



# LOVE'S TENDER FURY



# LOVE'S TENDER FURY

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## CHAPTER ONE

It began as it always did, another endless book signing in an overcrowded bookstore. The theme *du jour* was controlled chaos—lots of clerks dashing about, long lines at the checkout counter—a consumer’s nightmare, a store manager’s dream. Any other author would have been thrilled, positively joyful at such a busy book signing. Not Marnie Hammer. *Never* Marnie Hammer.

She could hear the babble of her fans around her. Instead of thrilling her, as it had in the very beginning, or infuriating her, as it had the last few years, now she merely found the enthusiasm profoundly depressing.

Head down, signing like an automaton, she could hear the next two women in line chatting.

“Is that the time? I’ve been here for an hour already.”

“I’ve been here since lunch,” her companion gushed. “Who cares? You know what a signed Jessica LeFleur is worth? I’m still hanging onto the one I got from last year’s book tour. See?” The woman, a smartly dressed brunette, dug a hardcover out of her totebag and flipped open the cover, reading aloud. “Why don’t you try *Les Miserables*? Jessica.”

“Doesn’t she have the best sense of humor?”

*Puke*, thought Jessica. “Next!”

The first woman elbowed her way to the head of the line. “Could you sign it, “To my number one fan, Love, Jessica?”

Jessica snapped her gum, quelling irritation. She had so many “number one fans”, she needed to employ a census taker to keep track of them all. “I *could*.” She took the proffered book, her newest release, and scribbled, ‘Help! I’m trapped in a publishing contract and I can’t get out!’” Then she handed the book back.

The customer read the inscription and smiled uncertainly. “Um...thank you.”

Jessica cracked her gum again. “Next!”

Seated beside her, her best friend, Joe Halloran, growled to show his disapproval. He knew why she was rude to her fans, but didn’t tolerate it. “Cut the crap,” he muttered in her ear, “or no more M&M’s.” He added to the still smiling, still puzzled customer, “Don’t mind her, ma’am. She’s on medication.”

“Oh! I’m sorry to hear that. I hope you feel better soon. I just love your work.”

*Oh, here we go*, she thought. “Why?”

“Because—” The woman faltered, then plunged ahead. “Because you write such beautiful love stories. You’re my favorite author. Better than Danielle Steele and Julie Garwood put together!”

Jessica sighed. It never ceased to amaze her. She wrote crap, which people mistook for gold. Libraries were stuffed with dusty classics, and meanwhile people were standing in line for three hours to get a signed Jessica LeFleur. It was beyond ridiculous. Worse, it made you lose respect for them. Almost as much respect as she had lost for herself.

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Toward the end of the line, Tony Freeborg was amazed at the number of women in line. And not your everyday hausfraus, either; many of them were in business suits that cost more than everything in



his closet put together. Not such a trick, given where he shopped and how often he shopped—which was bi-yearly at the *most*—but still...

"I can't believe it!" his mom was raving, in itself a startling development. Elinor Freeborg did not rave. "I can't believe I'm going to get a signed LeFleur! Now, when we're up there, smile nice and give her your card."

"Ma. I'm a nobody. I have exactly zero clients, which is why I still work for Mutch and Musch. She's Jessica C. LeFleur, worldwide sales in the bazillions. She doesn't need an agent, she needs an accountant." His cell phone rang; he pulled it out and flipped it open. "Freeborg...I can't talk right now. And for the tenth time, I don't want the service!" He paused, listening, while his mom looked on, unabashedly curious. "No...no! Just leave me alone. I don't want to talk! About anything!" He slapped the phone shut and stuffed it back into his pocket.

"What in the world?"

"My boss is making all the editors carry cell phones, and she bought us free hours of Dial-A-Shrink."

"Well. That was nice."

He snorted. "Yeah. A nice pain in the ass. None of us were using the service, so my boss is *making* the shrinks call us. All day long, my damn cell phone is ringing, and on the other end I hear, 'Tell me about your mother.' The trouble with people in therapy—like my boss—is that they think everyone *else* should be in therapy, too."

Elinor smiled. "Think about the state of the world for a moment. Then tell me more people shouldn't be in therapy."

"Ha! Good—"

"Look! It's almost our turn."

His mother, who hadn't gotten excited when his brother graduated magna cum laude or when his father won the local lottery, was actually jumping up and down on her little size fives. He had to laugh.

"All right, ladies." There was a man at the signing table, standing and holding his arms up like a television evangelist. "Ms. LeFleur is finished signing books for the day."

As one, the crowd groaned. The man winced, but bravely continued. "She'll be in attendance at the Romance Readers' Convention tomorrow at the Civic Center."

Remarkably mercurial, the crowd perked up.

"But now she has to go."

Tony could see the man standing beside Miss Hot Stuff Author was clearly uncomfortable at being the bearer of bad tidings. Tony could also see Miss Hot Stuff Author didn't mind making her flunky do the dirty work. She wasn't even looking at her loyal fans, just lying there, her head pillowed on her arms, eyes closed. Meanwhile, Flunky Boy was still yapping.

"I'm sorry. She'll be signing books tomorrow..."

It was maddening. They finally made it to the head of the line, only to be told Miss Hot stuff Author had writer's cramp or whatever and was blowing off the rest of her fans.

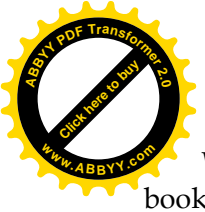
He cleared his throat. "Um...Miss LeFleur..."

Miss Hot Stuff Author, he noticed, couldn't be bothered to look up. All he could see was the top of her head.

"Don't call me that," she groaned into her forearm. "I can't take it. My name is Marnie."

His mother tugged so hard at his sleeve, she practically ripped his arm off. "Don't bother her."

He ignored her, bending toward the table like a testy maitre 'd. "I realize it's asking too much of you to sign books for fans, thereby increasing sales and your bottom line. It must be a terrible burden."



We're really sorry to put you out like this. But if you could bring yourself to sign just one...more... book. If you try to make that extra effort that separates champions from schmucks—"

What's-her-name stood, and then she was gone, stomping past the crowd. At no time, he noticed, did she trouble herself to look him full in the face.

Disgusted, he straightened. "And *speaking* of schmucks..."

His mother shook her head. "She's tired. We only waited in line for half an hour, but she's been here all day, signing. It's okay."

What's-her-name's flunky, meanwhile, had been shifting from one foot to another, and now he cleared his throat. "Why don't you give me your address, ma'am? I'll send you a signed copy."

Tony had been about to answer when his mother sent a sharp elbow into his ribs. He glared at her, but obediently reached into his pocket and...

"Here's my card."

Flunky Boy took it, studied it. "Mutch and Musch?"

"It's a small publishing house," he explained. "We do mostly poetry anthologies and a few literary novels. You can send the book to my attention."

Flunky Boy was now looking at him appraisingly, tapping his business card against his teeth. "*Ah-hmm*. Maybe we could have dinner sometime. I know a charming bistro that doesn't skimp on the bread. I can give you *Love's Tender Fury* then."

His mother jumped in. "He'd love to."

"Ma."

"He's free for a date tomorrow. Or anytime!"

Tony swallowed a groan. Matchmaking was one thing, but... "First of all, I'm not free tomorrow. Second —"

"What's the matter with you? He's about your age, he seems to like you, he's handsome...if you like skinny...he hangs around writers so he must be smart —"

"But *I'm* not gay."

She threw up her hands. "Oh, picky, picky."

Flunky Boy snorted. "You can't blame me for trying."

"Tony, he's nice! And how do you know you're not gay unless you've tried it?"

As God was his witness, he had no idea how to answer such a ridiculous question.

"Well, if you decide you do want to try it..." Flunky Boy was trying very hard not to laugh.

"You'll be the first person I call," he said dryly.

"I just think," his mother said with cool dignity, "you should keep your options open, is all."

"Great, Ma."



## CHAPTER TWO

Mystery writers got together and tried to solve fake murders. Science fiction writers went to Star Trek Conventions, planetariums, and toured NASA. Literary writers went to graduate school. And romance writers? Romance writers held giant conventions with half-naked men parading down runways, while women screamed themselves hoarse and vied to buy the chaps off the models' bodies. And then complained that no one in the publishing industry took them seriously.

Marnie Hammer, a.k.a. Jessica C. LeFleur, watched the pandemonium, and with great difficulty, stifled a yawn. A few of the men on the runway had modeled for some of her books, but she had never gone for the overly-muscular, blond, long-haired type.

"Maybe it's just me," she told Joe Halloran, her best friend and, occasionally, worst enemy, "but I could never date someone prettier than I was."

Watching the show with avid curiosity, Joe didn't look at her as he replied. "Maybe, but you have to admit, it's hard to resist a man wearing crotchless chaps."

She had to smile at that. She and Joe had been best friends since high school. They did everything together...she couldn't remember the last book signing she'd had to do solo. He was always at her elbow, joking with her fans, fetching her water, reading her books, flirting with the bookstore clerks. She and Joe had lost their virginity together, and had been lovers right up to the day Joe had come out of the closet. Sprinted out of the closet, actually.

Fool that she was, his being gay hadn't changed her feelings for him. Now here he was, drooling over the cover models, and if just once he'd ever looked at her that way, just one time...

Abruptly, Joe whooped. "Passion's Warrior! Yeah!"

"Will you shut up? You're making a spectacle of yourself."

"I can't help it. Buff, gorgeous men as far as the eye can see. This is, like, gay Graceland!"

The announcer boomed, "You've seen him on the cover of *Savage Bliss*. You swooned when he carried his virgin bride over the threshold of his manor house, Cresthaven. A big hand, ladies, for... Blanco!"

The crowd, as they say, went wild. The hall absolutely erupted with cheers and feminine shrieks. Marnie could see a tall, muscular man with shoulder-length brunette curls prowling the runway. He was classically handsome, the *de rigueur* romance novel hero. As he approached the end of the catwalk he turned slowly...and, to Marnie's surprise, somehow spotted Joe in the throng.

She and Joe looked at each other, then up at Blanco, whose gaze was riveted on Joe.

"Blanco?" she asked. "That's Spanish for white. What the hell kind of name is that?" Joe, she was irritated to note, was still staring helplessly. And Blanco, she was doubly irritated to note, was blowing her ex-boyfriend a kiss. "These women are making fools of themselves. And so are you."

Instead of being chastised, her friend only sighed. "I love romance conventions."



## CHAPTER THREE

An hour later, the reluctantly famous “Jessica C. LeFleur” was seated at her table, and *Love’s Tender Fury* was stacked all around her. She made herself sign books like a zombie, never looking at her fans. As always, Joe was at her side, constantly scanning the crowd.

“Will you cut that out?” she murmured. “What is this, your Secret Service impersonation?”

“Just watching for a familiar face.”

She scrawled something unintelligible on a copy of *Love’s Tender Fury*, slammed it shut, and handed it back without looking. “Next! Let’s keep it moving, people, I’d like to get some lunch before midnight.” She turned to Joe. “Who are you looking for?”

Joe didn’t answer, and she went back to her work, trying to hold her temper. Book signings always brought out her worst traits, and she had promised herself she wouldn’t be a bitch today. Should have promised something easier, like ending infant mortality in Calcutta .

Beside her, Joe gasped. “Oh my God! How do I look?”

“Like your usual drippy self. Luckily I’m not the type to be hung up on looks, or I’d definitely trade you in...for...a newer...uh...model.” It was hard to concentrate. It was extremely hard to concentrate. While she was signing, an enormous pair of white, fringed buckskin pants had entered her line of vision at crotch level. She slowly looked up...and up. Blanco in person was huge – well over six feet. “Guh.”

Blanco stretched out one huge hand, grabbed *Love’s Tender Fury*, and handed it to her.

“Sign, por favor.”

Recovering, she smirked and took the book. “Big fan of romance novels, are you?”

Blanco, of course, was staring at Joe, who was staring back. Marnie tried to make eye contact, in vain.

“Sí. I am...how to say? *Libro grande.*”

She raised her eyebrows. “You’re a big book?”

“Big fan. Sign, please.”

“Okey-dokey. Love the fake Spanish accent, by the way.” She flipped open the book and began writing. “To...my good...friend...Blanco. I’ll remember...last night...always. Your passion...your stamina...your broken English. Yours, Jessica C. LeFleur.”

She slapped the book closed, wondering if he would actually read the inscription, and gave it back to him. Blanco took it and looked her full in the face – finally.

“I have a flat tire.”

She rolled her eyes. The guy was transparent and unbelievable. “This isn’t the Triple A booth, pal.”

“Jack!” Joe yelled, startling everyone around them.

“Gosh, how rude of me,” she said with *faux* brightness. “Blank-o, this is my friend Joe, who likes to refer to himself as Jack. Joe, meet Blank-o.”

“I mean...I have a jack.” Joe smiled weakly.

“Bien. Vamos.”

Just like that, he turned and marched out, and Joe scrambled out from behind the table to follow. Amused in spite of herself, she watched them go. So did about fifty awestruck spectators.



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About ten fans back, Tony Freeborg was standing in line. He'd asked himself again and again why he was here, and could find no satisfactory answer. Instead, he kept pulling out his business card, then stuffing it back into his pocket, then pulling it out—it was getting a little crumpled from all the handling. He kept peeking around the people in front of him to look at Marnie—a.k.a. Jessica C. LeFleur.

"Hi, I'm Tony Freeborg," he practiced. "Tony Freeborg, Mutch and Musch. Hi there...hi, I'm Tony...how are you? Hello. Freeborg's the name...books are my game. Ugh!"

*Get hold of yourself, moron*, he instructed himself sternly. *Don't know why you'd be nervous, anyway, she's rude and full of herself.* "Hi, I'm Tony Freeborg, Mutch and Musch. Are you looking for representation? I realize this isn't the time or place, but perhaps we could discuss it over dinner?"

That was about right. Interested and friendly, but not a potential stalker—exactly the image he wanted to project.

Before long, it was his turn. Marnie grabbed yet another copy of *Love's Tender Fury* and signed it without looking up. He wasn't surprised; he didn't know her that well (at all, actually), but it was clear she hated being where she was. The woman was a mystery, and Tony Freeborg had never, ever been able to resist a mystery.

He took a deep breath and prepared to launch into his speech. "Hi."

"Hi."

He'd been prepared to be ignored. When she spoken so abruptly, it threw him off. So did her looks—he hadn't gotten much of a glimpse yesterday, but today he did. And she was spectacular, like a heroine out of one of her own romance novels. Shoulder-length blonde hair, big green eyes. Fair skin. Mouth in a frown, but he could see the lips were full, the lower one tender and waiting for kisses, kisses that—

"Next!"

And that was that. He'd been so busy staring at her like a school-boy, he'd blown his chance. And, walking away, he knew he'd never have such a chance again.

His cell phone beeped at him and he fished it out. "Biggest chump in the world speaking."

The voice that greeted him was a pleasant contralto, slightly breathy, and ridiculously young. "Having a rough day, Tony?"

"You could say that. If this is about the Girl Scout Cookie thing, I told you, the check's in the mail."

"Har, har. Why don't you tell me about it, dude?"

"Oh, man, not you guys again. How many times do I have to explain this? I don't want to make use of your service."

"Aw, don't be like that. Your boss bought, like, a humongous block of time. I'm obligated to make myself available to my patients."

Tony glanced back; he could barely see Marnie, surrounded by fans, but that one glance was enough to weaken his resolve. "How old are you?"

"Twenty."

"And you're a real psychiatrist?"

"Board certified. I'm sort of a genius. But call me Dr. Doogie just once and I'm so hanging up on you."

"I'll keep it in mind."





"So come on, man. You've got the time, I've got the time...to use a psychological term, spill your guts."

He hesitated, but he was dying to confide in someone. He supposed the trendy dial-a-shrink would have to do. "Well...there's this woman."

"Isn't there always?"



## CHAPTER FOUR

"Thank God that's over for another year. Jesus! I don't know why I let myself get talked into going every time."

Joe laughed at her and drained his drink. "A little thing in your contract called a publicity clause?"

"Don't talk to me about contracts. I've got to see Don when we finish up here."

Before Joe could comment, the waitress came over and set down more drinks. "Absolut on the rocks," she said, deftly sweeping their trash out of the way.

"Ewww, Joe! How can you drink that liquid hell?"

The waitress didn't change expression, but Marnie thought she detected a twinkle in the woman's eye as she added, "And a Shirley Temple...with a tequila chaser."

Now that was more like it. Marnie gulped down her tequila as the waitress left, then followed it with a swallow of Shirley Temple while Joe looked on in mingled fascination and nausea. "My editor's going to want a title for my latest literary bowel movement."

"Will you knock it off? You write great books. Even I like to read them."

"I'm a whore for the entire paperback book industry."

"Waitress!" Joe screamed.

The waitress, who hadn't had time to get far, came back.

"Take these away, please," he continued, shoving the glasses toward her, "and bring the lady some coffee. Repeatedly."

"I loathe coffee," Marnie muttered.

"You get so obnoxious when you've been drinking. It's either drink coffee or be slapped."

"Can't we do both?" She paused, trying to decide if she was joking or not. Since she didn't know, Joe was probably right...it *was* time to switch to coffee. "We're still on for the movies tonight?"

"Assuming you can crawl out of your self-pity pit long enough to fork over eight bucks to General Cinemas, yes. Listen—for a title, how 'bout *Passion's Fury*?"

"Done that. But that's a good try. Anything with Fire or Flaming in the title works, too."

"How about Love's Blazing Inferno?"

She laughed. "Sounds like a cross between *Die Hard* and *Gone with the Wind*. Nice try, though. There's a list."

"What?"

"There must be a list. Some editor wrote up this list and sent it to the marketing department of every romance novel publisher in the world."

Joe looked at her and, when she didn't crack a smile or otherwise indicate she was joking, said, "Okayyyyy, *way* past time for you to sober up."

"Ardor," she said. "Beauty, bride, bliss, caress, dawn, desire, dusk, evening, fire, flaming, flower, fury, garden, heart, jewel, lady, love, moon, moonlight, moonstruck, morning, night, passion, pirate, plunder, queen, ravish, ribald, savage, sweet, sunrise, sunset, tender, wanton."

"Seek help, Mar." He paused, then asked, "What's the new book about?"

"It *was* about Bard and Deirdre, a poet and a psychologist who meet at an environmentalist convention. They fall in love while implementing a terrific recycling program that will cut paper waste



by twenty-two percent.” She gulped coffee, grimaced, then took another swallow. “But after the meeting, I’m guessing it’ll be about...ah...Brad and Debbie. They meet at a singles bar. She’s there on a dare, dressed up as a prostitute because she lost a bet. He falls for her disguise. They have mindless sex and fall in love while implementing a new martini menu for the bar.”

“How about Cocktails for Two?”

“How about I just kill myself now?”

“Passion’s Plunder”?

“Been there, done that.”

“Come the Dawn”?

“That has possibilities,” she admitted. “Let’s remember that one.”

“Come the Dusk”?

“See how easy it is? I could do a whole series. *The Come Trilogy*. Remind me to put you on my acknowledgments page. ‘And thanks to my best friend, Joe Halloran, for a mediocre, yet provocative, title.’”

“I’ve been on your acknowledgments page and honey, the thrill is gone. In lieu of seeing my name in print for the fourth time, can I have cash instead?”

She laughed. She couldn’t help it. No matter how down she got—and these days, she was always down—he could always crack her up. It was one of the nicest, yet most irritating, things about him. “Off the subject, how did Blank-o work out?”

He shivered. “Badly. As you suspected, the accent is a fake—I happen to know *el cabeza estúpido* doesn’t mean ‘I can’t live without you’. Blanco’s looking for love in all my wrong places...never mind. You know what you should try?”

“A home lobotomy?”

He ignored that. “Why don’t you write gay romances? There’s a great market, and I bet you could have some flexibility. A lot of my friends complain they don’t have anything to read.”

“That’s a really good idea, but it’s not for me. I’d better stick to what I know.”

“Ha! And yet you’re writing about happy women having sex. When you’re about as happy as a chocoholic on a diet, and I know perfectly well you haven’t gotten laid since Earth Day, 2001.”

“Let’s skip that subject, okay? I can only focus on one aspect of my sucky life at a time.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but...” He yawned theatrically.

She made no attempt to hide her irritation. “If I were a nobody, I could write the kind of books I want. But because I’m “Jessica C. LeFleur”, I’m stuck in the bodice ripper niche.”

“Bullshit.”

“Truth! Even if I switched publishing houses, they’d expect a certain type of work from me. The stuff that makes money...that’s all the big houses care about. And if I actually managed to convince someone to give a literary manuscript a chance, the critics would hate it before they read a word.”

“The critics don’t hate you now. How can you be so sure they –?”

She snorted unbelievably. “Are you kidding? Most critics won’t even condescend to review a romance novel. But they’d all rush to review my literary work, and trash it, to keep me in my place.”

“Bitchy and paranoid. Nice combo.”

“They’d think I was overstepping my bounds,” she continued morosely. “Because I’m not a real author. Not in the eyes of anyone who matters.”

Joe leaned forward on his elbows, and in spite of her dreary mood, she was again struck by his fine good looks. His eyes were large, blue, and soulful. His hair was so black it was nearly blue under certain lights. He was exactly her height, lean and wiry, and not for the first time did she think AmerAsians



were some of the best-looking people on the planet. Born of a Japanese-American and a Northern European American, Joe was one of the best-looking men she'd ever seen.

If he was only ugly, she thought desperately. I'm shallow, I'm sure I wouldn't be so in love with him if he looked like he drank water out of a toilet bowl.

"A) About five hundred thousand readers would disagree with that," Joe was saying in that lecturing tone she knew well. "B) What do you care what a bunch of stuffed-shirt critics think, and C) You're *making me sick*. Do you realize how many aspiring authors would sell their sisters to be where you are?"

"So what? I never wanted to be a best-selling author. But my agent sold my soul to a publishing house that builds fiction giants, not literary little people."

"Please! Not another 'my life sucks even though I sell gobs of books and have money falling out my ass' speech. Besides, your agent didn't do shit without your permission."

Her grip tightened on her coffee cup as she glared across the table at Joe. "My permission?!? I didn't know what I was doing back then, I trusted his advice! The only reason I wrote *Love's Sweeping Tide* was because that spawn of Satan told me the romance market was the easiest to break into!"

"Well. He was right."

She had to agree with that one. Once all she dreamed of was getting published; she had never thought beyond that. Now...now she was hearing herself whine about her good fortune and it made her sick.

"I always thought I'd be so grateful to be published that I'd write whatever they wanted. Now that I'm stuck writing crap, it's just not enough. I know I sound whiney, I know you're sick of hearing it, but I'm not happy."

"Think about your money! Works for me."

"It is neither wealth nor splendor, but tranquility and occupation, which gives happiness.' Thomas Jefferson."

In response to this, Joe scooped his bag off the floor, rooted around in it, and produced a battered paperback. He thumbed rapidly through tattered pages and, when he had found what he was looking for... "'There are two things to aim at in life: first, to get what you want; and, after that, to enjoy it. Only the wisest of mankind achieve the second.' Logan Pearsall Smith."

"Cheater."

"You're the cheater," Joe retorted. "You've got a photographic memory, for God's sake. It's not like you stay up late memorizing this stuff. How many grading curves did you wreck in high school? Used to drive me crazy, especially since you only sound smart."

"*Cogito ergo sum*," she said smugly. "I think. Therefore I am."

"You look like a monkey, and you smell like one, too. How 'bout *that*?"

"Great, Joe."



## CHAPTER FIVE

Incredibly, being at the bar with Joe was probably going to be the highlight of her day, though all she had done was complain like a spoiled child. Now she was seated in front of her editor's desk, having a stare-down with a man she cordially detested. She wondered: would she speak first, to complain, or would he?

The mystery was solved when Don cleared his throat. "I just had a lovely chat with the hostess of the last book signing. She was thrilled to have a famous romance novelist in her establishment. Only, next time, she hopes you remember to take your medication before you stop by."

Marnie had no comment. They had done this dance before, she and Don. They did it during every publicity tour. She was certain he disliked her at least as much as she disliked him. She supposed they were both being punished for sinful past lives.

"Since you're not *on* medication," he continued, "I've come up with another explanation for your ridiculous behavior. *That you've gone right the hell out of your mind!*"

"This, from a man who eats aspirin like they were Tic Tacs."

"How shall I put this to a writer of your delicate, creative nature? Your attitude blows."

"Also, I'm clearly unstable. You'd better release me from my contract."

"Nice try, Jessica—"

Marnie slammed the palm of her hand on the arm of her chair. The sound was very loud; she was gratified to see Don jump. "*Don't* call me that. My name is Marnie. I have a perfectly fine name and it disgusts me that you won't let me use it on the books."

"Be reasonable. Your full name doesn't project the image we need."

"There is nothing," she said through gritted teeth, "wrong with my name."

Don snorted. "Marnie L. Hammer? You sound like a Spanish hitman, for Christ's sake. That's not the image we want to sell romance novels. Jessica C. LeFleur has style and pan-uh-chee."

"That's *panache*."

"Whatever. LeFleur's got it, Hammer doesn't. For the nine billionth time."

Marnie rubbed her forehead with her fingers. She felt like the "before" picture in a headache ad. "I can't believe they're letting you edit my books."

Her editor fumbled for a bottle of aspirin. He popped the cap and dry-swallowed three tablets. "What 'let'? Honey, they don't let me, they *make* me. As in, I lost the coin toss. As in, in addition to listening to freaked-out bookstore managers and wading through letters from weirded-out fans, I get to read through this..." He gestured to the piles of paper on his desk. "...and try to pull a love story out from the crapola you keep tossing in there."

"Crapola? Oh, that's nice."

He grabbed a sheaf of manuscript pages, put on his glasses, and flipped randomly. She cringed, knowing what was coming. "Here we go. 'Deirdre—' That's changing, by the way. I'm thinkin'... Debbie. Yeah. Debbie. 'Debbie stood at the window, her thoughts as quick and silvery as many small fish being chased by a predator.'"

"I hate it when you do this. You could pick random lines from Tolstoy and make them sound stupid."

Don paused in his reading and looked up, puzzled. "Tolstoy? That's the guy who wrote about



hobbits and stuff, right?"

"Oh my *God*," she moaned.

"Whatever. Now listen: 'She could not but help reflect upon the words of some unknown philosopher, who said, 'But at my back I always hear time's winged chariot hurrying near, and yonder all before us lie deserts of vast eternity.' Zzzzzzzzzzz..." Don had tilted back in his chair, eyes closed, mouth open, and was fake-snoring loudly. She glanced at his desk for something to throw, and just as her fingers closed around his stapler, he pretended to wake up and leaned forward.

"And that's on page two. It only gets worse from there. Why do you do this to me every damn time?"

"I was going to ask you the same question."

He gestured irritably and leaned back in his chair. "Knock it off. You know why I called this little meeting today?"

"To further ruin my life?"

"Give me a break, okay? You've got a great life. You're rich, you have gobs of fans *and* your own web site, people read your books all over the world. In a nutshell: quit your bitching."

"I write fairly good books," she corrected him. "You turn them into crap. Then you sell the crap to millions of women who insist on calling me Jessica. In a nutshell: you're ruining my life."

"It's only fair, because you're sure as hell ruining mine." He flipped through the manuscript pages and picked another paragraph at random. "'Bard—' I assume that's Brad misspelled."

"It's *not* a misspelling, it means poet. The hero is a sensitive man. Contrary to the example before me, that's not an oxymoron."

Immune as always to her insults, Don shrugged. "Doesn't matter what it means; we're changing it to Brad. Try this: 'Brad gave Debbie a look of apprehension, for though he longed to make her his, to possess her utterly, he worried for her. His penis was a symbol of man's tyranny, man's need to rend and tear and make things his. How could she see him as anything but a monster?'"

"Good question."

"I got a news flash for you—heroes of historical romance novels aren't feminists, okay? They don't read Gloria Steinem and they don't fret about the symbolism of lovemaking in the post-modern world. They ravage. They plunder." He gestured to the manuscript pages scattered all over his desk. "Four hundred seventy-five pages of this! Don't you get it? I'm saving you from yourself! Women don't want this! Romance readers don't want this!"

"Really?"

"They want to get lost in the fantasy, they want to escape from board meetings and emergency surgery and whatever else it is they do when they're not reading. Your books should pull them out of that, not push them in deeper."

She clapped, slowly and mockingly. Don flushed. "Just because my uncle owns the company doesn't mean I don't know what I'm talking about."

"No man's knowledge here can go beyond his experience."

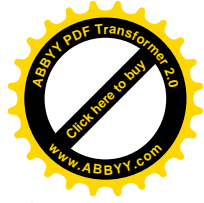
"Thanks a lot. Now everything's nice and clear. Now we won't have these fights anymore."

"It's from John Locke," she explained testily. "Read a book some time, Senior Editor."

She got up to leave. Don watched her, clearly frustrated. "This thing needs a title once I get done. If I can get through it without killing myself. Give it a shot."

"You hate my titles," she sighed.

"Just try, okay? Please. I'm begging you. Keep it under five words, okay? And we're working on the cover design—"



She sighed again. Cover design – always a special torture. “Already?”

“Hey, advance printing. Three hundred seventy-five thousand, baby. Time to get cracking. We’re talking to Fabio’s people to get him to pose...he’s been trying to get away from that for years, but we think the publicity’d be good for both of your careers. His comeback, and your continuing climb to the top.”

This, she decided, was as good a time as any to leave. But Don jumped to his feet and shouted after her.

“So for Christ’s sake, don’t pull his hair this time!”





## CHAPTER SIX

If seeing her editor was a little like being inside one of the circles of hell, seeing Joe's parents was heaven. James Halloran, Joe's dad, was hugging her so hard she feared her ribs would crack, while Tina, his wife, kept trying to elbow him aside so she could hug Marnie as well.

"It's so great to see you!" Tina said happily.

"You're looking good there, kiddo," James crowed. "You do something different to your hair?"

"I—"

"Joey!" Tina bellowed, startling her. "Marnie's here!"

"I know," Joe said sourly, coming down the stairs. His parents' love for his former girlfriend was aggravating only because it let them remain comfortably in denial about his lifestyle. "I heard the celebration. How's it going, Marnie-the-Great?"

"It's—"

Tina saw Marnie was holding yet another copy of *Love's Tender Fury* and grabbed it. "Is it signed? I'll add it to my collection."

"Don't you mean the shrine?" Joe asked.

"Don't be bitchy," Marnie said under her breath, hiding a grin. She noticed another copy of her book on the couch; there was a bookmark two thirds of the way through it. "Tina, how many times do I have to tell you not to buy my books? I get two hundred promo copies...you don't have to plunk down nineteen ninety-five. No one should have to," she added frankly.

"It's okay, hon. I didn't want to wait. Is the paperback coming out soon?"

"This new one's pretty spicy, kiddo." James clapped her on the back, hard enough to jolt, then winked. "Maybe you been doing some research with my kid here, eh?"

As always when teasing her about Joe, he was a little too hale and hearty. It was painfully clear he was praying the answer would be yes. Marnie didn't know what to say.

"Dad, please. You're embarrassing yourself and humiliating me. Again."

"No," she said kindly, "I didn't research with Joe."

"You outgrew him," Tina declared. "He was just a high school fling for you."

"Uh, sure, that's *one* explanation for why we broke up."

"Mom..." Joe whined.

But Tina was headed toward the mantel, where the Joe and Marnie photo collection took up most of the wall space. As she had a thousand times before, Tina pointed to their high school prom picture: a much younger Marnie, grimacing for the camera, and a teenage Joe, eyeing the prom dress—not Marnie—appreciatively. The photographer had caught Joe feeling the fabric with his fingers, testing for texture. "Is there a cuter couple on the planet?"

"Couple of what?" Joe muttered.

*Enough of this*, Marnie thought. "Can I get a drink of water?"

"Sure, hon."

Tina and Marnie walked into the kitchen, leaving Joe staring at the photo shrine and shaking his head. In the kitchen, Tina deftly produced a glass and filled it with ice-cold water from a pitcher. "Here you go. You're looking so good. And the books are doing well."





Marnie managed to finish her water without choking. "Yes. Thank you."

"We're so proud of you, dear. James and I talk about you all the time. It's like you're our own daughter."

"Which is kind of gross, given mine and Joe's romantic history...never mind. You're very good for my ego. What I don't get is, neither of you like the romance genre. But you can't wait for my books."

"They're about good men falling in love with good women and having good sex. It's nice to know you're so normal." Tina gave her a pat.

"Uh...thank you?" This woman, she thought, was insane. Nice, but nuts.

"I don't mean to be a *buttinsky*, but have you ever thought about settling down? Maybe what you need is right in front of your face. And Joe needs you...this phase...it can't last. He'll get over it soon."

Marnie stared at Joe's mother, startled, and there was a long silence while she thought about what Tina just said. Then she took a deep breath and spelled it out for the woman, as tactfully as she could. Explained a truth she herself had spent years facing.

"You 'get over' the chicken pox. Not this. If you're hanging onto this hope that he'll come home one night and present you with a wife and two-point-three children...well...you're really kidding yourself."

Tina took Marnie's empty water glass from her and rinsed it out, too thoroughly. She couldn't look at Marnie; instead, she concentrated on scrubbing the already-clean water glass.

"Haven't you ever thought about trying again?" she asked wistfully.

"I'm crazy about your son. But we're better as friends...we knew that when we were seventeen. We were each other's first. And that's always going to be special. But we can't go back."

"You don't date much. And you and my son are always together, it seems. That's why I thought—"

Marnie spoke the hated, bitter truth, mouthed the worst words in language. "We're just friends. Once, I thought..."

Unfortunately—or not, depending on how you looked at it—James entered the kitchen right then. He went straight to the fridge and began rooting around for a snack. "Thought what?"

"That her new book is much better than the last one," Tina lied smoothly. "What was it? *Passion's Sweet Fever*?"

"No," James said thoughtfully, "I think it was *Pirate's Lady*."

"It was *Sweetest Desire*," Marnie corrected. "And thanks. But Tina, I could publish my grocery list and you'd rave about the pathos I evoked with my superb characterization."

The doorbell rang, surprising them all. James straightened up from the fridge. "Are we expecting anyone else?"

Puzzled, Tina shook her head and headed for the living room. Marnie chewed her lower lip, dreading what was coming. "Joe said something about his date meeting us here."

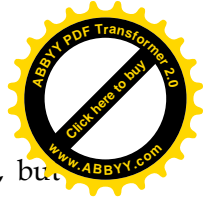
James turned toward her so sharply his hip slammed into the corner of the fridge. "He's bringing a date? When he's going out with you?"

"He likes me to meet them," she explained, knowing she sounded lame, but helpless to stop. "The men he likes. He values my—he's not going out with me *per se*. We're just friends." Ugh! Having to mouth the hated phrase twice in two minutes. Worse, she could have cried at the crestfallen look on James' face.

"I thought...something else," he said stiffly, and abruptly stalked out of the kitchen. Marnie trailed after him unhappily.

In the living room, Tina was greeting Joe's date, Curtis something-or-other, and the reception was bit chilly, to put it mildly.

"So nice to meet one of Joe's little friends."



Marnie had to smother a laugh. Curtis, shaking Tina's hand, was clearly a bit taken aback, but rallied gamely. "So nice to *be* one of Joe's little friends."

Dead silence, which Marnie broke. She could hear the false note of cheer in her voice, and hated it, but what else was there to do? Stay in the living room and stare at each other? Watch Joe lose his temper again at his parents' refusal to accept him for who he was?

But, by staying in love with him for this long, wasn't she guilty of the same thing?

She put that thought out of her mind in a hurry. "We'd better get going, you guys. I don't want to miss sitting in the theater for half an hour with nothing to do."

"Goodbye, honey. It was just wonderful to see you again. Are you coming over for dinner this Friday?" Tina's invitation held all the warmth she had withheld from Curtis.

Marnie stole a glance at a tight-lipped Joe, at the silent Curtis. "I'll let you know."



## CHAPTER SEVEN

The three of them—Marnie, Joe, and Curtis—didn't have a lot to say in the car, but once at the theater, Joe laid it all out for Curtis.

"My parents are in total denial about my life," he said, clearly aggrieved. "And they adore the monster over there."

Marnie smirked. "That's Ms. Monster to you, buster."

"We dated in high school—if you can picture that without barfing—"

"Lord knows I can't."

"And my parents were pretty annoyed when I broke up with her—"

"*Ennhh* ! Thank you for playing, but the correct response is, when *she* broke up with *me*".

He shot an irritated glance at her. "When we came to a mutual parting of the ways, and I came out of the closet."

"Lunged out, is more like it. You could have thought about my needs, for once. How do you think it looked to people when you slept with me, then publicly stated—more than once—that you prefer men? The cheerleaders made fun of me for weeks."

"*Anyway*. They won't see that we're just friends."

"Only friends."

"That there's no spark there."

"We're in a spark-free zone," she declared.

"And the thought of us ever getting back together is just extremely very stupid."

"An impossibility of nature." Somehow, this wasn't as much fun as it had been a few seconds ago. "Never happen."

"But they refuse to see it," he continued to an enthralled Curtis. "Take tonight—perfectly innocent, right? Mar and I are going to see the new Sandra Bullock flick—"

"*Love* her," she agreed.

"—because going to the movies together is this totally innocent thing that we've done forever. And Mom and Dad had to paint it like some big romantic evening."

"When it's not big. And certainly not romantic," she added.

"Which is where I come in." Curtis didn't phrase it as a question, but he did raise his eyebrows.

"Eeeee...yeah," Joe said reluctantly. "And I'm sorry I put you on display like that. But rubbing their noses in it is the only way to make them see."

Marnie munched popcorn while Joe and Curtis talked, and realized she was as content as she could be while the man she loved was flirting with another man. Maybe it was the locale. She adored going to the movies.

The lights went down and she sat up straight. The familiar green "this preview has been approved for all audiences" logo came up; then the first preview unfolded. On the screen, Marnie could see a beautiful woman, dressed in 18<sup>th</sup> century clothing. The movie announcer's dulcet baritone boomed through the speakers.

"She was a woman of noble blood. Untouched...innocent...with a terrible secret."



On screen, the woman of noble blood was standing on a beach gazing out to sea, looking pensive. The scene shifted to a handsome, bearded man, shirtless and standing behind the wheel of a ship. A wave broke over the bow, drenching him. He threw his head back and laughed like a manly man.

"He was a rogue," the announcer intoned, "the bastard son of royalty...and her only hope."

Marnie could feel the blood draining from her face. This was absolutely not happening. Absolutely not. No.

"From the author of *Passion's Sweet Caress* and *Flaming Surrender* comes the movie based on the national best seller..."

She opened her mouth in a yowl. "Aaaaaaaaaaaaaa—" She dropped her box of popcorn and jabbed an elbow into Joe's side. Joe was staring at the screen, his mouth open in delight.

"Maybe it's not your book."

"— aaaaaaaagggggggggghhhh —"

"For God's sakes, Mar. Breathe or your going to pass out on this disgusting floor."

"The breathtaking saga of Shyla and Marcus, brought to the big screen. Their passion..."

Onscreen, Shyla belted Marcus across the mouth. "You cad!"

"Their pleasure..."

The scene shifted, and now Shyla looked ecstatic. By contrast, Marnie thought she might vomit soon. This wasn't happening. It wasn't happening!

Okay, it was. She'd known the movie was going into production. It had been her decision to sell the film rights three years ago, after all. Her reasoning had been simple: it was a bad book (one of many), so what did she care if they made a bad movie out of it?

Only she did care.

"The only thing more unthinkable than being together...was being torn apart."

"You call that unthinkable?" Marnie shrieked at the screen. "This can't be happening. I thought I was safe here!"

"Take me, Marcus," Shyla breathed, fumbling with one of the several hundred buttons on her dress. "Take me as only you can...make me a *woman*."

"Shut up, you ninny!" There were several "shhhhhhhh"s around her, but Marnie ignored them all. "Your name used to be Ramona! And you never wore dresses that low cut in any of my manuscripts!"

"*Love's Eternal Caress*...experience it at a theater this fall."

"Not fucking likely!" She sat up straight, her despair gone and replaced with a new resolution. "That's it. I'm taking steps. This can't be allowed."

Joe looked thoughtful, his arm up to the elbow in his popcorn bucket. "Guess you shouldn't have let your agent sell the movie rights, huh?"

"Just because I sold the movie rights doesn't mean they actually had to make a *movie* out of it!"

"You sound just like Anne Rice, complaining when Tom Cruise got cast as Lestat. You didn't hesitate to cash the check, I can't help but remember."

"You're so lucky!" Curtis gasped, staring at her, dazzled.

She stood slowly. "I've been a victim long enough. Persecuted wherever I go. And I'm not going to whine quietly about it anymore!" She shook a fist at the screen, ignoring the muted shushes around her from her fellow movie-goers. "As God is my witness...as God is my witness! If I have to lie, cheat, steal, or kill...I'll never write romance novels again!"

The music from the preview swelled around her. A box of Sno Caps hit her on the back of the head. That was all right, the way she was feeling. That was just fine.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

Staring at the bizarrely dressed mannequins, Joe asked, "Tell me again why we're at Macy's?"

"You know why," Marnie replied shortly.

"Well, count me out, honey."

With difficulty, she restrained herself from seizing him by the lapels and giving him a good shake. "You're going to help me do this or I'll tell your mother you made a pass at me last night."

Joe's gasp wasn't entirely unfeigned. "Don't you dare!"

"She'd be mad?" Curtis asked

"She'd be thrilled." Marnie said this with a very dry smile, wondering why Curtis had tagged along. She supposed she could put up with him until Joe came to his senses.

"You're so ruthless when you're not getting your way," Joe complained. "And there's nothing wrong with the way you look!"

"That's the whole point. I look too healthy and normal. I need to look cadaverous. Brooding and complex. I need to look like a Serious Writer. And I absolutely cannot be recognizable as Jessica LeFruit."

"Yeah, but...a disguise?" He looked doubtful. "For how long?"

"As long as it takes. And you're going to help me. You know everybody in this industry, and you go to all my promotional stuff. You've got to have a contact for me."

Joe got a funny look on his face, took out his wallet, and extracted a business card. "What are you, a witch? I got this just the other day. Nice enough guy and his mom—of course, you completely blew them off because you're a jerk and a snob, but—"

She snatched the card and read it. "Mutch and Musch. Perfect."

"Perfect if you're a nobody. They're teeny and nobody's heard of them."

"That's the whole point," she repeated patiently. "If I give them a serious manuscript and look like a serious writer, a serious *nobody* writer they've never heard of, I'll get a contract. Or at least an open-minded editor to read my book. Heck, I'd settle for that—it's better than what I have now."

"But what about your contract at the other place?" Curtis asked.

"Jessica LeFruitLoop is under contract, not me," she explained. "It's the name, not what I produce. Besides, they won't mind if I sell something they won't buy, anyway."

Joe was already shaking his head. "This isn't an episode of *I Love Lucy*, moron. Disguises? Tricking people? Think about what you're proposing."

"Fortune sides with him who dares! Virgil."

"Yeah, okay, *that's* relevant."

"It's from the *Aeneid*, and it's my new motto."

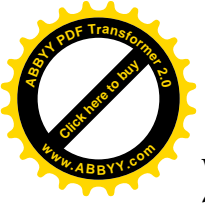
"What happened to 'I've fallen and I can't get up'?"

"Quit with the jokes already. Now let's get to it!"

"Get to what?"

She managed not to shriek. "Pay attention! I need a new look."

Incomprehension, irritation, and confusion were now being replaced with offense. "What, because



“We’re gay we can help you with a makeover?”

“You dress better than I do and you know it.”

“Like that means anything?” he yelled. “In high school you were voted Most Likely to Be Mistaken for a Homeless Person!”

“My point! I need you.”

“We’re not your gay fashion police, okay? Lose the stereotypes, honey.”

“You want me to quit bitching all the time? You want me to stop pretending I’m a victim? Then help me do this.”

That did the trick. And much later, Marnie couldn’t believe the transformation. An hour in the hair salon had left her blonde hair slicked back into a bun. Joe had borrowed letter openers from the receptionists’ desk; they were now sticking out of her bun with just the right kooky-artistic touch. She was clad head to toe in black, all the way down to her ballet slippers. Another kooky artistic touch—Marnie couldn’t *plie* if someone stuck a gun in her ear.

“Perfect,” she said, supremely satisfied. She looked weird, she looked tormented, she looked long-suffering. Nothing like a romance novelist.

“Not quite.” Joe handed her a pair of dark sunglasses, which Marnie obediently put on. Getting out of her chair, she tripped and would have brained herself on a table if Joe hadn’t steadied her.

“Never take them off,” he warned.

“I can’t see shit!” Despite the grumble, she didn’t remove them. “This is going to work.”

“Almost.” He went back to the hapless receptionist, nipped a cigarette out of her hand, and trotted back, giving it to Marnie.

“A final touch. How can you be brooding and tormented if you don’t have a filthy life-destroying habit?”

“This is why I love the man with all my heart,” Marnie informed Curtis. He laughed, but she could only manage a small, very dry smile.



## CHAPTER NINE

Tony Freeborg was having trouble believing he wasn't dreaming. While waiting for yet another appointment with a would-be author, in walked the woman of his dreams, the woman he couldn't stop thinking about. Jessica C. LeFleur in the flesh. In his *office* in the flesh.

He couldn't begin to imagine what she wanted. He got his first clue when she made no mention of her publishing history. She was—he was sure he was misinterpreting, but it seemed as though she was in disguise. She was pretending she'd never been published, that she—big laugh—needed him to succeed.

And why was she smoking a cigarette, when she obviously didn't smoke?

"So what do you think?" she asked him, then bent forward and coughed harshly.

Mystified, he stared at her, wondering if she was going to yark up a lung or what. "You have no idea."

"Pardon?"

"Miss...uh...Hammer, I'm not sure if you're aware, but Mutch and Musch is a very small literary house. We're talking six books a year. Maybe."

"Great!"

"And they never make the best seller list," he continued doggedly, positive she wasn't getting it. "*Windows on the Nile* sold eight thousand copies, and we threw a party."

"That's wonderful!"

Sure, he thought, wonderful for a small literary house. But six thousand sales for a best-seller was peanuts. Worse than peanuts. Sub-peanuts.

*What* was she up to? How did she pick him out of the crowd to try and fool? He had recognized her in an instant, despite the ridiculous disguise, but it was obvious she was unaware they had met—sort of—twice before.

"We don't have much in the way of marketing budgets, we don't do much promoting, and we never print more than two thousand for a first run."

"I know. *Windows on the Nile* was brilliant. But literary novels about Egyptian dogs don't make the best seller list. Too bad."

She coughed out more smoke, her eyes watering, and looked around in vain for an ashtray. She was holding the cigarette with the ginger care of someone who's been a smoker for all of ninety seconds.

He decided to try once more. "I'm proud of the work we do here. It's excellent quality. But it's not very marketable. I'm not sure we're what you're looking for."

"Trust me. You're exactly what I'm looking for."

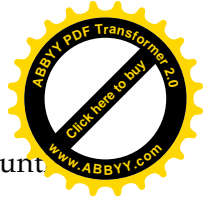
"Well...I'm actually leaving this house to open my own agency. I'm hoping to represent more... commercial pieces to bigger houses. Maybe you'd consider writing something—"

She sat bolt upright, so quickly her dark glasses fell off her face and into her lap. Weirdly, this aroused him. He could actually feel all the blood start to leave his head and go...er...somewhere else.

"No! And I don't need an agent, thanks very much. Are you going to help me, or do I need to talk to someone else here?"

"Help you how?" he asked, and the vague question actually made him feel like blushing; she was *so*





cute and so pissed off, he wanted to call it a day, hustle her over to his apartment, and fuck her until they were both sweaty and out of breath.

Try to get ahold of yourself, man!

“Uh...help you how?” he asked again.

She was so angry, she didn't notice her cigarette, which had burned down to her fingers. She yelped and dropped it, then jumped up and stomped it out before the carpet could catch fire.

Tony watched this and waited to wake up. He assumed he was having this bizarre dream because he'd had a hot fudge sundae just before going to bed. Well! No more of that.

His cell phone rang and, without taking his eyes off her, he pulled the phone out of his pocket and flipped it open. “Not now, doc.” He slapped the phone shut and put it away. “You're quite confident for a *fledgling* writer. Surely you know this is a tough business for newcomers.”

Marnie finished putting out the cigarette and sat down, carefully folding her sunglasses and putting them away. His heart broke a little at the helpless, almost desperate look on her face.

“I'm just asking for a chance,” she said quietly. “I'm sorry I lost my temper earlier. It's just...I don't have a lot of use for commercialism.”

While he stared, she took out another long, black cigarette, looked at it doubtfully, then put it away. She stuck out her tongue and picked off a piece of tobacco, then longingly eyed the glass of ice water on his desk. He slid it over to her. She picked up the glass and gulped gratefully.

“Look, why don't you think about a few ideas to pitch to my boss? I'll try to set up a meeting so she can meet you.”

She was so excited, she started to thank him while drinking, and water dribbled down her front. She set the glass down with a thud and water sloshed over the side, wetting his blotter.

“Okay! Great! Jeez, that was easy.”

Under the desk, where she couldn't see, he pinched his thigh, hard. It stung like a bastard. Definitely not dreaming. “Well, it's clear that you're a great—I mean, you seem like you'd be a great writer. Very...uh...deep.”

“Thanks!”

She jumped up and for one glorious moment, he thought she was going to hug him. Instead, she settled for vigorously shaking his hand, hard enough to make his fingers ache. Then she gathered up her stuff and practically skipped out of the office.

Maybe, he thought to himself, they're re-making *Candid Camera*, and I just starred in the pilot episode. Maybe...

His cell phone rang again. He snatched it. “Whaaaaaat?”

Dr. Jorenby's girlish voice filtered through the phone. “Is now a good time?”

“My goodness, is cheerleading practice over *already*?”

“As if! I can't do a cartwheel to save my life. Want to chat? Any repressed childhood memories surface recently?”

“Yeah, I dreamed I was being tortured by a psychiatrist younger than my socks. You're not going to believe who was just here.”

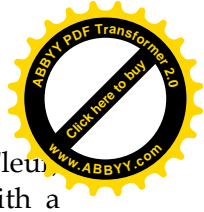
“Jessica C. LeFleur.”

He had been leaning back in his chair, and when she guessed correctly he nearly fell on the floor. He opened his mouth but Dr. Jorenby interrupted him.

“Don't even ask me, dude. Who else would make you sound so surprised and happy? It was a totally logical deduction on my part.”

He got out of his chair and went to the window. He was only two stories up, so it was easy to spot





the small figure in black skipping down the sidewalk. Marnie Hammer, a.k.a. Jessica C. LeFleur, was happier to get a meeting with a small literary editor than she had been at a book signing with a thousand fans.

It was all very strange. And for some reason he was in the middle of it. God was good.

“Dr. Jorenby, I am in love.”

“Well, duh. Like I hadn’t figured *that* out in two nanoseconds.”

“Oooh, you’re so smart.”

“You see LeFleur as the embodiment of all you enjoy about literature, and women. She’s passionate, articulate, intelligent...”

A little thrown by the surfer-girl voice sounding like a mental health professional, he rallied gamely.

“Rude, snobbish, ungrateful...”

“And way cute.”

“How do you know that?”

“Got her latest novel right in front of me. Cover photo looks like something from Glamour Shots.”

He spun away from the window and started pacing in front of his desk.

“Why did you buy her book?”

“Research, oh obsessive one. Don’t know how I’m going to wedge this thing into your chart, though. So why’d she come to your office?”

“Ah...I’d better not. I think I need to keep her secret for a while, until I figure out what she’s up to.”

“Dude, ever heard of doctor-patient confidentiality? I could not be more silent on the subject of La LeFleur if I had been born without vocal cords.”

“But I’m not your patient.”

“What are you, my pool boy? Spill. Start with, ‘Imagine my surprise when Jessica came into my office,’ and end with, ‘and then my brilliant psychiatrist called, and I told her everything.’”

He grinned in spite of himself. Shrugged. And told her everything.



## CHAPTER TEN

Joe opened the door and she almost dropped her purse. He looked ghastly—eyes swollen and bloodshot, face too pale. He was holding a glass full of what she assumed was whisky. The glass was so big, it looked like a mixing bowl on a stem.

“Uh...I got your message.”

He shrugged. “That bitch.”

“Do you mean Curtis? Don’t tell me, let me guess—he thinks *you’re* too smart for *his* own good.”

“He’s thinking about going back to his ex-girlfriend. He’s with her right now...” Joe actually shuddered. “Discussing it.”

“What a slut! Both of them.”

He stood back from the doorway. “Come on in.”

She followed him in, wrinkling her nose at the state of the apartment. The shades were drawn, there were dirty dishes everywhere, and the television was on.

“Sit,” she ordered.

He listlessly complied. She bustled about, throwing open the shades, picking up dishes, making a cheerful racket. Joe, she was annoyed to notice, was unmoved. He was slumped in front of the television, gulping at his whiskey and feeling pretty damned sorry for himself.

She came over and shut off the television. Joe jerked in surprise and glared at her.

“Dammit! Let me die in peace.”

“Forget it, pal. Hey, this ought to cheer you up—I have to work here for the next few days. They’re painting my apartment.”

“After seven years?”

“They finally believed me when I said the walls weren’t supposed to be beige.”

“Good,” he said listlessly. “I could use the company. Especially now that you’ve pulled out of the pity party you’ve been throwing *forever*.”

“Which reminds me, let me tell you about my great day! Then you’ll realize that even though your life sucks, just being associated with me is something to be grateful for.”

“I can hardly fucking wait.”

“I went to see the guy, Tony Freeborg, at Mutch and Musch?”

“Try to keep my name out of these meetings, okay? I don’t want him to find out I siced you on him.”

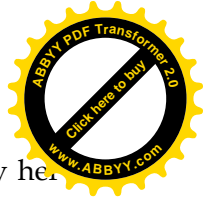
“He’d thank you!” she said brightly.

“With a bullet.”

“Well, he’s going to get me a meeting with his boss, how about that, wise guy? I’m going to pitch her a few novel ideas.”

While speaking, Marnie had been rooting through her tote bag, pulling out a T-shirt and shorts, and changing out of her “serious author” costume. She had just stripped down to her bra and panties when Joe sat up straight.

“Oh my God!”



She froze, startled. It never occurred to her that Joe might be shocked—possibly excited?—by her undressing in front of him.

She smiled tentatively. “What?”

“What the hell is that thing on your leg?”

She glanced down and saw the fist-sized bruise on the outside of her thigh.

“Oh. Walked into the corner of a low bookshelf. Then started swearing. A lot.”

“Ouch, looks nasty. Anyway...you were saying about meeting Freeborg’s boss?”

She stared at him for a long moment. He stared back. His hair was so untidy it was actually standing up in spikes all over his head, but he still looked yummy to her.

Don’t do this, she thought.

“Do you feel anything?”

*Bad idea*, she warned herself.

“What?” he asked.

*Stop now. It’s still possible to stop.* “Right now. I’m in my underwear, and it’s expensive stuff. How does that make you feel?”

“Like you must be freezing your ass off. Want a sweater?”

She shook her head and got dressed. Of course, he didn’t feel anything. He thought they were friends. She didn’t know if that made him the fool, or her.

She cleared her throat. “So...what? Curtis was just using you to get back at his lady love?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“It’s so ironic. Men do to you what you used to do to me. They use you for sex, even if they don’t feel anything.”

“This is fun. You should come over more often when I’m depressed. Are you implying I deserve this treatment?”

“No. I’m implying that it’s ironic.”

“Is that what you think I did to you?”

“That *is* what you did to me. I was your experiment, your ‘Hey, maybe I’m not gay’ attempt to fit in.” She coughed, surprised at how anger surged up at the thought, even after all this time. “Your token woman.”

“You’re nobody’s token anything. And we were seventeen...that hardly qualifies you as a woman.”

“It doesn’t qualify me as a trout!”

He put his arm around her and hugged gently, dropping a kiss to the top of her head. She submitted sulkily.

“For what it’s worth, you really confused me. You were the only woman I was ever attracted to. You know, besides Tom Brokaw.”

“Well, you really confused *me*. You were the only man who had sex with me and then decided he preferred men.”

“I dunno...maybe you should have switched deodorant...or something.”

She stared at him incredulously, then realized he was teasing. She seized a couch pillow and let him have it right across the face. He retaliated with a couch cushion. They fell to the floor, shrieking and wrestling.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Tony knew he would have a tough time convincing his boss, Robbie Todd, Editor-in-Chief, to see a best-selling author who was pretending to be a nobody. Not because Marnie was pretending to be a nobody. No, it would be tough because his boss was completely out of her mind. Since book publishing was a tough business, Tony didn't know if Robbie being a nutcase worked for her or against her.

But he had his theories.

He had a hard time believing he was even doing this...if only he wasn't so damned mixed up! He liked Marnie a lot, and he'd sure love to get her between the sheets, but when it came to how she felt for him...total blank. He had no idea. In fact, he strongly doubted she was aware he had a penis at all. Which was annoying, to say the least.

Fuckit. He could do this for her, regardless of how he felt. And he wasn't the sort of man who did favors with strings attached.

While he tried to convince her, Robbie was lining up her daily dose of medication and vitamins on her spotless desk blotter. There was exactly one piece of paper in her in-bin. Her out-bin was empty. The office was as barren as a cell, and she appeared to be caught up with her work—a near impossibility in the publishing business.

"I'm telling you, Robbie, this is a great writer."

"How's Dial-A-Shrink working out for you?" Robbie asked without looking up.

"It's the biggest waste of company funds since you decided we needed bi-weekly physicals."

Humming, she said, "A healthy staff is a productive staff." She suddenly straightened, and her eyes went wide with alarm. "Is there a bee on me?"

"No. Listen, cancel Dial-A-Shrink, will you? I don't need to tell Jorenby all my deep dark secrets."

"Dr. Muffy Jorenby was a child prodigy."

"Muffy?"

"She's published dozens of academic papers, and is making quite a name for herself in the field."

"I've been baring my soul to a *Muffy*?"

"Lucky bastard."

"If she's so great, why is she working at Dial-a-Shrink?"

"Right now her youthful appearance puts patients off."

"Ya think? She sounds like a cheerleader coming down from acid—I can't imagine what she looks like. Look, I'd rather talk about this new writer."

"No manuscript, no meeting."

She put her head down on the desk, her cheek against the blotter, and flicked the first in a long line of pills into her mouth, then sat up straight and chewed placidly, like a cow.

He was so used to his boss's oddities, he barely noticed. "She's had some experience. And she's brilliant, Rob. Intense and brilliant. Ten minutes of your time. Let her pitch."

"She knows we're small and she wants us anyway. She doesn't have a manuscript but she expects a meeting with the Queen."

"That's an honorary title. You aren't actually royalty."

Robbie flicked two more pills into her mouth in rapid succession, then crunched them up and



swallowed them. "Let's keep reality out of this for a moment, shall we?"

"Don't we always?"

"I say this woman has something up her sleeve. Is there a bee on me?"

"No."

"She's hiding something, and you know what it is, and for some nasty reason, you're keeping it from me, the greatest editor who ever lived. *Ergo*, it's probably something I don't want to get anywhere near."

Flick. Crunch. Swallow.

"Unfortunately, you wretch," she continued, "you know I've got a curiosity bump the size of Washington State. So, she can have ten minutes. Starting right now."

He turned and sprinted out of her office, racing down the hallway until he came to the reception area. Marnie was waiting for him, dressed in her absurd costume, reading what appeared to be one of the volumes from "The Encyclopedia Britannica". A quick glance confirmed she was reading the letter M.

He screeched to a halt in front of her, but Marnie was—or was pretending to be—engrossed.

"Ms. Hammer?" he wheezed.

No response, except her face was so close to the book her nose was practically touching the print. She shook her head in pseudo-fascination and quickly turned the page.

"Marnie. My boss is waiting to see you."

She jumped and slapped the book shut. "Oh! Sorry, Mr. Freeborg. I didn't see you there. Don't you think marmosets are fascinating?"

"I think about them day and night. And please call me Tony. This way."

He ushered her into Robbie's office, noticing without surprise the extreme change in the room. Gone were the neat little lines of pills; now the desk was covered with galley pages. The phone kept beeping, but Robbie, intent at her work, didn't answer it. Her computer was on and a mail icon was flashing on the screen. It was controlled chaos.

"Robbie, this is Marnie Hammer."

His boss didn't look up from her work. She was, Tony knew, afraid of people whose last names were things, i.e. Gunn, Hammer, Rock. It was one of the many things that made her an interesting woman to work for.

"I need a manuscript."

Marnie nodded, then seemed to realize Robbie couldn't see her because she still hadn't looked up.

"Of course. How about an outline and three sample chapters by the end of tomorrow? I can download it right to your E-mail account, or courier over a hard copy, or a disc. If I could trouble you or your assistant for a copy of your writer's guidelines, I could get right to work."

Robbie slowly raised her head. Marnie smiled at her. "Of course, I couldn't produce more than three sample chapters without discussing the possibility of an advance. But there's time for that later."

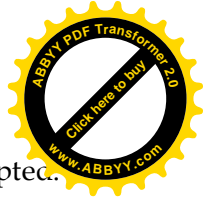
"How very...professional of you. What did you say your name was again?"

"It doesn't matter who I am. What matters is what I produce, yes? 'The use of language is all we have to pit against death and silence.'"

"Joyce Carol Oates."

Marnie, who'd been opening her mouth to give the quotation's source, stared at Robbie like a diabetic stares at ice cream, then beamed.

And speaking of staring, Tony was doing his share. Marnie was awfully spectacular when she smiled. Hell, who was he kidding? She was spectacular, period.



On the spur of the moment, he asked her to lunch. And to his amazement and delight, she accepted. They went to Hoolihan's, which, as it was well past lunch time, was nearly empty.

He couldn't get over the change in her. The sullen, depressed woman he had seen before was gone. A smiling, laughing charmer had taken her place.

"Your boss is incredible. Imagine, an editor who actually reads."

"You mean, reads the sort of thing you find appropriate."

"I mean, reads books without pictures." She snorted and took a sip of her water. He watched her, amused.

"Do you have an eye infection?"

"No."

"I only ask because every time I've seen you, you've had dark glasses on."

"It's...uh...to shield my vision from the state of the world. I'm very sensitive, you know."

"Where there is no vision, the people perish."

She stared at him, then slowly took off her sunglasses. She would look beautiful if not for the two letter openers sticking out of her bun, the hideous black clothing, and the tobacco leaf sticking to her upper lip.

"I'm—I don't know that one. Where is it from?"

"The Bible. Proverbs. You see before you a proud graduate of Catholic high school. But I'm about to sorely disappoint you—I can't remember the chapter, or verse, or where the text appeared on the page. Aren't photographic memories great?"

"But if you don't remember the page number and such, then you don't—"

"No, but my mom does. Used to drive me crazy when I was a kid. Never, but never, ask that woman to help you with your homework. I'm lucky I made it through senior high without choking her."

"Consider me warned. She must be pretty proud. You turned out all right." She paused, then lightly touched him on the wrist. "In fact, I'd say you turned out great. You really helped me out today. Thanks a lot."

He swallowed hard, then tried to break the tension. "You can make it up to me by picking up the tab."

She laughed a little and drew back. He dabbed sweat from his forehead with his napkin when she wasn't looking. He couldn't believe he was nuts about a woman who ran around in disguise trying to fool his crazy boss, who pretended she *was* a smoker and *wasn't* a best-selling author.

"My mom really likes—would really like you."

"Why?"

"Because. Actually, what she'd do is try to set us up. She's been after me to get married for years."

"Oh, God, mine too! Like a marriage license is going to solve all my problems. Like picking out china is going to improve my outlook on life!"

"Exactly. There's more to life than saying I do."

"Right!"

"The lone wolf. Answering to no one. You can come and go as you please."

She rapped the table with her knuckles. "Come as I please, go as I please."

"Sure, it gets a little lonely at holidays...and on birthdays...and practically every weekend..."

"Cut it out. Traitor. So what?"

He shrugged and picked up the dessert menu.





There was a long silence while she studied him. "Actually, my mother's got this dumb idea that I'll never find anyone because I'm still in love with my high school boyfriend." She paused, appearing to think it over. "The annoying thing is, she's right. I think about him—this guy—all the time. But he thinks we're good friends. Which we are."

He smiled through his disappointment. "But you want to be good naked friends."

She laughed. "Well...yeah..."

"Well. Good luck with that. And to head off the awkward silence that's about to descend, I'm going to change the subject. What kind of book do you want to write?"

"Something evocative, yet meaningful."

"If you're going to write for us, you have to actually think about what you're going to say. 'Evocative, yet meaningful' won't cut it."

Her eyes widened with surprise. "You're sure different from the people at my old...um...job. The only time they noticed me was when I tried to deviate from the norm."

"Deviate from the norm? You? Never happen."

"All they cared about was junk," she said bitterly.

"Oh, I don't know. There's a lot to be said for junk. Otherwise, we'd all be driving Ford Escorts and eating nothing but tofu and fat-free crackers."

"There's no place for junk on bookshelves."

He managed to look unknowing, though he finally had an idea what her problem was, and where she was going with this. "Junk on bookshelves, huh? You mean like comic books and *TV Guide*?"

"And romance novels."

*Oh, boy*, he thought. *Time to jump in with both feet.* "Actually, my mom's a big romance fan."

"Your mom and half the world. It's disgusting."

"Yeah. Reading for fun. A real abomination."

She picked her purse up off the floor, wrenched it open, and irritably stuffed her glasses into it. He winced when he heard the small crunch.

"Please! Did you know that all romance novels have to have a happy ending? It's the law. No realism, please, we only want Disney endings."

"Well, Disney with sex..."

"And the hero has to be older, preferably by ten years or more, preferably richer than God. And the heroine has to be rescued. And God forbid if you try to inject a little realism into the books, like HIV or starving children or the state of the world."

"I don't think that's true anymore. In the seventies, maybe...besides, I think some people have a little too much reality in their lives. Maybe once in a while it's nice to sit down with a book that's going to make you feel good. What's the harm?"

She slammed her hand on the table hard enough to make the cutlery jump. "The harm is, forty-nine percent of all paperbacks sold are romance novels. Almost half! One out of every two!"

"What the hell is your day job—census taker?"

He was trying to hold his temper, but it was tough going.

*Don't mock me*. Those figures mean almost nobody's interested in what's going on around them. They just want to read about Rachel and Brad and will she Save-It-For-The-Marriage-Bed? It's sick."

"You would have made a great Eva Braun. Why don't you go blow up a book warehouse or something? Make you feel better, force people to read the books *you* want them to read. God, I—"

'Can't believe I liked you' was what he was going to say, but that obviously wouldn't do. So he



didn't finish the sentence. Instead, he glared at her, which worked out nicely because she was glaring at him. They both stood and threw their napkins down at the same time.

"No you don't!" she snapped. "*You insulted me. Stay here. I'm walking out on you.*"

"Like hearing you rant and rave about people making their own choices wasn't insulting? *I'm walking out on you.*"

She gasped. "Don't you dare!"

"Watch me."

"Fine."

"Fine!"

They left, taking different routes away from the table but running into each other at the doorway. Tony shook a finger under her chin and was about to continue lecturing her about the evils of censorship, when he was interrupted by the waitress, who appeared like a genie, waving the bill.

"And...who gets the check?"

"Eva over there. Careful she doesn't set it on fire if she doesn't like the way you added."

With that, he left—angry at her, and even more angry at himself for being so blind.

Stomping down the street, he noticed other pedestrians getting the hell out of his way, which suited his mood just fine. He reached into his coat pocket and yanked out his phone, then irritably stabbed out a number.

It rang twice, and then—thank God!—she picked up. "Muffy Jorenby, M.S., M.D., PhD, PhD, speaking. What's up, doc?"

"I can't believe I let you talk me into having lunch with that jerk!"

"Daddy? I thought you and Mama were going to give it another try."

He nearly walked into a street light. "Uh...this is Tony Freeborg."

"I know. Just messing with your head. Which, by the power vested in me by the American Psychiatric Association, is not only fun, but totally profitable. How'd lunch go with the Empress of Erotica?"

"It's worse than I thought," he said glumly. "She's a closed-minded snob."

"Yeah, but she's totally salvageable."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means, she's with you—Mutch and Musch—to try and improve her self-image. She doesn't get why other people like reading what she hates writing. That's not snobbery. That's someone who doesn't feel good about herself and takes it out on everyone else."

"Well, what am I supposed to do about it?" he whined.

"Be her agent. Help her sell the manuscripts she cares about."

He nearly choked at the absurdity of the idea. "She doesn't need *me*."

"Wrong, oh bastion of insecurity."

"I'm not insecure!"

"Scared to death, then."

"Is that supposed to be a professional opinion, you little twit?"

He heard the distinct sound of popping bubblegum. "I know you are but, like, what am I?"

"Goodbye, Muffy."





## CHAPTER TWELVE

Marnie was trying to work in Joe's home office; her gaze was riveted on the computer screen as she reads a few lines from her literary effort.

"Rachmaninoff's Misery," she read aloud. "Ahhh...no." She backspaced and tried again. "Rachmaninoff's Tears. A literary novel by Marnie L. Hammer.

"Chapter One. Kirsten sensed the coming spring, sensed it as an alcoholic sensed the nearness of fine wine. Too long she had been a virtual prisoner in her apartment, with only the company of her flat-mate, Jeff, to beat back the boredom of the long winter days. She had known Jeff exactly four months and twenty days, and thought him splendid in all ways, save for his manner of speaking without thinking. And, of course, the way he sprayed saliva when he spoke."

She backspaced; tried again. "And thought him splendid in all ways, save for his manner of speaking without thinking. But he was young. Time would teach him restraint. And speaking of restraint, she wished he would exercise a little less of it. Rather than remaining aloof as a well-fed cat, she wished he would notice her. She yearned for his touch on her face, her shoulders, her creamy, upthrust breasts. She wanted him to take her, to know her, as a man knows a woman, intimately, deeply...repeatedly. She...

"Oh you numbskull, this isn't working!"

She brought her fists down on the keyboard, instantly typing gibberish. More gibberish, anyway. Then she took a deep breath, deleted the chunk, and started again. "*Rachmaninoff's Tears. A literary novel by Marnie L. Hammer. Chapter One. Kirsten sensed the –*"

She cut herself off as the front door slammed, and cocked her head, listening. She could hear someone stomping around in the living room, the rattle of keys, a grocery bag being slammed onto a table. Then the *beep-boop-boop-beep-boop-boop-boop* of someone dialing a touch-tone phone. A long pause, as if someone was listening to an answering machine message, and then...

"You jerk," Joe spat in a low voice...one that carried perfectly. "I thought you cared about me. Don't ever call me again."

She breathed out, her heart contracting a little in empathy. "Oh boy."

She heard Joe, obviously dumped again, slam the phone into its case. After a long moment, she got up and headed for the living room.

Once there, she saw him pouring himself a drink. Pure whiskey, straight into a gigantic water glass. This was usually for show – Joe liked to walk around with a glass full of hard liquor, but gagged after the second swallow and ended up pouring the rest of the booze down the sink. But tonight he had the look of a man who was planning to drink until he puked, gagging or no gagging.

"Don't do it, hon," she said sympathetically. "You'll be going to the bathroom all night. You know that stuff's a diuretic."

He didn't answer, just took a defiant gulp, then coughed explosively.

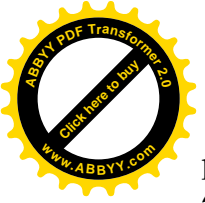
She cleared her throat. "So...ah...Curtis decided to go back to the ex-girlfriend?"

"Ex-boyfriend. The one before Sara. Austin somebody."

"A flexible young man, Curtis."

He flinched and she was sorry to see it; she hadn't meant to add to his pain.

"But him being a cheesy slut doesn't mean *you're* a bad person," she continued. "In fact, his decision



probably doesn't have anything to do with you."

"Next you're going to tell me it's not me, it's him."

"Well, it's true."

"Basically, I wasn't enough for him. But that doesn't have anything to do with me. I mustn't blame myself."

"He was a bimbo! You were smarter than him *and* better looking, I might add. Frankly, there was nothing for him to bring to the relationship."

"It's not that I don't appreciate this – actually, I *don't* appreciate it."

"You'd rather be here sulking by yourself?"

"To preserve our friendship, I won't answer that. Listen, if I'm as great as you say...why can't I find anyone?"

She rubbed her temple. "Oh, jeez. Why do you think that because you haven't found anyone, it has to be a failing in you?"

"Because it *is* a failing in me."

"By that logic," she said reasonably, "then I deserve to be alone, too. Is that what you think?"

"Well. You're a snob...and irritating, sometimes...and you don't know how to dress...and you get pissy when you don't get your own way...and you take your good fortune for granted..."

She waved him along. "Yes, yes..."

"But no. I don't think you deserve to be alone."

"There you go. I don't think *you* deserve to be alone. See? We agree."

She waited expectantly, but Joe didn't get it.

"Why are you still here?" he asked.

"Hey, you didn't let me wallow in self-pity when I was Jessica LeFahrvegnugen. Now it's your turn to be cheered up against your will. To start..." She tried to take his whiskey glass away; Joe held on; they struggled. Then he spitefully let go and she found herself drenched with Canadian Club.

"Nice try, but that didn't cheer me up."

"You bastard! I'm-God, this stuff *stinks!* I feel like I should be lying in a gutter."

She smacked him on the arm; he smacked her back. They glared at each other, then attacked like crazed alley cats, kicking, scratching, growling. They ended up on the floor, Marnie on top; she grabbed his shoulders and jerked him to her until they were nose to nose.

"Repeat after me. The bimbo. Wasn't. Good. Enough. For me."

"I smell booze," he said sternly. "Have you been drinking?"

She clutched her head. "Aarrgh!"

"The worst part is, that's the last drop of liquor in the place. And I'm not nearly drunk enough to quit."

He managed to flip her off him and then pounced, grabbing her shirt collar and then sucking on the cloth.

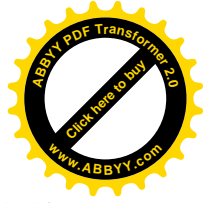
"Stop!" she shrieked. "That tickles!"

"Now if you kept cocktail onions in your hair, you'd be the perfect woman."

She tried to slap him away, but she was laughing too hard. And when his lips moved to her neck she stopped laughing. Practically stopped breathing.

Joe pulled back and looked down at her. "You're the greatest."

"Yes. FYI, if you don't kiss me, I'm never speaking to you again."



He bit his lower lip. "Marnie..."

"Shut up, fool." She grabbed him and pulled him toward her for a long, searing kiss. He halfheartedly resisted for a moment, then gave up the pretense and began—oh, thank God!—kissing her back in earnest.

"Do *not* stop to wring my shirt out over a glass," she muttered.

"Later," he growled back.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Afterward, Marnie thought, *well, I guess it just didn't occur to him that anal sex wasn't the goal of the day.* It didn't matter, though. Well, it had stung like crazy, and she was still mystified by the whole thing – *what* was the big deal? – but at last, at last they were one.

It had been amazing at first, like being a teenager again, when sex was the most exciting thing in the whole world. When it was all you could think about, and when, when you were finished, you couldn't wait to do it again. She and Joe had been like that when they were dating – curious, insatiable.

This time, they both had some years under their belt. They certainly weren't kids anymore. And they both had their own condoms and, in Joe's case, a truly amazing selection of lubricants.

He hadn't gone anywhere near her cunt, but had lavished attention on her ass, and when he eased inside her she'd been stroking her clit from sheer hunger, and had been able to bring herself off while he pumped inside her.

Okay, so, not exactly fireworks. But that was all right. They had years to get it right. Hell, they had the rest of the day to get it right. What mattered was, Joe had finally realized they were meant to be together, it was fate, destiny, it was...

"This was a terrible mistake."

"What?"

"I am *so* sorry."

"What?"

"You must be so pissed at me."

"I'm starting to be."

"I know, I know. I don't blame you." He sat up and looked at her, shaking his head. "Like things weren't bad enough. Then we had to go screw up a perfectly good friendship. No pun intended."

"Joe, this just makes our friendship *better*. I love you and you love –"

"Stop trying to make me feel better! The last time you did that I took advantage of the best friend I've ever had. It was stupid, *stupid*."

"I thought it was okay. No bells and whistles, but...we're a little out of practice."

"Make that a lot out of practice."

"Well. Let's get back into practice. Try not to call out another man's name this time."

"You're joking, right?"

She said nothing.

"Are you insane? I'm gay, Marnie."

"I've heard the rumors."

"Last night didn't change that. *Nothing* will change that."

"Don't you have any feelings for me at all?"

"Have any – I love you, idiot! You're my best friend. But we're not going to be lovers, Marnie."

"Again."

"What?"

"We're not going to be lovers again."



"Right. You got it. We're not."

"I can't think why not."

"God, I'm so sorry. I'd give anything to go back in time and un-do last night."

That did it. Bad enough he was denying her, denying *them*. But then to wish what had given her such happiness had never happened...

"Well, I *wouldn't* un-do it! I thought it was wonderful, I thought *you* were wonderful. You're talking like I poured hot water on your gonads."

"You're great in bed, Marnie, but I prefer my partners with a little less estrogen."

Everything inside her froze. Before, she had been so happy. Now, five minutes later, she had never been so humiliated.

"You son of a bitch."

"That's the spirit." He started to leave the room, then stopped and whirled like an angry cat. An angry naked cat. "Goddammit, Marnie! Why isn't my friendship enough for you? It's *never* been good enough. You've always wanted more—*always*. To be published. Then to be published *again*. Then more respect as an author, more time to write what *you* want to write, more of me. And *none* of it was ever enough for you! Not once, *not once!*"

Stunned, she sat there as he pulled on his clothes with fast, furious motions. He strode to the door, yanked it open, and paused, turning for one last shot.

"And you know what? I knew you could never be satisfied, but I loved you anyway. And what I could give you, I did. But you took everything I was able to give and it wasn't enough. That's like spitting on fifteen years of friendship. I love you more than anyone...and it's never been good enough for you. And after today, I see it won't ever be good enough. So go spit on somebody else for the next decade."

The wall shook when he slammed the door on the way out.

When she was sure he wasn't coming back, she lowered her head to her knees and cried.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Hunched over Joe's desk, Marnie tried to lose herself in her writing. She refused to let her personal problems affect her art. If she worked hard, she could temporarily forget about Joe and how he had broken her heart – again.

"Sands and Dollars, by Marnie L. Hammer. Chapter One. Barbara stood looking out a large window, holding back the curtain with her finger and talking to herself. As it reads in the first book of Corinthians, 'When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.' I would imagine that could apply to women as well, even though I did not get around to putting away childish things until well after my thirtieth birthday."

Ooooooh, yeah. Good stuff.

"At that moment, Peter strode into the library, spotted her by the window, and said, 'I'm really sorry about all those years I repressed you.' He paused to pick his nose, and added, 'It's nothing personal. Just the nature of man. We're forever condemned to rape, pillage, plunder, and then keep women down for centuries. Sorry.'"

She was typing so hard, the tips of her fingers were numb. But pain was irrelevant. This was good stuff!

"Barbara smiled sweetly and said, 'That's all right.' She brought her arm up and threw a really huge file knife at Peter, killing him instantly. Blood splattered like a thousand tomatoes...no, no, no!"

Marnie massaged her temples, where a truly gigantic headache was forming. She had to focus. She had to concentrate. She had to quit writing this crap.

She took a deep breath. "Okay. Let's try again. Go back to what you were working on last night. And quit talking to yourself.

"Dara, a glorious redhead, was sitting on the lush green grass of her father's country home, her arms filled with flowers. She could hear hoof beats in the distance, and looked up to see Daniel, her beloved, thundering toward her on his charger. She ran to him as he dismounted. He held out his arms to her, his handsome face flushed with happiness and triumph. She reached him and, as his head was bending toward hers for a passionate kiss, she slammed her knee into his groin. Daniel dropped like he'd been axed. 'That,' Dara informed him, 'was for letting me get kidnapped by pirates.'"

Marnie stopped typing, stood, yanked the keyboard plug from the back of the computer, and dropped the keyboard in the trash. She wondered bitterly what else was going to go wrong this week. Always before, no matter how much she hated the work, no matter how useless she thought the subject, always before she could write. Now she had even lost that.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Marnie sat amid the chaos of Tony Freeborg's office. Boxes were everywhere; she remembered he had said something about leaving the publishing house to start his own literary agency.

She was back in her disguise, but her heart wasn't in it. She had left her hair down and she had lost her dark sunglasses. She was holding a cigarette, but couldn't bear to light it and cough out her lungs for the next half hour. The only thing she clung to was wearing black.

Tony finished reading her manuscript pages, and looked up. "This is...interesting reading."

"It's crap. It's puerile, predictable, and nugatory."

"Nugatory?"

"'Of little or no importance; trifling. Without force; invalid.' American Heritage Dictionary." She sighed. "Page eight-sixty-two."

"Oh, yeah? Well, can you pat your head and rub your stomach at the same time?"

To her surprise, he proceeded to do just that, surprising a laugh out of her. She tried to copy his actions, and found she couldn't.

"It's all in the wrist, sugar...well, well, we can't do everything, can we?"

Just like that, her temporary cheer disappeared. She scowled and gestured to the pages on his desk. "Obviously not."

Tony, still rubbing his stomach and patting his head, leaned forward. "The words are great. The way you string them together...not so much. It's clear the ability—the talent—is there. I get the feeling you're trying too hard. Reaching for...well, I don't know. Do *you* know?"

He finally quit rubbing his stomach and patting his head. She looked him in the eye and, for a moment, saw something there she could trust.

No, you don't.

Yes, I do.

She leaned forward and rested her elbows on the edge of his desk. "This is going to sound...beyond stupid, I know. But here it is. For the longest time, I only wanted two things. To be a respected author. Not a famous one. Respected. There's a difference, you know."

"Sometimes."

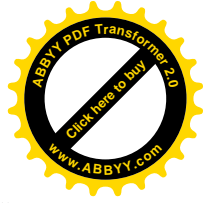
"I wanted critical acclaim, and...well, one other thing. One other *person*. And now I'm wondering if the two things I wanted most, that I've spent years working for and pining for and wishing for, I've got to wonder if I really wanted him—*them*—after all, and how much of that time spent wanting is dead time, wasted."

There was a long silence. Then he cleared his throat. "Y'know, I never wanted to write. But I love books. That's why I got in this business. And you know how they say those who can't, teach? Well...one of the first rules of writing is do it because you love it. Not to be famous. Excuse me—respected. You should write literary novels because nothing in you will rest until what's inside, is out on paper. Not because you think people should write good reviews about you."

She was giving him her careful attention, even as she could feel her eyes filling with tears. "I can't help what I need."

He laughed, without humor. "Tell me about it." To her surprise, he took her hand, and when he spoke again, it was most gently. "Marnie L. Hammer, what's wrong with doing what you're good at?"





"What if what I'm good at isn't worth anything?"

"Why don't you let me be the judge of that? You know – someone objective, who doesn't –" He coughed suddenly. " –have any sort of emotional investment in you?"

She pulled her hand out of his grasp. The moment, if one had ever existed outside her imagination, was over.

"Look, feed those pages to the shredder or use them to line the bottom of your birdcage or set them on fire. I'll do better. I'll work on it some more this week and I'll do better." She got up, then looked back at him and managed a smile. "Thanks for listening to me whine, though. It was pretty great of you, considering the words we had at lunch the other day."

He had the grace to look embarrassed. "About that –"

"Forget it. We both said awful things."

He raised his eyebrows at her. "True, but one of the two of us was significantly more awful."

She scowled. "Let's not talk about it, all right?"

"You brought it up."

"And now I'm dropping it. I'm sorry I've wasted so much of your time. I'll let you get back to work."

She moved toward the door. Tony jumped up. "Wait a –"

But she was gone. He sat back down, dispirited. He hadn't ever seen her so depressed, not even when she was signing books she hated. Obviously, writing literary novels meant a great deal to her. She had been devastated to find out she couldn't do it.

What to do, what to do?

He fished out his cell phone and hits the speed dial.

"Thank you for calling Dial-A-Shrink. If you're depressed, press one. If you're hearing voices in your head, press two. If you're –"

He impatiently hit a number and waited, drumming his fingers on the desk blotter.

"If you know your psychiatrist's extension, please –"

He again cut off the voice, stabbing in four numbers.

"This is Dr. Wechter. How may I help you?"

Dr. Wechter's tone was deep, soothing. Tony realized the man he was speaking to had a voice right out of central casting, and sounded extremely capable. He was unmoved.

"I want Muffy!"

"Dr. Jorenby is on the other line, sir. May I help you? What would you like to talk about? Work? Family? I'm here to help."

"Stay out of my head, you quack! I want Muffy. Tell her to call the bastion of insecurity when she gets a moment."

He hung up without waiting for an answer and then headed for the window to watch Marnie walk away. But it was too late. He couldn't see her anywhere.





## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Marnie was looking through a bookstore window. *Love's Tender Fury* was prominently displayed and she realized for the first time that it didn't look like an awful book. The cover was tasteful and the colors were nice. She wondered if people were enjoying this one.

"Excuse me...Miss LeFleur?"

She rolled her eyes and turned. A short, dark-haired woman was standing behind her, timidly holding *Love's Tender Fury*. When Marnie faced her, the woman smiled, relieved, and held out her hand. "Hi. I'm a big fan of yours. Barbara Lorentz."

She shook Barb's hand. "My name isn't Barbara Lorentz."

Barb laughed.

"Hallelujah! A fan who gets my jokes."

"We're not all illiterate housewives, Miss LeFleur. Just like not all romance novelists wear cheesy silk robes and lie around nibbling caviar while writing love stories with a feathered quill pen."

"Who let you spy on me? Touché."

"Um...I hope I'm not disturbing you. I thought maybe...you were on your way to a funeral or something."

Marnie glanced down at her black shoes, black pants, black turtleneck. She realized she was still holding the unlit cigarette and self-consciously tucked it into her fist. "I sort of am. I'm mourning the death of my literary talent. Although you can't really mourn for something that never existed, can you?"

"Who told you that? People are sad for things they never had, pretty much every day. Anyone who says different is a fool or a liar."

"You are *really* refreshing. Ever think of going into publishing?"

"Never once. I'm sort of prejudiced. I love my job, and I think anything outside my field is sort of a waste."

"Uh-huh. And what do you do?"

"I'm an ICU physician."

"Oh."

"You walked right into that one," Barb said kindly.

"Well. You know. Books can save lives, too. Um—you can stack them under an unconscious person's feet so they come around quicker. Speaking of books, did you want me to sign that for you?"

She reached for the book tucked under Barb's arm, but Barb clutched the book and slowly shook her head. "I'm going to be really forward, here. If you're not doing anything for the next hour, could I get you to come with me? The book's not for me, it's for a friend. And meeting you would make her day. Her year."

"Go off with a stranger instead of attending to my mysterious business?" Marnie shrugged. "What the hell. The day I've had—the *week* I've had—walking off with a perfect stranger to meet another stranger seems logical."

"Actually, studies show that less than thirty percent of strangers are perfect. In fact, some people think it's more like seven percent."

"Do you stumble across a lot of trivia in Intensive Care?"



"As a matter of fact, yes. Listen, if you're going to smoke, you'd better do it before we get to the hospital."

"God, no. I don't want it. I don't smoke."

"Oh."



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The friend Barb wanted her to meet was in the hospital. As they opened the door, Marnie could see a middle-aged woman sitting on the bed, talking on the phone. Chemotherapy had left her completely bald, she was so pale she was the color of the bed sheet, and she was much too thin. But her voice was cheery and upbeat.

"Aunt Kathy, listen. To. What. I. Am. Saying. I feel fine. I look great. You know that problem with split ends I kept having? Totally taken care of. And I've lost a ton of weight. Seriously. I'm going to recommend lung cancer to all my friends." She paused, listening to the voice on the other end of the phone. "Uh-huh...uh-huh. No, I have everything I—well, I'd love a cigarette or ten, but I don't suppose you'd—no? Oh, fine, refuse a dying request. That'll get you straight into Hell, no waiting...aw, cut that out. I was only kidding, Aunt Kathy. Yes, I'm sorry. Yes, I won't joke about dying anymore. Which reminds me, did you hear the one about the corpse and the pathologist? Okay, well, the pathologist is walking down the street, and he realizes he left his bone saw in the—" Lynn looked up, saw Barb, and waved. Then she noticed Marnie and her eyes widened. "Holy shit! I have to go, Kath. Dr. Doofus and a best-selling romance novelist just walked in...no, I haven't had my medication yet...I'll call you back."

She hung up the phone and turned to greet her visitors, folding her hands primly on the sheet. "When you said you were running out to pick up a LeFleur, I sort of thought you meant the book." She smiled broadly at Marnie. "Hi. I'm Lynn Filkins. It's really great to meet you."

Marnie crossed the room and shook Lynn's small, hot hand. "Thanks very much. I ran into Barb just outside the bookstore..."

"And she hit you over the head and brought you here. Well, I can't say I condone her methods, but I sure appreciate the results. Could I get your autograph, Miss Hammer?"

Marnie was already digging in her purse for a pen, but at the sound of her real name, she looked up. "How did you know my real name?"

Lynn rolled her eyes, clearly disgusted with such a stupid question. "Puh-leeze. Every real fan knows your name is Marnie Hammer. The name is on the copyright page of all your books, for God's sake. Which reminds me, were your parents into, like, really bad Hitchcock films?"

Marnie grinned, delighted. "Yes! Marnie isn't even short for anything. I can't tell you how many times people think my name is Barney. Especially when I have a head cold."

Meanwhile, Barb had been busy on the other side of the room, and she returned to the bed with an armful of LeFleur paperbacks, retrieved from their place on the counter. She dumped them on the bed, where Lynn shuffled through them expertly.

"Would you mind signing the whole lot?"

"I'd be honored."

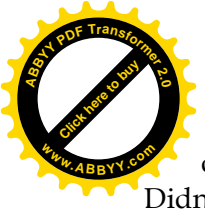
The hell of it was, she would. She had finally found a pen, and pulled up a chair to start signing. Barb handed her *Love's Tender Fury*, and Marnie flipped the cover open to a blank page, as she had done thousands of times before, and bent to her task.

"How long are you going to be here, do you think?"

"Until I die."

She froze in mid-autograph. Oh, shit. Nice question, loser. By the way, are we done feeling sorry for ourselves yet?

Lynn was looking at her kindly enough, but when she spoke it was as if to a small—or dumb—



child. "I have end-stage lung cancer. And only one lung left to have it in. It's pretty much hopeless. Didn't Barb tell you? No, I guess not."

"But you can't—you aren't more than—how old are you?"

"Twenty-six."

Marnie shook her head. That couldn't be right. Lynn looked as if she was in her late thirties, at least. She had no idea what to say, what to think.

"I'm so sorry. I'm really sorry."

"My own stupid fault. Well, mine, and the tobacco company's. Hey, come on, you look like somebody just die—I mean, cheer up. I've come to terms with it. And you coming here really makes my day. I love your books."

"Tell her about your goals."

"Oh. Well, after I got the bad news—you know, that they don't get cable on this ward—and then the very bad news—that I probably wouldn't live to see Thanksgiving, which, given my family's history of overeating and then picking fights wasn't exactly the worst news I'd ever—"

"Lynn."

"I'm getting to it! Anyway, once I found out my time was more finite than I'd thought, I set a goal—hang on until *Love's Tender Fury* came out."

Marnie didn't know whether to be appalled or flattered. "You're kidding."

Lynn patted her bald head. "Hello? Do I look like I'm kidding? What, that's not a worthy reason to hang around the planet for a while longer? I should have decided to hang around for the Super Bowl?"

"I—I didn't—I don't—that's—"

"Boy, you're probably the least articulate best-selling author I've ever met. Anyway, the book is out, right? I mean, you're holding it in your hands. So the new goal is to see the movie."

Marnie just sat there. She remembered her actions at the movie premiere and wanted to squirm with shame. And had she really thought she had a life full of problems? Had she really?

"Helloooooo? Are you still in there? Don't make me slap you; I haven't got the strength."

Barb shook her head. "She's so stubborn. The doctors gave her six months to live. Ten months ago."

Marnie laughed. "Shame on you. Not listening to your doctors. Naughty girl."

Lynn laughed, too, but the laugh soon dissolved into a coughing fit. She turned an alarming purple color and Barb hurried to her side, but Lynn got control of it and ended up flat on her back, exhausted.

"Shit. Can't even have a good laugh anymore...that's the worst part." She sighed, then forced a smile. "Anyway, you coming here...that means a lot. I'm so glad to finally meet you. I wanted to tell you how much I liked your books before I couldn't tell anyone anything."

Marnie inched her chair closer and took Lynn's hand. "Don't thank me again. I should thank you."

"Why?"

"You've really helped me get a handle on...on some things that have been happening lately. I was trying to write a different kind of book...not because I could, but because I didn't think these..." She gestured to the small stack of paperbacks on Lynn's bed. "...were worth anything."

"Well, you write what you like, Ms. Hammer. But those books are gold to me."

Barb cleared her throat. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but I've got to get up to the floor...rounds start..." She looked at her watch. "...ten minutes ago."

"So?" Lynn asked. "Who's stopping you?"

Barb blew a kiss to Lynn and shook Marnie's hand. "Thanks a million for coming back here with me. Lynn, behave yourself. I'll come down on my break."



"Okay, but I can't promise to be alive."

The doctor rolled her eyes. "That's some disgusting sense of humor you've got there. 'Bye."

"You know, I have another book coming out. But it's not slated for release until after the New Year."

"You're trying to trick me into enduring another Thanksgiving with my family! Well, I won't do it."

"I could get you the galleys next month. They're like a rough draft."

Lynn smiled tentatively. "Really? I could get a LeFleur book before anyone else? Oh, the advantages of being terminal!"

"'Dying is an art, like everything else.' Sylvia Plath."

"Quote Ms. Plath to me again, I'll be forced to get out of this bed and kick your ass, literary idol or no."

She snorted. "I wouldn't be your idol if you'd seen some of the dreck I've been producing lately."

"Hey, if it works, don't fix it. You write great love stories. Your heroines have functioning brains. Your heroes are honorable and don't smack the ladies around. It works."

"I don't know, the romance genre is so...it's got such a trashy reputation. Nobody takes it seriously."

"What's that line from *The Fisher King*? 'There's nothing trashy about romance.' Besides, there's worse genres. True Crime, how about that? How'd you like to write about nothing but murder cases... ooh, *there's* a literary goal."

"Hmm."

"And while we're getting all cozy, here, what's with the black clothes? You look like a gangster...or like you were on your way to a funeral. I'm not dead *yet*."

"It's sort of a long story."

"Do I look like I'm going anywhere?"

Marnie leaned back and got comfortable. "Okay, well, you asked for it. See, in high school, I fell in love with this guy, this really great guy..."



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Joe slowly went to his door. The sound made his head and his heart hurt—Marnie used to pound on it that way, that ‘hurry up, we’ve got things to do’ way that always made his day. But she wasn’t likely to be pounding on his door anytime soon.

He missed her so much, and wasn’t sure if he was angrier with himself—for spoiling their friendship by giving in to her in a moment of weakness—or her, for wanting more than he could give.

So it was with a heavy heart that he opened the door.

Marnie grinned at him. “If you’re ready to apologize, I’m ready to listen.”

She was standing there, having the nerve to look prim and wait for *his* apology, it was just so typically Marnie, and he suddenly knew. It was going to be all right.



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

"So I told my friend Joe..." Marnie chewed and swallowed. "I told you about Joe, right?"

Tony nodded. "The good friend you want to get naked with."

"Right. Anyway, I had a long talk with him last night and he and I decided it's time to tell you everything."

"You're both secretly in love with me?"

"No."

"Rats."

Suddenly, it was very hard to look him in the eye. You'd think she was about to confess to murder, rather than writing successful romance novels. "The thing...the thing is...I've sort of...got...a publishing history. That is to say, I've...had some experience writing." She glanced up and froze in surprise. Tony's mouth was hanging open and he had dropped his napkin in his soup. He clutched his heart, rocked back in his chair – and toppled to the floor in spectacular fashion.

A long moment passed, and then she saw a hand reach up, grope around, and grab the edge of the table. Tony hauled himself back in his seat, dabbing his forehead with his napkin.

"I'll...I'll be all right," he gasped. "Just give me a minute. The news...such a shock..."

She narrowed eyes. "Son of a *bitch*."

He smirked at her. "May I have your autograph, Miss LeFleur? I'm just your biggest, biggest fan."

"Oh my God. You knew. The whole time, you knew. You let me make a fool of myself!"

"What was I supposed to do? Tell you I knew you were lying through your teeth?"

"I *never* lied about who I was. Marnie is my real name."

"A lie of omission is still a lie."

She gnashed her teeth, but he was right. "So why play along?"

"It seemed to be something you needed to do. And I wanted to help you."

Still shocked, and feeling more than a little foolish, she tried to get her mind around what he was telling her. He had known. All along, he had known. And he had done nothing but help her. She had misled him and deceived him and he had helped her.

"How'd you know who I was? You're not exactly in my demographic."

"My mom's a big fan. We stood in line for a while to get the new book signed. Incidentally, you're much cuter when you're not pretending to be a pretentious, chain-smoking, pseudo-intellectual."

She sputtered wordlessly, trying to respond to pretentious, chain-smoking, and pseudo-intellectual at the same time. After a moment she gave up and shook her head.

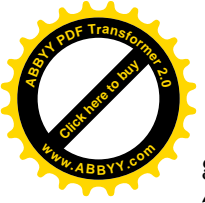
"All this time, you've been letting me run around in black, trying to smoke those gross cigarettes, reading the crap I've been –"

"Who told you it was crap? *Where* do you get these ideas about yourself? About your work? Don't you know how great you are? Most of the time, I mean?"

She laughed suddenly; she couldn't help it. "This was supposed to be my meeting. I was going to reveal myself as Jessica LeFruitbat, you were going to be revolted and kick me out, and I was going to go back to writing romance novels."

"Now, as to going back to writing romance novels, sure, why not? You should do the things you're





good at—and take pride in them.”

“How uplifting. You should write fortune cookies.”

He gave her a look, and continued. “Why don’t you get yourself a new contract with your House, one that stipulates, say, two bodice rippers and one book in another genre? For that matter, why haven’t you tried it before?”

“It won’t work. I don’t have the talent for a literary novel.” She managed to say this without flinching. And was surprised at how easily the truth came. Strange that it didn’t hurt, admitting she was a failure. It should have hurt.

“So? Maybe it’s not your style. Write a children’s book. Write a mystery. Hell, write a book on writing. You’ve got a lot to teach.”

“There are other genres out there, aren’t there? Duh. Actually, a friend of mine reminded me of that very thing...that’s a good idea, Tony.”

“You mean I’m not as dim, as dull-witted as you thought I was? Did you know my knuckles *don’t* drag on the floor when I walk? Not since I had the operation, anyway...”

“You’re insufferable.”

He stretched out in his chair and laced his fingers behind his head. “Naw. I’m an agent. Speaking of which, how are you fixed for representation these days?”

“I’m my own agent. I fired mine after he signed me to write six romance novels in two years.”

He dug in his breast pocket, pulled out his card, and handed it to her. “My card.”

She looked at it for a long time, thinking. “You knew. You even got me an appointment with your boss. And you didn’t tell her who I was.” She smiled. “We’re going to be great good friends, aren’t we?”

“At least.”

His cell phone burped, startling them both, and he said, “That’s my psychiatrist. You mind if I take this call?”

“You’re in therapy?”

“Not exactly.”

Marnie excused herself, looking puzzled, while he flipped his phone open.

“Muff! Where the hell have you been?”

“Tanning. Did you win the fair maiden?”

“Not yet.”

“*Carpe the diem*, dude.”

“Working on it.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY

It was showdown time. The participants of the literary gunfight were all highly intelligent – well, two of them were. The other was dim, but catching on.

“You’re willing to sign another contract,” Don said, fiddling with his pen. “For three books.”

“See?” Marnie said to Tony, delighted. “I told you we didn’t need the hand puppets. He understood you just fine.”

“What’s the catch?”

“Why so suspicious?” Tony asked.

“I know the psycho, there. She’s got something up her sleeve. Probably a .357 Magnum. What’s the catch?”

“Well.” Tony coughed. “There is one minor stipulation.”

Don Peter, Senior Editor, groped for the aspirin bottle on his desk. Marnie saw without surprise that it was roughly the size of a milk jug. “I knew it. You’ve come bearing gifts to the pig in the poke, and now you’re thinking you’ll get two birds with one stone.”

“You’ve really got a way with words, Don.”

Tony leaned forward. “Two of the books will be romance novels. Historicals, three hundred pages or more...the moneymakers.”

“And the third?”

“Marnie gets to pick the genre.”

“No freakin’ way.”

“Told you,” she said.

“You did, but I never thought he’d throw away the potential hundreds of thousands of dollars of profit, because he was too gutless to gamble on a third book.” Tony paused. “But, I hear Pocket has been interested in signing you for a while. We’ll –”

“Siddown!”

They sat. Don stared at them, his gaze unblinking. Like a lizard’s.

“The romances come first,” he said after a long beat.

She yawned, concealing her joy.

“Sure,” Tony replied easily.

“And the third isn’t literary-like. Something else. True crime or something. And under your own name. We *own* Jessica C. LeFleur.”

Oooh, Marnie thought. That’s telling me.

“Oh, all right,” Tony sighed. “You drive a hard bargain, my man. You’ve got yourself a signed contract.”

“I’ve got it!” she said, jumping up. “How about a gripping mystery? Beautiful, intelligent authoress is accused of murdering her simian editor. While no jury in the world would convict her, still, she –”

Don was crunching more aspirin. “And no funny names in the romance novels. And knock off the quotes!”



“It is a good thing for an uneducated man to read books of quotations.’ Winston Churchill.”

“I hate quotations,” Tony replied, “‘tell me what you know.’ Ralph Waldo Emerson.”

She stared at Tony, feeling a quite goofy smile come over her. He grinned back. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her editor shudder and put the top back on the aspirin. All was right with the world.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

"I still can't believe how easy it was! I've been miserable for so long – and it was so simple to fix!"

"Easy, you're about to bounce into traffic. Besides," Tony added, "that's hindsight. I think you had to go through all that disguise nonsense to find out what you wanted to do. Not what you thought you wanted to do. Why go into a contract meeting unless you know exactly what you want? Since you and I knew what we wanted, knew what to ask for, it was easy. If you'd tried it a month ago, maybe not so much."

"I guess. Thanks for walking me here. Unnecessary, yet touching."

"Well, since I'm now your agent, I have a vested interest in making sure you don't get creamed by the number sixty-seven bus on your way home. Is this where you live?"

"No. An old friend lives here. I'm staying with him while my apartment's being re-painted."

His face fell, and she was startled at his expression.

"What is it?"

"Nothing," he said shortly. "I'll talk to you later. I'd better –"

Like that, it hit her. When she spoke, it was almost accusingly.

"It's Joe's apartment! But you didn't know that. You thought I was staying with a boyfriend!"

"Did not."

She smiled, a giddy grin full of hope and promise. "Did too! Did I mention my friend Joe –"

"Repeatedly."

"– is about as interested in me carnally as I am in him?"

"What does that mean?"

"He's got this funny idea. About me. And my head being up my ass. But I'm better now. I'm not into crying for the moon anymore."

"No."

"What?"

"No, you hadn't mentioned it."

"Pity. Why don't you come inside, and we can talk about it over cups of international coffee?"

He laughed, and followed her inside.

\* \* \* \* \*

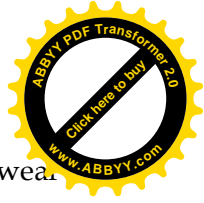
"Oh, Christ!"

"Yup."

"Holy God!"

"Uh-huh."

She was still out of breath, and they'd finished ages ago. "Seriously, do you take vitamins, or what?"



He laughed and pulled her on top of him for a hug. "No. But I'd better start. You're going to wear me out, aren't you?"

"I think so, yes."

He rubbed her buttocks and kissed the hollow of her throat, and she closed her eyes and gloried in the sensation of being held, being cherished.

It had been like flying. It had been heaven. It had — she couldn't think of the exact word, she, who always had a quote or an adjective for every occasion. Tony had been hungry, he'd been skilled, he'd been phenomenal. His mouth had been everywhere, his hands, his fingers, his tongue. He'd made her laugh and come in the same breath. He'd made her come before she had all her clothes on the floor.

And he hadn't gone anywhere near her ass.

Not, as Seinfeld would say, that there was anything wrong with that. But Tony did so many other things. Instead, he'd made himself at home between her legs and licked and sucked and nibbled until she was screaming at the ceiling. When he'd surged into her, her vision actually went dark around the edges as her orgasm bloomed within her like a black orchid.

She'd begged, she'd screamed, she'd shuddered around him, she'd left tracks on his shoulders... and he had asked for more, demanded more.

Oh, it had really been something.

"I think you've ruined me for life," she said, stroking his hair.

"Ruined you for gay men at least."

"Well, that, too."

She felt two of his fingers slide up inside her and shuddered as he quickly worked her to another orgasm. "Oh, jeez, you've got to let me get my breath back."

"Why?"

"So I can return some of those amazing favors you've bestowed upon me."

"But you're so slick and slippery," he teased, and oh God, she was, his fingers were still sliding around and she squirmed against his hand, "I can't stay away."

"Well, I never said — said I wanted you — you to stay away — oh, God —"

"If you don't mind," he said into her mouth, "I really need to fuck you again."

"Mind?"

He slid inside her with a laugh, and she wrapped her legs around his hips and pumped back at him. Oh, Christ, it was so sweet, it was delicious, it was heaven in bed. "Look what I've been missing," she gasped.

"Well, I didn't want to rub it in," he teased, though she was gratified to hear he was out of breath, too. His breathing started to hitch and he buried his face in the hollow of her throat, nipping lightly as she clenched around him, as she felt a new wave of heat race down her limbs, through her stomach, through her cunt...

"Oh God!"

He groaned something in response and then shuddered above her.

"Oh God," she said again, slightly more calmly.

"I must be crushing you," he moaned, but didn't move.

"You're all right. Stay right there."

"Forever," he moaned again.

She laughed, and kissed the top of his head.



## EPILOGUE

Fourteen months later, Marnie was at another book signing and, for a wonder, was enjoying herself. Sales of *Be Careful What You Wish For* were brisk, and if it didn't do as well as one of her romance novels, she wasn't going to cry about it. This was the book she wrote for the pleasure of it, not because she was trying too hard to be what she was not.

This signing was different in other ways, too. For one, Joe *and* Tony had come with her. Joe, poor bum, had a rather large crush on Tony. Tony was oblivious, but Joe had no secrets from her. She was sorry for him, but not immune to irony. Hopefully after her wedding next spring Joe would recover from his case of puppy love and settle down himself. She supposed it was about time she turned matchmaker, which was another irony.

"Say, didn't you used to be Jessica C. LeFleur?"

Startled from her thoughts, Marnie looked up and saw Barb, the ICU physician, standing at her table, holding a copy of *Be Careful What You Wish For*.

"Dr. Barb! How are you? I haven't seen you since Lynn's funeral."

"I'm good, thanks. It was kind of you to come."

"It was the least I could do, believe me. She fought to the end, didn't she?"

Barb nodded, and Marnie saw the woman's smile tremble a little.

"Ah—don't you dare buy that book, I'll give you one of my copies."

"It's a wonder you make any money at all. No, I'll buy it, thanks." She flipped the book open and, with a twinkle in her eye, read the dedication out loud. "For the late, great Lynn Filkins, who hung around long enough to show me the truth, and then went on to a better place. We miss her so much." Barb smiled and slapped the book shut. "She would have loved that."

"I wish she could have seen it."

Barb sighed. "Baby, don't we all. What kind of book is the new one?"

"Well, it's not literary. But it's not awful, either. It's kind of a mystery, I guess. I hope you like it."

"I'm sure I will. I have to run, Marnie. It was nice to see you again."

Before she could answer, Barb was gone. Marnie couldn't help but again think of Lynn's influence. She'd spent one afternoon with the dying woman, and it changed her life. It was all very—

"Hi...I know you're promoting your new book...but I was hoping you could...maybe sign this one?"

Marnie looked up and saw an older woman with a kind, lined face. She was neatly dressed, but her clothing had seen years of use. She tentatively handed Marnie a battered copy of *Love's Tender Fury*. At the sight of the familiar cover, a tangible symbol of her past unhappiness, Marnie had to smile. She had been unhappy, yes, dreadfully so. But it was of her own doing. She'd never been a victim, no matter how much it had pleased her to think so.

"No problem at all. What's your name, ma'am?"

"Karen. I really liked it. It's my favorite."

"I'm so glad. If you like my style, you might want to try Julie Garwood or Catherine Coulter."

Tony, returning with coffee and sandwiches for her and Joe, stopped short by her table. "She's recommending other romance authors! My heart! Can't...take...the shock..."



After setting the coffee down, Tony dramatically tumbled to the floor. Marnie didn't turn around, though her fan gasped and looked suitably alarmed. She handed the book back, explaining, "That's my fiancé. He hasn't taken his medication today."

Karen was backing away. "I-I hope he gets better."

"Unlikely. But thank you."

Marnie glanced behind her, toward the floor. "Tony, you're scaring the customers. Joe, get off him! He does *not* need artificial respiration. Will you get off? I said get off him right now!"

For heaven's sake, she thought, trying not to laugh. I need to get Joe fixed up, pronto. Say...there might be a book in that...

**THE END**