

“You don’t understand, Scott,” Red played her last card, “I can’t dive. I can’t even swim!”

“What?”

“Did you see me swimming off Doc’s boat?”

Nobody had been swimming off Doc's boat.

"Did you see me swimming in your pool?"

Well, no, he hadn't seen her swimming in his pool. Anticipating this situation, she'd purposely avoided swimming laps, even when her muscles were dying for exercise, just so she'd have this excuse if it came down to it.

"Well, no," Scott admitted.

"That's because I never learned to swim a stroke," she lied. "I hate going in the water. It scares me. It's scared me since I was a little girl. I know what things live down there. It's way over my head. I can't."

She let her very real fear of being trapped one-hundred-sixty-feet deep underwater with a homicidal paranoid psychopath show in her face.

Scott realized how frightening water can be to a non-swimmer, and interpreted the fear in her face as that.

He'd tried to get adult non-swimmers into the water before, and it wasn't worth the effort. He might be able to get her suited up, and maybe even into the water by force, but he'd never get her to dive. Especially in the one-foot swells. They were nothing to experienced swimmers, but she'd scream and yell, and hold onto the swim ladder for dear life. That would be it.

Relenting, he said: "Okay, there'll always be somebody else up here, anyway."

The plan was to make two dive teams: he with Pedro, and Sean with Phillippe. One team would work below to send ingots up, while the other team received them at the surface. Then, the teams would switch places.

While on the surface, the divers would have time to clear dissolved gasses from their bloodstreams. Decompression stops could help them avoid the bends while coming up, but they'd need extra time on the surface to fully clear their blood before going back down.

Each diver would spend about 30 minutes working on the bottom, and forty or more minutes decompressing their way to the top. The decompression time would increase for each dive of the day.

While one team was in the water, the other would work on the surface. There would be heavy work for the surface team while the bottom team was sending up ingots, but they would rest during the bottom team's decompression stops. He'd have Red monitor the dive schedule. It was what she was best at, anyway.

Scott figured he could push each team to manage four dives per day, and said they should be able to pull up ten ingots in each dive. Red figured that if it all worked out, they'd have the ten tons she'd promised Olmos in three or four days.

While he was sure Red was committed to their project, Scott had come to think she wasn't mentally all that stable, which was why he wanted to keep her in sight. Scott realized that with others on the boat, Red couldn't do something bizarre, like cutting the anchors loose and motoring away. They'd watch her to see that she did what she was supposed to do.

"That's up to you," Red said when he'd explained his revised plan. "As long as you don't ask me to go into that water. There's sharks in there, and whales, and big slimy fish! Ugh! *No!*"

Sighing, Scott beckoned for her to follow him up on deck. There, he told the crew she was to inventory the silver as it came up, monitor the dive schedule, and help with the heavy work using the boat's crane. Most women he wouldn't ask to operate a crane, but Red wasn't most women. With her amazon-like physique, Scott figured she could probably pick Philippe up by the neck with one hand, and give him a good shaking before tossing him across the deck. She was certainly smart enough to operate a crane with minimal instruction. Showing her how to operate the controls would be Sean's job.

Before he and Pedro went in for their first dive, Scott handed Red a headset and explained that she would be the link between the divers below, and the boat on the surface. When they reached the bottom, they'd tell her to lower a basket attached to the crane. The basket contained the tools and equipment they would need on the bottom. Most of it was spare tanks. The boat was practically swamped by spare tanks!

The plan was for the divers to use an air dredge powered by compressed air pumped down from a compressor on the boat to clear off the sand covering the silver ingots. They would then load the bars, weighing an average of eighty pounds each, individually into collapsible baskets Scott had fabricated in Miami for the purpose. They would then attach each basket to an air-lift bag.

The air-lift bags looked like miniature hot-air balloons about two-and-a-half-feet high. Filling the bags from the compressed-air hose provided buoyant force to lift the ingots up to the surface.

At the surface, the surface team, in a twin-outboard launch, would hook onto the basket, remove the air-lift bag to keep it from dragging through the water, and tow the ingot-carrying basket to the crane's hoist line. Red would use the crane to lift the ingot aboard, and drop it on the deck. She would then type markings on each bar into an inventory list on her laptop. The most important information was the bar's serial number and weight. They planned to lift ten bars per dive. When ingots stopped coming up, the surface team would stack Red's inventoried bars in the hold before going below for serious rest.

While she figured the whole project should take about four days, she didn't really care how long it actually took. She was just making a show of project management for Scott. She hoped the cruisers would arrive soon after the first ingots reached the surface. She intended only a few to come up before they were all busted.

She *needed* to have the cruisers arrive soon after the first ingots reached the surface.

She didn't know how she could hold herself together if they didn't.

Please, Doc. Please. Please. Please.

## 56

Red was destined to be bitterly disappointed, though. The Coast Guard, who was responsible for making the arrests, wanted all the divers on board the work boat with the silver before they struck. They didn't want to have to go down to get any of them, or to sit around waiting for them to run out of air, so they'd have to surface on their own. Their plan was to let the operation go for a full day, then sneak up to surround the boat during the night, and take them down in the morning.

Doc was frantic. Bud had told him about her talk with Red Thursday afternoon, and how disturbed Red was becoming. She'd flown down from South Carolina to be with Red when they got her off the boat. She and Doc were afraid of real psychological damage if they left her hanging too long. They didn't think she was in the most robust of mental health to begin with. Pat Dacy described her condition before all this started as "fragile," and they figured she'd be deteriorating faster, now.

He did not know about Red's method of dealing with her frigidity, but he knew she'd managed something. Pete reported that she was still alive and at liberty. He also confirmed Doc's fears about her mental state. He reported that each day she looked a little more haggard. "Unravelling" was the term he'd used.

Doc didn't know about the panic-induced nymphomania, but he suspected. He knew where it could lead, and didn't want that for his little sister. Red was, he knew in his heart, the love of *his* life.

Pat did not assuage his fears when she allowed that, if that was actually going on, then, yes, it *could* become a chronic condition. She'd seen such things happen before. Sexual behavior is, after all, highly addictive.

Every hour on that boat was, in addition, an hour in which Scott could decide to eliminate her for whatever reason.

The folks at the FBI and at the Coast Guard pooh-poohed these concerns. First, they didn't really give a damn if Red came down with a chronic case of hot pants. They didn't credit his concerns for her safety, either.

"Why would Arnold do her in when she's become so useful?" they asked.

"Because he's a paranoid homicidal psychopath!" Doc countered.

That was the point at which they decided he was no longer being useful to the investigation, and froze him out. He wasn't even going to be allowed on the cutter when they picked Red up.

By the time he'd gotten someone in Washington to intervene, it was too late.

Ingots had started arriving at the surface by two o'clock Monday afternoon. Red was in high spirits as she winched them aboard and filled out the inventory spreadsheet on her computer. She figured Doc would wait until they had the first ten ingots aboard and were changing shifts before sending in the cavalry.

When the shift change was accomplished with no Coast Guard cutters darkening the horizon, she began wondering what was taking them so long.

When they missed the second shift change, she figured enough was enough, and started getting angry about the delay. When they missed the third, she began wondering if they'd abandoned her.

Then, she twigged that the Coast Guard wanted the divers all aboard for a longer time. Maybe they'd wait until everyone came aboard for their supper break.

When supper came and went, she started cursing Doc for an unfeeling son-of-a-bitch, leaving her to endure this for no reason. She was secretly grateful when Scott rebuffed her sexual advances because he was physically fatigued.

At seven o'clock, as they were rigging lights for night work, she began to despair. She was on her own. Nobody was coming to save her.

At ten o'clock, the divers came up, physically exhausted, for the night. Scott flopped face down on a narrow bunk, leaving no room for her, and fell into a deep sleep.

She and Philippe were left to tidy up, kill the lights, and secure the boat for the night. Around eleven, she climbed despondently onto an upper bunk by herself, and quietly cried herself to sleep.

The way she saw it, Doc had finally abandoned her. He'd realized what she'd been doing with Scott, and no longer cared for her. He was never coming to save her. She looked forward to a short life of abandonment with a gang of criminals led by a homicidal paranoid psychopath until she finally cracked under the strain, and they killed her.

She almost looked forward to when they killed her.

That night, she had a horrible nightmare. Dozens of ships armed to the teeth lined the horizon surrounding Scott's work boat. They were all ready to arrest Scott, but Doc wouldn't let them do that until Scott finished with her.

Scott raped her, then tied her to the hoard of silver on the deck for Sean, Pedro, and Philippe to rape, too. When they were done, Doc started sending boatloads of sailors over to rape her as well. Finally, when everyone had a turn on her, they tied an ingot to her feet and threw her overboard.

She sank slowly to the bottom. As soon as she hit the water, the sharks came. They circled her, and circled her. They kept coming closer and closer. They had clouds of red blood pouring out of their mouths as they swam. But, she sank past them into the dark depths.

The water surrounding her got darker, and darker, until it became completely black.

She was dead.

Red woke to find that her nightmare had become very real. The horizon was dotted with great, whacking armed ships with guns pointed directly at Scott's boat. She couldn't understand why she didn't feel either elation, or fear. Then, she remembered that she was dead, and would never feel anything again.

She realized that she was now in Hell. Her particular version of Hell was obviously to be trapped on this boat, and gang raped for eternity.

Numbed by that realization, she looked for Doc to appear, and get it organized. He was great at getting things organized.

She waited, and she waited. But, he didn't come.

Pretty soon sailors in boats did come, but they didn't rape her. She actually started taking her clothes off in numb anticipation, but they stopped her and wrapped her in a blanket.

They herded her, along with Scott and the crew, into a launch, made them climb a ladder up to the deck of one of those ships, then marched them down below where they locked them in small cells with steel walls, and iron doors. They put Scott, Sean, Pedro, and Philippe into one cell, and her into another.

They left her there alone for about an hour. Then an officer came with two sailors armed with nightsticks. He had the sailors escort her to a small ward room with a big, steel table.

The officer asked her a lot of questions about what the boat was doing out there, and what was her part in the operation. Did she know the penalty for looting an archeological site? Is it correct that she ran the crane? She inventoried the ingots as they came up?

Was this her laptop? He had her show the inventory spreadsheet on her laptop, and explain the various entries. What were they planning to do with the silver? Who set that up?

After that officer was done asking these questions over and over for what seemed like forever – she’d lost her time sense – he left, and another officer came in. This officer asked her if she’d like a cup of coffee.

“Yes, please,” she replied gratefully.

Would she like a cigarette?

“No, thank you, I don’t smoke.”

The officer expressed surprise bordering on disbelief at that response. He actually said: “Don’t lie to me!” before repeating the question. She thought that was pretty daft, but she was in Hell, so what would you expect?

He did not ask her if she wanted to pee.

“Excuse me,” she asked, “could I use the head?”

“In a little while,” came the response.

The coffee arrived.

When he’d seen her take a few sips, he started asking her the same questions the previous officer had already asked three or four times.

“Could I use the head, now?” she asked again.

He didn’t hear her. He just asked more of his questions over again.

Eventually, he noticed tears welling up in her eyes from the pain of holding back her urine. He signaled to someone outside the wardroom door.

A female sailor, also armed with a nightstick, came in and escorted her to a lavatory, and waited outside the door until Red was done. Then, she escorted Red back to the wardroom.

The second officer had disappeared. Instead, there were two men in conservative suits and ties. They identified themselves as

FBI agents, and began asking her questions about the operation Saturday night. Where did they get the silver? Did she know its original source? Who set the delivery up? Who was Señor Olmos? The FBI guys didn't believe that she'd made Señor Olmos up. How much money was delivered? Where was it delivered? Why was it delivered to her account? Why was she trying to implicate Doctor Manchek, when it was obviously all her operation? That went on, and on, and on, as well.

When they left, the female sailor with the club came back, and escorted her back to her cell, and locked her in.

A little while later, someone slid a tray of food through a slot at the bottom of the door. She couldn't quite identify it, but she ate it, anyway. It turned out to be pea soup.

After eating her soup, she fell asleep on the bunk.

She thought she woke up to a bang-squeak as the door to her cell opened. She was surprised because she hadn't expected to sleep in Hell. You learn something every day!

Two sailors stepped into her cell, and handcuffed her hands behind her back. They then escorted her up ladder after ladder after ladder until they finally came out into the open air. A stiff breeze was whipping across a huge deck. She saw a helicopter on a helipad.

Then, she knew she was still in Hell because she saw Doc walking toward her from the helicopter. That meant it was finally time for the rape to begin.

She screamed, and threw herself to the deck. She didn't want to go through that, again. She was sorry for what she'd done, but she didn't think she'd been so bad to merit this Hell for eternity. She'd be good if someone would only make it stop!

Someone grabbed her arm and poked it with something sharp. Her head spun, and she gratefully succumbed to a rush of euphoric peacefulness.

## 57

Red woke up in a hospital bed with crisp, clean sheets that didn't smell at all. She was engulfed in a warm softness that smelled like Bud.

Bud, who'd saved her with her wise counsel. Bud, who'd kept her sane by visiting her with long talks and loving cuddles in Scott's shop and on the boat. Wait, she couldn't have been there. Red wasn't sure what had been fantasy and what had been reality, anymore. Perhaps she'd finally gone insane.

"I thought I was dead," she told Bud.

Then, she told Bud about the whole nightmare on the boat. She cried when she told about Doc's betrayal.

"He didn't betray you," Bud insisted. "They wouldn't let him help. They decided to leave you on the boat until morning. They wouldn't listen when Doc tried to get them to stop the operation. Finally, they wouldn't let him on the Coast Guard cutter to come get you. They wouldn't let me come, either. Then, this morning they arrested you like you were one of the looters."

"Doc spent all day yesterday trying to get someone in Washington to stop it, but by the time he did, it was too late. They'd already left you overnight. Then, he spent all morning trying to get you out of the brig and into a hospital."

"But, he hates me for going nympho over Scott," Red wailed.

"No he doesn't," Bud rebutted. "He loves you to distraction. He's out there now trying to get them to let me take you home. He's been ranting about unlawful imprisonment, abandonment, criminal negligence, and civil lawsuits for very large amounts of punitive damages. He's also got a call in to Eve Salazar to get her out here to do a news report. I think this is going to look awfully bad for both the Coast Guard and the FBI."

It took about fifteen minutes, along with a number of repeats, for this to sink in. Then Red burst into tears because she couldn't figure out whether to feel embarrassed, chagrined, angry, grateful, or loved. Bud let her cry herself back to sleep.

It was several days before the doctors would let Red out of their sight. She'd actually suffered no physical damage at all. She was, however, having trouble distinguishing dreams from reality, and she felt exhausted all the time.

Finally, they admitted there was nothing a hospital could do for her, when she seemed to settle down into plain, old, garden variety clinical depression. She convinced herself she'd gone over the edge into nymphomania, and actually did masturbate a lot. Then, she felt so guilty about it that she wouldn't let anyone visit her but Bud.

She especially didn't want to see Doc. She realized that she'd been wrong about his abandoning her, and she felt guilty about that. She felt she'd betrayed him by running off to Scott without even telling him. She felt she'd betrayed him *with* Scott by lusting after Scott so intensely. She felt guilty about using his memory to have orgasms with Scott. She attributed her longing to be with Doc to her nymphomania, which she tried to control by staying away from him.

She was basically an emotional basket case. Everyone agreed that the best thing would be for Bud to take her home and be her emotional support until she could get her head back together.

The Coast Guard and FBI had realized the mistake they made by arresting her. They weren't quite ready to admit that they'd been stupidly wrong – especially considering Doc's lawsuit threats. She'd played a heroic part in the operation, they now said, and her testimony would be invaluable to prosecuting Scott. They just wanted to debrief her. They could visit her in her Boston apartment, and interrogate ... err, debrief ... her, there.

Bud told them to go fuck themselves.

Doc was much more polite and civilized. He hired a team of very expensive lawyers, who told them – in polite legal terms – to go fuck themselves.

## 58

“Let’s get the Hell out of here,” Bud said one Friday afternoon in late July. “Let’s go out, and get laid tonight. It’d do us good.”

Red had to admit Bud was right. Neither of them had had sex with a man since coming home from Florida over a month ago, and they both missed it. Red was under the additional burden of having lost her “armor.” She could no longer pretend that playing brother and sister with Doc was enough.

Especially, it simply was *not* okay for him to be with another woman. Seeing Bud with him had brought it home to her that she wanted him for herself. Her adventure had turned it into a desperate need.

Having rid herself of that confusion, she was now confused about whether Doc would have her back. Maybe he *liked* those other women. He certainly acted as if he liked Bud.

Maybe she’d completely blown it with Doc by letting Bud have her shot at him. Maybe Bud had scored. She was beautiful, intelligent, funny, and shared Doc’s “if they can’t take a joke, to Hell with them” attitude. And, she didn’t come with all the emotional baggage Red carried. There was no pussyfooting around with Bud. She knew what she wanted, and reached out to grab it.

Red compared herself to Bud, and felt she came up short. She was too tall. Her tits were too small. Then, there were all those freckles, and that carrot-top hair. She was too serious, moping around all the time.

Basically, Red was still depressed. She had climbed laboriously from “I hate myself” depression, to “I hate how things have turned out” funk. It was an improvement, but the more she thought about her funk, the funkier it became. She felt she’d screwed up her life so badly that nobody’d ever want her again – especially not Doc. He might say he still loved her, but that was just to get her out of her depression.

Bud was right. It was time to stick something into her vagina that had a man attached to it. Where was Suby when she needed him? In Florida was where. Two thousand miles away, and no doubt introducing some other female computer jock to the marvels of the *Kama Sutra*.

Red secretly had another motive: she wanted to do an experiment. She hadn’t been able to figure out whether her longing for sex with Doc was really longing to be with Doc, or nymphomania. It was a dangerous experiment – it could result in her becoming a sex addict like Annie, or finding out that she already was – but it was an experiment she felt she had to do.

“Okay, maybe you’re right,” she admitted to Bud. “I feel like crap! Dog shit! *Hammered* dog shit! Maybe getting laid will help. I know a biker bar outside of town that has just the atmosphere we want. You can find everyone there from four-eyed blues-history aficionados, to Hell’s Angels wannabes. There are even a few dykes on bikes! I used to go there on Saturday nights after flying lessons.”

“Sounds good,” Bud agreed. “When do we go?”

“Now is good,” Red decided. “Let’s get into our best dykes-on-bikes outfits, and take the Triumph out.”

Red’s red leather jumpsuit was still the sexiest thing she owned that was appropriate for a thirty-mile motorcycle trip, so she wore it. Accessorizing was always the trick to making that jumpsuit look good, and she’d had practice, as well as time to acquire more accessories to work with.

For example, instead of her squash blossom necklace, she’d acquired a bib style necklace made of turquoise strips of varying lengths: short at the sides near her shoulders, and graduating to several inches long between her breasts. She added a white-turquoise and silver pendant on a long silver chain that hung below the bib. She added a half-karat cubic zirconia navel ring in her new piercing, along with a silver waist chain. With the jumpsuit zipped down far enough to show the navel ring against her flat, six-pack abdominal muscles, the effect was spectacular. She’d also acquired a red leather hobo bag to wear over her neck while riding.

Bud, on the other hand, went more for black to contrast with her bloneness. She also went for jewelry featuring darker stones.

For tonight, she chose a pair of tight black leather pants with a jeans cut, over a pair of black boots with impossibly high “come fuck me” heels. For a top, she pulled out a black leather vest – with nothing beneath it but jewelry. It was actually too small for her full figure. She had a couple of chains that she used to pull it together below her breasts, making the upper portion of the garment lift and push her breasts into a very attractive shape with killer cleavage. The chains didn’t completely close the vest’s front, leaving it open a couple of inches to show *her* navel ring. Her black leather motorcycle jacket went over all.

Both women brought large, dangly earrings to put in when they got to the bar.

Speakeasy Pete’s Downtown Lounge, as the bar was called, occupied a small portion of a city block just off the town’s main street. The line of motorcycles, however, occupied the on-street parking for almost the entire block, with considerable overflow parked against the curb across the street.

They were early enough to find a spot practically in front of the bar. In order to get there early, they’d skipped dinner, and were famished. Since food was not the bar’s big draw, they parked the bike, and walked a block to a family restaurant.

The reaction the two women got from the family-oriented patrons, as they chose the “gunfighter’s chairs” (overlooking the restaurant’s entrance) at a table set for four, was a comic mixed bag. The husbands stared furtively at the two tall (Bud might be half a foot shorter than Red, but that still made her tall in anyone else’s book), sexy, leather-clad women carrying motorcycle helmets. The wives pursed their lips, and stared daggers. The children didn’t know what to think, and simply stared as they tried to figure it out.

They both chose hearty fare – steak sandwiches with fries – to help absorb the beer they intended to consume later. They’d have to spend the next week fighting their waistlines, but what the heck?

While waiting for their meals, both put on the dangly earrings that would have been lost – along with portions of earlobes – had they tried to wear them on the bike. When they took their jackets off and hung them over the backs of the unused chairs, Bud’s revealing top made an even bigger impression.

As the designated driver, Red intended to buy one beer, and nurse it all night. At dinner, she drank water, and tapered off from the meal with coffee. Bud, as the designated drunk, kept her company with cheap, domestic beer.

## 60

They were smart enough to know that what happened that night would be unpredictable. It would depend on who showed up, and how the evening played out. Red had imbued Bud with enough understanding of chaos to know she couldn't actually *plan* the evening. There were, however, several fuzzy categories of possible scenarios. There was, for example, the "we each find someone to screw separately" scenario. There was the "*menage a trois*" scenario. There was the "finding two, or more guys for a cluster fuck" scenario. There were also several others. The girls agreed on a few ground rules:

- They would stick together for mutual support and protection, not to mention Bud having no way to get home if they got separated;
- Use condoms, since Red wasn't using other birth control, and there was always the threat of disease from poorly vetted sex partners;
- Another female in the mix was okay, but the idea was to get men into their pants.

When they got back to the bar, the band was just setting up. Red and Bud staked out a cozy booth that afforded a good view of the dance floor, the stage, the bar, and most of the tables in the room. It was only when the place began to fill up that they noticed that the booth was right next to the men's room door. That had the negative of being next to the men's room door, but the positive of guaranteeing that they would see, and be seen by, every man in the place.

They decided to keep the booth. They hoped they wouldn't be there too long, anyway. The object of the evening wasn't to get drunk, or to listen to music. The object was to get laid, and there was a Best Western motel just down the street.

At seven o'clock, the band swung into their warm-up set. The bar was about half full, and Red had spotted several people she'd talked and danced with previously. About quarter past seven, a shy, pretty coed from the nearby college came in, looked around self consciously, spotted Red, and came over.

"Hi," she said. "Do you remember me? I'm Diane. We met a while ago? I haven't seen you around here for a while."

Red remembered her as the shy, somewhat dependent one of a pair of girls who'd been coming in together when Red stopped by to dance off some calories after flying lessons. They always came together, and left together. Sometimes they found dates, and left

with them, but always together. More often, they, like Red, danced, and partied until closing, then left together.

“Of course I remember you, Diane,” Red cooed. “Where’s Peggy?”

“She’s sick. Flu. I decided to come alone. I’ve never been here alone.”

“Well, then you’d better sit with us,” Red said. It was stupid strategy for attracting men, but Diane, being short, blonde, and shapely, with intelligent, if a little sad, eyes, reminded her of Eve’s Gwen, but a year, or two younger. Red just didn’t have the heart to send her off on her own.

Bud looked at Red in amazement, but could see the dynamic going on, so she went along with it. One of the things she loved about her friend was her penchant for picking up strays.

“Hi, Baby,” Bud smiled, offering her hand to Diane. “I’m Bud. Red, and I work together. We also have a lot of fun together,” she added with a lecherous smile, tongue tip pressed against the front of her upper teeth.

Startled by Bud’s forwardness, Diane shrank back a bit. “You mean you’re – gay?” She gave Red an inquiring, slightly shocked look. Diane had seen Red on a number of occasions, but never saw her come on to anyone, men, or women. She clearly enjoyed showing off that magnificent body, and was willing to dance lewdly with women as well as men, but never seemed to want to take it further. She’d certainly never come on to Diane, even though they’d danced together several times.

“Not exactly,” Red said, then realized she no longer knew how to explain her mixed-up feelings.

Bud came to the rescue: “Not tonight! Our pussies are thirsty for some man-cum.”

Diane giggled at Bud’s frankly raunchy manner, but the sparkle in her eyes told that she was on the same quest. She wasn’t sure what to do without her friend Peggy at her side, egging her on.

As the band warmed up, couples started going up to the dance floor. Diane stared at them wistfully. She looked around in the hopes of finding someone for herself.

“Do you know who that guy is over there staring at us?” she asked Red. “The big guy with the crew cut. Looks like a wrestler. He keeps staring over here.”

“Yes, I know him, and he’s not staring at us. He’s staring at *you*,” Red responded. “What do you think of him?”

“He makes me all tingly. Lots of yummy muscles under that jacket. How do you know he’s staring at me, and not at you two? Who is he? Could you introduce me to him?”

“One question at a time,” Red said. “We know he’s staring at you, because he wouldn’t dare stare at me, or Bud. He’s my bodyguard, and he’s risking his job by staring at you. You’ve got him hooked, now all you have to do is reel him in. Here’s how you do it ...”

Red realized that Diane was staring at her openmouthed. “What’s wrong?”

“You have a bodyguard?” Diane asked, impulsively.

“I have a lot of things, including a step father with an oil company. He doesn’t like it when I’m kidnapped, as happened last Spring.”

“Then that really *was* you. I saw it on the television. I didn’t know you were all rich, and famous.”

“I try not to be,” Red lamented, “but I can’t seem to get the nack. Now, ...”

“What’re you doing *here*?”

“Trying to get laid, like you.”

“But, you’re Judith McKenna.”

“Don’t say it so loud. Everybody will want one.”

“But, you could have anyone!”

“Right now, I’d settle for about anything with an erect dick. Stop acting starstruck,” Red scolded. “I’m trying to get *you* laid.”

“Uh, sorry.”

“Close your mouth, it looks stupid, and I don’t think you’re stupid, and we certainly don’t want *him* to think you’re stupid. Now, his name is Phil, and he’s a really nice guy. Leave your things on this table, and, using your sexiest walk, go right up to him, and say: ‘Phil, Mistress Judith says to stop staring, and take me over to the dance floor.’ The rest is up to you.”

Smiling at what she knew was a private joke she thought she understood, Diane walked up to Phil, and whispered into his ear.

With a somewhat embarrassed laugh, he flashed Red an okay sign, and allowed Diane to lead him to the dance floor.

“Another stray kitten free to a good home,” Bud intoned with mock severity. “You’re hopeless.”

What Bud thought, but didn’t say, was: “Girl, you need to make some kids of your own.”

Not coincidentally, the band had just started a slow number that Phil and Diane could waltz to. Either Diane was taller, or Phil was shorter, than Red had thought. The top of Diane’s head came to just about Phil’s collar bone. While they danced (quite well, by the way, Red noted), Diane rested her cheek happily on the upper slope of Phil’s enormous pectoral muscle. The zipper of his leather jacket scratched at her ear, so she pushed it aside, and nuzzled her cheek against the gray tee shirt he wore underneath.

## 61

“You still owe me a story,” Bud told Red as they scanned the bar patrons for promising targets.

“What do you mean?” Red asked.

“Months ago, you told me you were on the rebound from a couple of bad experiences with men. I now know about Doc – in exquisite detail – but who was the other one? You said that I, especially, would like that story, but haven’t told me about him, yet.”

“Oh, I meant Greg Michels,” Red explained.

“He’s as tall as Doc. Thinner, though flabbier from not working out, but overall very cute. Blonde, really smart – he invented that Worm robot I told you about – CTO of a robotics company that’s growing like gangbusters. Overall, a really good catch.”

“He showed up at SST a couple of weeks after my tiff with Doc. I was supremely horny at the time, and he looked like the catch of the century, so I went after him, and snagged him the second night.”

“What made me say you’d find the story interesting is that he turned out to like anal sex the way you do. He could fuck my vagina like a porn star, but clearly preferred anal. And, oral. Can’t forget oral! Remember we talked about the tongue? But, he liked anal best of all. I thought nothing of it, and happily let him fuck all of my holes as much as he wanted.”

“When we found my father’s body, and caught the sleazebag who killed him, Doc took me off the project, and sent me up here to work on Wavelet. Greg went back to Santa Clara, California to run his company. Before I came up here, though, Doc gave me some time for R&R. I spent most of a week with my folks in Miami, then decided to follow Greg up to Santa Clara, and fuck his brains out.”

“So?” Bud asked, not seeing any point. Or, at least not any bad-experience point.

“So,” Red continued, “he picked me up at the airport, and we did a little making out in the terminal. Then, we went out to his car, and did a little heavy petting before even starting it. The weekend was going perfectly, so far.”

“Uh, oh!” Bud anticipated.

“Then, we get to his place to find his boyfriend making dinner!”

Bud's eyes got wide as she slowly worked up to a laughing fit.

"You didn't know! Of course, we can't point fingers. From here, you look a little 'bi,' and we've established that I go both ways at the drop of a panty. No reason to hold that against him."

"He could have forewarned me! I'd no hint. I'd checked him out six ways from Sunday. All we'd found was an airheaded ex-wife. It turns out he makes a transvestite male prostitute look exclusive. I walked with no warning into a situation where I was certain to get double-drilled, and no polite way to back out. I thought it was inconsiderate."

"So, did you get double drilled?" Bud asked, eyes bright.

"Yeah. About six times over five days! I also got come covered, and about everything else you can do with two penises! Ever had two dicks in your cunt at the same time?"

"Not yet," Bud admitted. "Maybe that should be next. Did they come in there?"

"Well, I made 'em wear condoms, but, yeah. They did."

"So, obviously you came back for seconds. Greg's boyfriend ..."

"Bruce," Red interrupted.

"Bruce apparently was not unacceptable as a lover."

"Made me want to go on birth control, and play sloppy seconds!"

"So, what's the problem?"

"Look, a three-way cluster fuck with two hunks is a lot of fun. It was enough fun to wheedle a couple of extra days of vacation to keep doing it. But, it's not going to help me raise a family. Let's get off this subject before it ruins our evening."

"Okay," Bud said, watching Red scan hopefully around the room, "but you won't find him here. He's not coming."

"Who?"

"Doc."

“You had to say it, bitch!”

“Jeez, don’t bite my head off. I’m sorry. It just came out.”

Red, who knew she’d be lost without Bud, wasn’t about to let a screwy mood swing start a fight. She took a few minutes to meditate. Reaching satori, she saw clearly her priorities for the immediate future: first, make up with Bud because she was far more important than a temporary itch in her crotch; next, scratch that itch.

“Sorry, Baby. Mood swing. Give us a kiss.”

She reached over to Bud, pulled her into an embrace, and kissed her thoroughly. In so doing, she trashed any chance of connecting with any man in the place looking for a permanent relationship (which was probably nobody, anyway), and boosted their chances with anyone wanting to be the guest of honor in a girly gang bang (which was probably most of the guys, and half of the women).

“Well, that just turned off the ones looking for a one-on-one,” Bud observed. “Looks like we’re in for a cluster fuck, or nothing.”

“Yeah,” Red agreed. “You see anyone wanting a cluster fuck?”

“Dozens. Look at ‘em with their tongues hanging out. You pick him, I’ll get him.”

“I’ve danced with that tall redhead before. The one by the bar with the pony tail, and the ankh earring – and the sudden bulge in his jeans. He smells nice, has a good body, and moves well. Likes to rub chests while slow dancing. I don’t know what he has for a brain, but we can find that out.”

“Uh, oh,” Bud said, getting excited. “He spotted us checking him out, and he’s on his way over. Ballsy! I like that.”

“Hello, Red. Would you like to dance?” he asked.

“Were you reading my mind?” Red said. Slinging her hobo bag over her neck, and pushing it back to ride on her tush, she got up, took his hand, and, with a bright-eyed smile to Bud, let him lead her to the dance floor.

## 62

As Red had reported, her partner, whose name she could not recall, liked to dance close, with exaggerated upper body motion. As this fit perfectly with Red's plans, and he was one of the few men around tall enough to cuddle with while standing upright, she responded enthusiastically.

The slow number was almost over when they got to the dance floor. The next number was a twist, and Red was just starting to get into it when she felt a tap on her shoulder. Turning around, she found Bud, bright eyed, and smiling, who said: "Let me show you how it's done."

Red stepped back, and Bud came right up to the redhead, and started doing the twist with him almost as closely as Red had been waltzing.

The redhead learned fast, and soon the two of them were able to coordinate movements well enough for them to get belly to belly with his knee between Bud's legs. Bud could feel his knee rubbing the leather of her pants, and pushing the silk of her panties back and forth across her labia. As her clitoris became fully erect, and her labia spread wide, she managed to work the panty crotch into a cameltoe across her vaginal opening. The leather now moved back and forth directly across her freshly shaved labia.

Taking a professional interest, Red watched intently as Bud became increasingly aroused. Soon, Bud and the redhead figured out how to twist with Bud's crotch firmly planted on the redhead's upper thigh – and his on hers – while holding each other in a moderately tight embrace. Watching Bud's face, Red could see her coming close to climax.

Cruelly, Red interrupted by shaking Bud's shoulder – she figured tapping wouldn't get through to Bud's consciousness – and saying: "My turn!"

Bud stepped back awkwardly, and Red stepped into almost the same position. The redhead seemed pleased at being passed back and forth. Red worked herself into basically the same position with the redhead that Bud had, allowing for differences in height. Red pushed it a step further by adding an open-mouthed kiss. She'd just about got her tongue all the way into his mouth, when the number ended, ending the set.

Slightly out of breath, the three walked back to the booth. A couple of college boys were headed for it at the same time, but backed off after receiving a dark, warning look from Red.

“Well, that was fun,” the redhead announced while maneuvering himself to center position between the two women on the booth’s semi-circular seat. He tried pulling them close with an arm around each, but Red found she didn’t like him pinning her arms. She pulled away a little bit.

Confused, the redhead loosened his grip, and contented himself with stretching his long arms out along the seat back over their shoulders. Red put her hobo bag on the table, and went back to nursing her beer.

Diane, who’d been transfixed by the two women’s performance on the dance floor, slid into the booth next to Red.

“You want somethin’ to drink?” interrupted the waitress.

“Yeah. Gimme a Bud,” the redhead said. “Wadda you girls want?”

“I’ll have another Dos Equis,” Bud ordered.

“I’m still working on this one,” Red indicated her three-quarters full mug.

“Could I have my pocketbook back?” Diane asked Bud, who’d tucked it into the pile of jackets, helmets, gloves, and Bud’s shoulder bag at the back of the booth when she’d gone to the dance floor. She simply ignored the waitress, making it obvious she wasn’t staying at the table. “I want to go sit with Phil. Do you mind?” she asked Red.

“No. Good luck. Give Phil a peck for me,” Red said. On impulse, she gave Diane a motherly kiss on the forehead, and sent her on her way.

“Who’s that?” the redhead asked.

“Just another stray the tall one picked up,” Bud said. “Luckily, this one found a good home right away.” Bud threw a stern glance at Red, who laughed.

“By the way, I’m ‘Stoner.’ I have that V-Rod outside,” the redhead announced, proudly.

“They call me ‘Bud.’ We’re on the red Triumph by the door.”

“Yeah?” Stoner asked, “Is it fast?”

“It goes as fast as I want to go,” Red explained. “I’ve only been riding a few months.”

Stoner then launched into a speech about how to ride a motorcycle, as if Red knew absolutely nothing about it. In the process, he showed complete ignorance of the physics involved. But, he was proud of the misinformation in his possession. In the middle of the speech, the waitress brought the two beers. Stoner pulled out a little bottle of oblong red pills, and took several with his first sip of beer.

Bud flashed a look of alarm to Red, as Stoner offered the pill bottle around.

“No thanks,” Red said, realizing they were prescription pills coming from a non-prescription bottle. She had, however, no idea what they were, or what their effect might be. Clearly, Bud recognized them, had an idea what the effect might be, and was alarmed.

“You girls live together?” he asked.

“We work together,” Red replied.

“Oh, waddaya do?”

“I write software for a company in Arizona,” Red said, wanting to be truthful, but not wanting to seem too smart. “Right now, I’m working on a project that involves something Bud’s working on. So, we spend a lot of time together.”

“So, you’re, like, shacking up.”

“Sort of,” Bud came to the rescue, since Red seemed to be having trouble figuring out what story to tell. “I share a little, cramped apartment in Chelsea with three bitches. Red shares the entire top floor of a building in Boston with a bunch of computers. Where would you hang out?”

“Her bedroom?” Stoner ventured, indicating Red with a nod.

“Bingo!” Bud confirmed.

“So, you’re dykes, right?”

“We don’t like that word,” Red warned.

“If the shoe fits ...” Stoner said, untactfully.

“He’s right, you know,” Bud told Red, “Despite what Doc says.”

“Let’s not talk about him.”

“Who’s Doc?”

“Old boyfriend,” Red said, pushing the subject aside.

“What’s he got against dykes.”

“Nothing,” Bud said. “He doesn’t like the *word*. If he were here, he’d be lecturing you on the psychology, philosophy, and politics of sexual preference.”

“Se a wanker?” Stoner seemed to be starting to live up to his name. Red did not know, but Bud did, that one of the side effects of the drug Bud suspected him of taking was a tendency toward belligerence. Coupled with the wrong personality, it was a dangerous combination. That’s why she’d been alarmed when he took an unhealthy dose of it. “I don’t like wankers,” Stoner concluded.

“You don’t even know what a ‘wanker’ is,” Red commented. It was the wrong thing to say, but, not knowing about the drug, she didn’t realize her mistake. Besides, she didn’t like this guy talking trash about her Doc.

“I don’t think I like *you*, either.” Stoner said directly into Red’s face.

“Then get lost,” Red said right back. It was beginning to dawn on her that she was facing a dangerous, drug-induced situation, but she didn’t know what to do about it.

“I like you, though,” Stoner said to Bud, turning to give her a kiss.

## 63

Red started to stand up, but Bud stopped her by holding up her hand, palm forward, fingers splayed. She thought she could handle Stoner, but knew Red was starting to overreact, and would make a mess of it.

“Okay, honey, calm down. Just relax. She didn’t mean it.” Bud was trying to calm him down, while deflecting his amorous advances. She wished she knew how much he’d taken. From the speed of his reaction, she suspected he’d connected with some high-dose tablets, or had taken more before they’d seen him. Hopefully, he’d go unconscious soon, and they could get him to a hospital. If it *was* seconal, it had been associated with a half dozen celebrity deaths, including Judy Garland, and Jimi Hendrix.

She could feel his muscles tense, as he started feeling aggressive. He unclasped her belt buckle, and started working on her fly.

Suddenly, he wasn’t there. Red had grabbed him by the ponytail with one hand, and the belt with the other, and lifted him bodily off Bud. Once in the air, she propelled his body out of the booth. People stepped back as he came crashing feet-first onto the floor. Red march stepped him toward the nearest door, which led to the men’s room.

Somebody kindly pushed the door open just before Stoner’s face crashed into it, or he would have sustained worse injuries than he got. Pushing Stoner through the now open door, Red saw the open maws of three urinals.

On sudden inspiration, she threw Stoner head first into the nearest one. With a *bong!* his head hit the porcelain back wall, and he landed face first in the bowl. Keeping her grip on his belt, so that he didn’t fall out, Red grabbed the handle, and flushed.

Ironlike hands grabbed her, and a judo chop broke her grip on Stoner’s belt. The ironlike hands threw her over someone’s shoulder in an expert fireman’s carry, and rushed her out of the bar. The last she saw of Stoner, two bikers were pulling him out of the urinal before he could drown.

At the curb, Bud was already standing next to the Triumph, pulling her helmet on. Diane was there. The person carrying her put her down on her feet, handed her first her hobo bag, and then her helmet. Turning around, Red saw that it was Phil, who’d pulled her out of the men’s room.

Seeing Phil calmed Red down. She realized she’d blown her top when she saw Stoner trying to rape Bud. All her anger and frustration from the past ten years came out at once, and Stoner got the worst of it.

“You’ve gotta get outa here in double-quick time,” Phil told her rapidly. “We’ll take care of that guy. At the last minute, you pulled back, so you didn’t kill him. He’ll need some time in a hospital, then at least thirty days observation in a mental institution. Then, maybe some time on a drug charge. By that time, we’ll have this hushed up. Then, they’ll be looking for two other women with different descriptions who’ll never be found, because we’ll give the descriptions.”

“He wasn’t all that bad,” Red pleaded, realizing what she’d done. “He was pretty nice until he got into the drugs.”

“Okay, we’ll try to help him.”

Seeing Diane standing on the sidewalk with big, frightened eyes, shaking in her shoes, Red said to Phil: “Can you have someone else clean up the mess, and you take care of her? I like her, and it looks like the excitement’s been too much.”

“I like her, too. Don’t worry, I plan to take very good care of her for my own reasons.”

“If she needs anything ...”

“Right now, what we *all* need is for you two to get on that bike, and get out of here before the cops show up. We’ve got a coverup to put in place. Don’t take the highway. Use Route 1 into town. We’ll tell ‘em you headed south toward the Cape. Hole up in your apartment until Monday.”

“Thanks, Phil. You guys are great,” Red told him from the heart, then gave him a kiss.

“I never got to say this,” Phil said, “but we really enjoyed that performance you girls put on for us. Thanks.”

Pulling on her helmet, Red forced herself to slow down before trying to start the bike. Pressing her hands firmly together in front of her, she took a deep breath.

Doc had warned her: “Never hurry around a motorcycle.”

So, she entered satori, and forced herself to do everything in slow motion, running through the steps in her mind like a check list.

- Turn main switch on: check
- Apply front brake fully: check

- Raise bike to a standing position: check
- Turn on fuel supply: check
- Flip kill switch to 'Run:' check
- Rock bike to make sure it is in neutral: check
- Pull in clutch: check
- Three squirts of the throttle – no, that's for a carburetor, and this bike is fuel injected.

Another deep breath.

- Press starter switch until engine fires: check
- Hold throttle until idle smooths out: check
- Signal for Bud to get on: check
- Flip up kickstand: check
- Drive off slowly toward the main highway: check.

While Red was going through this checklist in her mind, Bud had told Phil that she thought Stoner had been taking second. "He's still got the bottle on him. I couldn't tell how much he'd had. He may be in trouble from it."

"Okay," Phil responded, "we'll get him to a hospital right away." He pulled out a cellphone, and speed dialed a number as they drove off.

When out of sight, Red made a couple of turns, then doubled back to pick up U.S. Highway 1 North. That would take them into downtown Boston, from which they could navigate by any of several routes to Red's place on Beacon Hill.

"Nothing in today's paper, either," Bud reported two days later. They'd spent Saturday holed up in Red's rooftop spa, trying to calm jangled nerves, and poring over local newspapers for reports of the incident in the bar Friday night. Nothing. It was now Sunday

morning, and still nothing about a bar fight. Apparently, Phil had managed to cover it up as promised.

“Now, what?” Bud asked. She was sitting, nipples deep in the hot tub trying not to get the newspaper wet while scanning it rapidly. She’d just glanced over at Red, who was sitting in the middle of a thick oriental carpet laid out on the roof, meditating in a lotus position. Bud discovered tears streaming down Red’s cheeks.

“C’mon, Baby. Tell the girlfriend what’s wrong,” she cajoled.

“Nothing,” Red sniffed.

“Bullshit! Out with it.”

“I miss Doc so much.”

Bud waited for more explanation. When none came, she coaxed, exasperatedly: “What brought this on all of a sudden? You’ve been missing him since we left Florida. Why tears at this particular time.”

“I just remembered. When Doc and I first got together, ‘way back in Austin. We had a little minor argument. I was afraid he’d be upset if I ever did what I did Friday night.”

“You mean, beat the crap out of a drunk? I can imagine what Doc would have done if he saw someone trying to rape me!”

“You probably can’t,” Red said, meaning it truthfully, not unkindly. “Doc would have found a way to keep Stoner from eating the pills in the first place. Either that, or he’d have spotted the situation long before we did, and would have stopped us from ever getting near him. That’s not what I mean, though.”

“So, what do you mean?”

“I’ve lost boyfriends before through being too quick to defend myself. They want to do it for me. The whole macho thing? Anyway, Doc said he never wanted me to hold back, and promised to let me handle any situation I could, and only intervene if I were losing. To emphasize it, he said that if I ever stuck someone’s head in a toilet, and flushed it, he promised to love me forever. It was the first time I ever thought he might seriously want to marry me.”

“Yeah, well now you’ve got the goods on him.”

“Huh?”

“Oh, yeah. In your own, as usual twisted, way, you’ve got him hog tied. He can’t back out. He promised if you ever flushed somebody’s head down a toilet, he’d love you forever. Now, you’ve flushed somebody’s head down a toilet, so he has to love you forever. That’s a contract. Specific offer, and specific performance. Spit on your palm, and shake hands. He’s *gotta* marry you, now!”

Laughing through her tears, Red said: “I couldn’t.”

“Yes you can. What’s stopping you?”

“For one thing, what would happen to you? I love you, too, you know.”

“Oh, for God’s sake. Are you nuts? If I had a guy like Doc half as in love with me as Doc is with you, and I loved him back half as much as you love Doc, I’d be out of your bed so fast I’d break the sound barrier. My wing tips would leave vapor trails leading directly to wherever he was. And, I wouldn’t look back.”

“So, what do I do?”

## 64

After six hours in the air dodging enormously tall thunderstorms, Doc rolled his plane to a stop in the general aviation area of Austin International airport. It was Monday evening before the start of the user conference for SST's main data-acquisition equipment supplier, and Doc had flown his plane in from Arizona to attend. As he hooked up the tie-down chains, a black Lincoln Town Car sped across the tarmac, and pulled up just in front of the plane's nose. Doc was composing a comment for the driver about safe driving speed around other people's expensive aircraft, when the back door opened, and Bonnie Wells, Red's sometime executive assistant, and perpetual confidante, jumped out. She ran to Doc, and hugged him impulsively.

"We were so worried about you," she practically squealed. "You were supposed to be here *hours* ago!"

"I had a little weather problem," Doc replied in surprise. He'd expected to be met by a limo, but one driven a quiet, diffident, professional chauffeur. He did not expect it to contain Red's irrepressible Girl Friday.

"I'll take your bag, sir. My name is Sadr," said the chauffeur, holding out his hand for Doc's flight bag, which Doc handed to him with a "Thank you."

"We kept calling," Bonnie said, "and they kept saying you were okay, just changing course to avoid thunderstorms. First you were in New Mexico, where you were supposed to be, but then Colorado, then Kansas, then Oklahoma. We were afraid you'd never get here."

"Well, there was a line of thunderstorms along the Texas, New Mexico border. They were too high to go over, and too dangerous to go through, so I did an end run around them. Even so, it was pretty choppy, so I had to keep the speed down."

"Do you have to go to the bathroom?" Bonnie asked. She didn't think he had a toilet in that little plane.

"No," Doc laughed. "I took care of that in a little bottle I carry in my flight bag. I'll empty it, and clean it out when I get to the hotel. Right now, I just want to get there. I'm bushed."

"You're too tired for ... dinner, and such?"

"No. In fact, I could eat a horse. It's been a while since I had a close encounter with nourishment."

Bonnie brightened: “Okay, what would you like? I’ll have it sent to your room.”

“How about a pastrami sandwich on rye,” Doc laughed. He wasn’t used to being looked after like this. Having an executive assistant was one perk he resisted. He liked to schedule his own time, and handle his own correspondence. He expected his department heads to make their own decisions, and coordinate within their teams without him in the way. So, there was little need for a full-time assistant.

Ideally, SST should run perfectly well without him. The fact that it couldn’t, or at least not for very long, irked him. It also kept him coming back to work with a purpose. Pat Dacy had, however, prevailed on him to keep Bonnie in the loop about his activities. She was doing the same thing with Red, and, by extension, Bud.

“How are our two lovelies?” he asked.

“Red, and Bud? They’re at the hotel, biting their nails until they know you’re safe. I called them when I saw you taxiing.”

“Did they get here in time for their classes Sunday?” He’d pushed both Red and Bud to come early to take advantage of mini-courses provided by the company. A better understanding of how to use the software to create data-acquisition and control systems was critical for Red’s education, and would be really useful for Bud.

“They arrived from Boston Saturday afternoon. They had classes yesterday, and today.”

As they drove out, Bonnie told the driver to slow down. Why race across the tarmac at warp speed on the way out, Doc wondered, then slow to a crawl on the way back? Clearly his friends were cooking something up.

Bonnie flipped open her cellphone, and speed dialed a number. “Yeah, he says he’s tired, and wants a pastrami sandwich. ... Oh, okay. I’ll tell him. Be there in, say, twenty minutes.”

“No pastrami sandwich for you, I’m afraid,” Bonnie explained sadly, shutting off her phone. “Red says she’s going to take you out, and feed you prime rib. So, go directly to your room, and change. She’ll meet you there.”

“Oooh-kayy,” Doc said, slowly. Whatever they were cooking up, he’d find out in due time. For now, he should just go along for the ride.

When they reached the Driskill carport, Bonnie said she’d catch him later. She had some things to take care of. She started with the bellman, quietly giving him instructions for what to do with Doc’s flight bag. Then, she turned to the limo driver to take care

of his paperwork.

How she could know Doc's room number to give it to the bellman before he checked in, Doc didn't know. He couldn't hear what Bonnie had said. At this point, he was just going with the flow.

"Good to see you back again, Dr. Manchek," the desk clerk said, smiling brightly. "Your wife said you'd be coming in today, but we thought it would be earlier."

"My wife?"

"Yes, the tall, red-haired lady you were with when you came here last?" the desk clerk said, uncertainly. Doc's surprise surprised him.

All the pieces began to fall into place in Doc's mind. Obviously, Red had revived the newlywed fantasy she'd invented back in March, when she'd decided she liked him enough to have sex with. He hoped he put the pieces in the right pattern. He'd have to wing it 'til he was sure.

"I know who she is. I didn't know she'd be able to make it."

"She's been here since Saturday," the clerk said, carefully.

"I didn't think she'd be able to make it at all," Doc explained without explaining.

"Then, everything is alright?" the clerk asked.

"Everything is wonderful," Doc said, playing the part of a pleasantly surprised husband who'd expected to spend a dreary week on his own, but finds his lady there after all.

"Here's your room key. Use the elevator across the lobby," he said pointing.

Doc noticed that it was the same suite he had shared with Red in March. Riding up in the elevator, he cleared his mind to enter satori, and avoid guessing at what he might find in the suite.

"Hello, naked lady," he said, entering the living room. It was the same greeting he'd used in March because there was Red, striking the same odalisque pose on the same sofa. Instead of a roll of condoms, as she'd had wrapped around her neck before, she had the scarf he'd bought her to decorate her red leathers the last time they were here.

“To what do I owe the honor of your very welcome, and delectable presence?” Doc asked, as if it weren’t obvious.

“I want to have your babies,” she said, confirming the obvious, but surprising him because he was searching for some more complicated explanation. “I want to have your babies, and watch them grow up in our nice house in the hills with roses in the yard, and grow old with you.”

“I think we can arrange that,” he said.

Relieved, because she’d still harbored nagging doubts whether he’d want her back after all the crap she’d put him through, she jumped up, and ran into his arms.

“Oh!” she said, pulling back when she felt the lumps and welts of his pressure suit under the coveralls he was wearing. “We’ve *got* to get rid of that thing!”

As she started ripping at his coveralls to get at the flight suit’s fastenings, Doc said: “You didn’t have to do it, you know.”

“Didn’t have to do what?” she asked, confused, and hoping she hadn’t done something wrong.

“Flush that man’s head in a toilet. I’d have loved you forever, anyway.”

## Epilogue

Red did not get pregnant that night. Despite her and Doc's best efforts, trying several times per day that week, it was not until a week later – the proper time in Red's menstrual cycle – that she "caught." That resulted in Mike, Jr., who inherited his father's aptitude for physics, but not his interest in business. He became a university professor, and eventually won a Nobel prize for his work showing the practical implications of superstring theory, and the completion of Einstein's dream: the Grand Unified Theory of Physics.

Red never did make the Olympic tennis team, but her first daughter, Judy, born ten months after Mike, Jr., did, eventually taking home a gold and two silver medals. In the meantime, Judy joined the SST staff, studying robotics under the tutelage of Gwen Petersen, who had become, as Doc predicted, an outspoken advocate for women in engineering, and a well respected engineer, herself. Eventually, Judy took over the duties of CEO at SST from Red, when Red left to take over as CEO of Gulf States Petroleum from retiring Mark Shipton.

It had taken Red twelve years to work her way up to CEO at SST. At that time, Doc "retired" to devote his time to motorsports, pulling together consistently winning teams in motorcycle, sportscar, offshore boat, and aircraft racing. His winning hull designs, especially, dominated offshore boat racing for years.

For her twenty-fifth birthday, Doc arranged for Red to appear on a website where married women could spend an hour having sex with a porn star, while their husbands watched. When she found out about it, Red angrily punched Doc in the face, breaking a tooth. That was, of course, exactly the sort of reaction he'd wanted most – except for the trip to the orthodontist. He ended up with a gold crown, which just made him look even more piratical.

Later that day, Red reviewed video of the pornstar in action, and decided his technique was lacking. So, she dragged Doc to their bedroom, and made him do it right. She secretly recorded the session, and added voice overs to explain what the porn star did wrong, which her husband got right. She then emailed it to the website.

Ten years later, Mike, Jr. was upset when he downloaded a copy from the Internet, and realized it was his mother and father in the starring roles. Doc made Red explain it to the boy. "You pulled the stunt, you take the heat," he said.

That surreptitious video session resulted in Red's third pregnancy: her second daughter, Elise. Elise inherited her mother's love of applied mathematics, eventually winning a Nobel prize in economics for her computer model of the global economy. It was based on a stock trading strategy Doc had taught her when she was ten. At seventeen, when Harvard begged her to study for her bachelor's

degree there, she had already made several millions of dollars trading stocks in her own portfolio.

Alan, Red's fourth, was the black sheep of the family. He initially disappointed his father by going into politics. His father felt much better when, half way through his second term as the youngest governor in Arizona's history, Alan suddenly quit "to do something useful."

That turned out to be helping to manage his grandfather's boat-building business in Amesbury, Mass. Alan ran the production side of the business, while his Aunt Alice (Doc's *real* little sister) ran the sales side. A lifelong fitness fan, like Doc, Alice appeared in the company's ads wearing a skimpy bathing suit well into her sixties. Who knew?

Bud hunted down and married Subramanian almost immediately after Red left her for Doc. Suby had been at the same conference in Austin as the rest of the SST "clan." She sought him out, and insisted he indoctrinate her into the "mysteries" of the *Kama Sutra* (which are, of course, not mysteries at all), as well as initiate her into Buddhism.

Soon after marrying, they hit upon the happy idea of producing a video version of the *Kama Sutra*, with themselves modeling the positions. Suby insisted they make it freely downloadable over the Internet because he said that such important knowledge should be freely available, not marketed like roto-tillers. The website has been ranked as the most successful site, excepting search engines, ever, providing several million downloads a day to this day.

Flushed with that success, Bud decided to create a lesbian version of the site. She asked Red to model for it with her, but Red refused, saying she didn't want her son to have to deal with sex videos of his mother on the Internet when he got older. That was before the incident with the "sex with a porn star" site.

So, Bud asked Gwen Petersen, who agreed (with Eve Salazar's acquiescence) to do it. This sort of broke Gwen's promise to Doc to never appear in pornography. When she apologetically told Doc about it, he laughed, and said: "I saw some of the stuff. It was spectacular! Good job. You've struck another blow for women's rights. I'm proud of you."

Eve had a falling out with Red, though, when, soon after Mike, Jr. was born, Eve nominated Red as the most influential gay person in Arizona. Red was passed over when it was realized that she was happily married to a man, had one child already, and was pregnant with her second.

A few weeks later, they patched it up when Gwen explained that Eve had only put Red's name in to embarrass the contest organizers, whom she thought of as a bunch of self-righteous wankers of both sexes. Red got her revenge by nominating Eve for the same honor the next year. Eve won.

It turned out that Red's bodyguard, Phil, had a lot in common with Diane, the girl in the blues bar. She was a history major, and he, being ex-military, was fascinated by history. They eventually married, and both became teachers at a private military academy.

Scott Arnold was brought up on four counts of premeditated murder (two wives, Bud's brother, and his dive partner), destruction of Federal property (the *Castillo* archeological site), and three counts of theft of Federal property (the *Castillo* bell, and two trips to the wreck to loot silver). He was found not guilty by reason of insanity, and spent the rest of his life in an institution for the criminally insane. While there, he hatched multiple schemes that got numerous staff people, and even one administrator, in legal hot water.

Red and Bud remained fast friends for the rest of their lives. From time to time – specifically when they were separated from their husbands for more than a few days – they continued to cuddle up together at night. “For company, not sex,” Red insisted. Bud never bothered to explain it to anybody.

It took Red and Bud five years to complete their Ph.D. theses. Interpreting the debris field at the *Castillo* wreck site was their first success, but they applied the technique to two other Caribbean wrecks as well. The reason it took them so long was that their research kept getting interrupted by further adventures.

“Are you causing trouble again?” was a phrase Red's Mom used frequently.

## Acknowledgements

I want to extend my grateful thanks to Brian Luzzi of VideoRay for providing the information about ROVs, and for reviewing the manuscript to make sure what I described bears some resemblance to real ROVs. The voluminous material he provided quickly made it clear how badly uninformed I had been previously, and provided everything I needed to write a realistic description of a commercial-dive ROV, and how it may be operated.

Similarly, Karl Shreeves of the Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) is largely to thank for the dive plan Scott Arnold's crew used to work on the wreck of the *Castillo de Santa Guadalupe*. If they'd tried to follow my original plan, none of the divers would have made it back to the surface alive.

Finally, a word to all of our friends who have noticed an uncanny resemblance between Red McKenna and that redhead who's been waking up next to me for over four decades: all of my characters are composites, with bits and pieces taken from many people I've known over the years. But, yes, most of what I like best about my heroine came from that girlfriend, who long ago consented to be my wife as well.