



Rash

1

Margaux was a longtime regular at the downtown Y in Sarasota, Florida. Her predictable costume was long gym pants, a long sleeved jersey, and Nike shoes. She was tall, slender, buff, but no voluptuary. It was her intelligent eyes and ready smile that made her attractive. She used the gym early in the morning when many of the city's influential lawyers and politicians were also there. She knew them all. Those alpha types chatted her up whenever they spotted her between routines.

It wasn't until Jack had been going to the gym for four years that he learned her name. Occasionally he'd nod hello to her, but he was basically a loner in the gym. He did his workouts and left without interacting with anyone other than the desk clerk and once a week with Juan, his physical therapist/trainer

At the Sarasota Sailing Squadron, Jack befriended one of the city's most notorious criminal lawyers who told him the woman's name: Margaux Howland. She was a Yankee WASP from Connecticut married to a powerful state Judge. She had two grown children: a daughter who was a regular blogger for *The New Yorker*; and a son, who was a member of the practice squad for the Chicago Bears. Margaux and her husband owned a getaway home in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

One morning during a thunderstorm, the lights in the gym went out. Margaux and Jack were on adjacent cardio machines.

—Well, I guess that ends my workout, said Margaux, snapping off her hairband.

—Yeah, said Jack, no juice, no workout.

They both made a perfunctory effort to wipe down the machines.

—So, I've seen you here for four years, said Margaux. What do you *do*, may I ask?

He didn't know what to say. What did he *do*? A complicated question. He was a musician who had to retire when an automobile accident ended his professional career. Now he painted, sculpted, and wrote stories and novels, which he published and sold to various Internet sites and small presses.

—Well, I'm mostly a retired musician.

—*Retired* musician? Don't musicians play music until they die?

—That was the plan, but a drunk ran head-on into my car. The accident broke half the bones in my body.

—Oh, how awful!

—Well, I survived to tell the tale.

—What's your name?

—Jack. Jack Mahler.

—My name is Margaux. Margaux Howland is my married name. My maiden name is Bradford. I'm related to the Mayflower Bradford family.

—Is your husband the State Judge, Leland Howland?

—Why, yes. We've been married 33 years.

—Sounds comfortable.

—Be nice.

—Sorry, I've had to struggle most of my life.

—Since I've never heard of you, I guess so.

The lights came on, and they went their separate ways.

A week or so later, Jack was maxing-out on the Stairmaster when Margaux approached.

—Jack, you didn't tell me you were the author of *The SoHo Quartet*.

—You didn't ask.

—I read the first book in the quartet, *Francesco Martinelli*. I was in tears at the end.

—Yes, Francesco is a sympathetic character based on a close friend and a famous painter.

—Did you have to *kill* him?

—He killed himself.

She walked away, shaking her head in disbelief. She couldn't know that an author suffers as much as his characters when bad things happen. Authors don't dictate the outcome, they only write the story.

As Jack was leaving the gym, Margaux drove up in her car, a Honda CR-V. She stopped and lowered the driver's side window.

—Why are you so cruel, Jack? I loved that book. I fell in love with Francesco. I cried when he committed suicide. I cried for his sons and his talented wife, Oriana Morosini.

—Look, Margaux, I didn't sleep well for two months after Francesco's tragedy. But you know, when you write a novel, no matter how much you outline and plan, the characters and their personalities take over. You become a scribe reporting the events.

—I've never heard *that* before.

—I'll buy you a coffee and explain it to you.

—Sorry, I'm off to Santa Fe, New Mexico. Tell me more when I return. See you soon, Jack.

Jack didn't see Margaux again for several months. He'd heard she had suffered a leg injury and was undergoing rehab with Juan, his personal trainer. She was in a rehab session early one morning when Jack arrived at the gym.

—Hey, Juan, what's happening? Jack asked, as he walked past them.

—Friday morning at 6, Juan replied. You better get a good night's sleep. I intend to break you.

—Not possible, *amigo*.

—Go to bed early or you'll suffer.

—Juan, you know I've already broken everything, Jack replied, grinning.

Margaux looked up and smiled at Jack. It was the sexiest smile he'd ever seen. His workout was a bust. All Jack could see was that seductive smile. No woman in years, even if they were flirting with him, had given him such a smile. Why would Margaux smile at him like that? He barely knew her. Or was he imagining things?

When he went to leave the gym, he picked up his keys at the desk. There was a note attached to the keys: "Meet me at Café Jazz at 4 Friday afternoon, Margaux."

How could he say no? It was already Thursday morning, and he had no way of contacting her. Did Margaux know that Café Jazz was two blocks from his house? Why would a woman married to a powerful judge want to meet with a seventy-year-old artist? Was she attracted to him? Did she know his marriage was all but over? Maybe she wanted to commission a work of art. That had to be it: a commission. But her seductive smile was taking over, he kept replaying the scene in his mind.

Jack arrived at Café Jazz at quarter to four. Pascal, the co-owner, greeted him with open arms. Jack had given him a small loan when they first opened. It helped the café through its first year.

—Give me a Leffe Blonde. I'm expecting a lady friend, so I'll pay for whatever she chooses.

—Jack, my friend, *you* don't pay for drinks here.

—Hey, man, charge me now, but don't ask me for a loan later.

—But, you're a special friend of the house.

—Thanks for the beer, but I'll pay for her drinks.

—Well, I like your taste in women. The lady editor you meet here is one-of-a-kind.

—Too bad she's taken, said Jack.

—*C'est la vie*, said Pascal.

Jack took his beer and sat at a window table. He opened the Kindle app on his iPhone and continued reading Haruki Murakami's novel *1Q84*.

—Hi! said Margaux, holding a glass of wine. May I join you?

- Of course, said Jack, standing and pulling out the chair across the small table from him.
- I hope you didn't pay for your wine.
- No, Pascal told me you were here and were treating me. I come here often.
- Me, too.
- I work down the street, but I hope this location was not inconvenient for you.
- No, it's actually my neighborhood café.
- Pascal's wife Celine says you are a kind and generous man.
- Ah, who wouldn't love Celine? She's beautiful, speaks four languages, and is a superb chef. Her quiche is the best.
- I thought real men didn't eat quiche.
- You're dating yourself, Margaux, plus those 60's guys never ate Celine's quiche.

Margaux was a youthful-looking woman in her mid-fifties. Being a life-long runner, she was in remarkable shape. She had prominent cheekbones and a narrow chin, which gave her face an amusing chipmunk expression. When she smiled, double dimples dotted both sides of her full lips. She had darkened her eyelashes, but otherwise her large brown eyes were untouched. She kept her shoulder-length hair its natural silver. Her nails were recently manicured and painted a dusky crimson. She wore a short white skirt that exposed most of her long, well-muscled legs. Her apple-sized breasts were braless, and the nipples nudged her sleeveless silk blouse. Outside of diamond stud earrings, the only other jewelry was a thin gold band on her ring finger.

- Right. Celine does make the most divine quiche, said Margaux.
- Well, you know Celine is half Peruvian and half French, two countries with strong culinary traditions. Peru has world-famous food resources, as well as a stellar culinary tradition, and we know French cuisine is *crème-de-la-crème*.
- Let's talk about you, Jack. You said you were a musician. You must have traveled a lot.
- There were times when I was a full-time road warrior. Cobbling together a life, I've worn many hats. I was fortunate to grow up in a creative household. From the time I was about twelve, I painted, composed, invented or build something new every day. It carries over to now. This morning I wrote a draft of a new short story and started a new sculpture. It's what I have done all my life. I survived on my creativity and my talents. I wouldn't have it any other way. Creative intensity at my level is foreign to most people, even threatening. Except when I'm performing, I'm pretty much a solitary guy.

This information froze Margaux's smile. She found it incredulous that a human being could live such a disciplined creative life.

- If you're so productive, why haven't I heard of you before? I'm not understanding this.

Jack took a sip of his beer. There was no easy answer.

- Well, I've always been on the front edge of art. The avant-garde, or perhaps what is *before* the avant-garde. Not that I didn't study the masters. My training was very

traditional. But I had an irresistible urge to be my own person: a maverick, an outlier. The seduction of the strange and unknown was in my DNA. I made my living playing in symphony orchestras until I was forty, then I said to myself, "If I don't start doing what I want to do, my life will pass me by." So I quit the orchestra and set out on my own. I made a comfortable living and had a good reputation among the international A-list of "new music" musicians—the people who specialize in the fiendishly difficult post WW II concert music. I also played a lot of avant-garde improvisational music. It was an exciting and satisfactory life. After my near-fatal car crash, I could no longer perform at that level and concentrated on writing stories and making art.

—That's so far removed from my experience, said Margaux, looking out the window. I attended Vassar, but dropped out in my senior year to marry my husband who is six years older. He graduated from Yale Law School and we were married the next day. Five years later, our daughter was born. Our son arrived three years after that. I've been married for 33 years.

—Me, too, but it's my second marriage. The first marriage lasted less than three years.

It's hard to tell what Margaux thought of Jack's background. She mindlessly sipped the last of her wine still staring out the window avoiding Jack's gaze.

—Another wine?

—Maybe I should go.

—But you just arrived.

She looked distressed.

—Did I offend you? asked Jack.

—Oh, no, she said, it's just I've never met anyone like you before. I liked your book. *Francesco Martinelli* a wonderful, but sad story.

—Well, thank you. Tell me about yourself. But, first, let me get you another wine.

—I think I should leave. My husband is out of town and will call home. He expects me to be home.

—Perhaps a coffee?

—No, I really must leave.

When she stood, Jack rose and pulled back her chair.

—I'm sorry. This was all a mistake, she said, her color rising.

—No, I enjoyed your company, if only for fifteen minutes. Please don't think it was a mistake.

—I expected something ... I don't know ... different maybe, but thank you for the wine.

She turned abruptly and walked out the door. Through the window, Jack could see Margaux sitting in the driver's seat of her car with her face in her hands.

—Eh...you didn't score with her, said Pascal, raising an eyebrow. She looked ripe.

—I guess I'm not her type, my friend.

- She looked like she was ready for sport.
 - Pascal, I was only hoping she was an interesting woman to talk to, but I think she thought I was too intense or crazy.
 - Right. Like you would have turned her down if she invited you to her bed.
-

- Jack saw her at the gym four days later. He was cooling down on an exercise bike.
- I read the second book in the *SoHo Quartet: Ben Clarone*. What a great movie it would make.
 - I guess that's every writer's dream to have his stories made into a movie.
 - Listen, Jack, I'm embarrassed by my behavior last Friday.
 - Not a problem. I wish you'd stayed around for conversation.
 - You've seen me for four years looking my worst. How can you be interested?
 - But you have such charisma. Drop-dead beautiful women are afraid men will ruin their make-up or wrinkle their blouse. I know. I'm married to one. I can tell you are probably a loving wife and mother.
 - Do you know what it's like being married to a *judge*? I've been under the gavel for twenty years.
 - Well, I spent eight hours yesterday with a mallet and chisel hammering marble. That's much grittier than banging a judge's gavel. Hammering rocks is considered hard labor in prison.
 - There's nothing creative or exciting about sentencing criminals to jail, said Margaux.
 - Stop by my studio some afternoon. You'll see how much work *exciting creativity* is. I'm there from two until eight. Then I make dinner. I write in the morning and don't take visitors, calls, e-mails or texts. Here's my card with the address.
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On a cold rainy winter day, Margaux visited Jack's studio accompanied by the Judge. The Judge did not look pleased. Since Jack was polishing a marble piece, he was dressed in full-body dust suit with respirator. Even with the vacuum on the sander, dust motes filled the air. When Jack saw Margaux and the Judge, he turned off the sander and removed his mask.

- Welcome to my studio. Excuse the dust, it comes with the territory.
- No problem. We didn't wear our Sunday best, said Margaux, eyes shining with excitement.
- You must be Judge Howland, said Jack, offering his hand to the Judge, who ignored it. I'm Jack Mahler.
- I'm *Judge* Leland Howland, Mr. Mahler. I believe you know my wife from the gym.
- Yes, we've spoken on occasion. You can call me Jack, Judge. The gallery is right through this door.
- We came to see your artwork, said the Judge. Margaux is eager to see your workshop. We've only seen your large sculpture in the traffic circle on Main Street.
- That was a fun commission, though the red tape was brutal.

—It's always been that way for artists and patrons, said the Judge, as if issuing a sentence.

—This way to the gallery, said Jack, stepping out of his dust suit.

As they walked to the gallery, Margaux tried to catch Jack's eye. He marveled at her gait, like a thoroughbred. There was nothing classically feminine about her, yet she had sex appeal. Jack wanted her. Her pheromones were working on him overtime.

—Is all of this *your* artwork? asked the Judge.

—Absolutely! These are the most recent paintings and maquettes. Half of my upstairs loft is filled with paintings and sketchbooks. I've always sketched and produced art since I was in grade school. As a kid, I couldn't afford a camera, so I learned to draw.

—Well, Mr. Mahler, you're nothing if not productive, mumbled the Judge.

—I enjoy what I do, so I do a lot of it, said Jack.

—Where are your sculptures? asked Margaux. Juan, at the gym, said you make these wild whimsical pieces.

—I think Juan is talking about the porcelain pieces in the bookcase behind you. The larger sculptures are out back in my sculpture garden. If it stops raining, we can visit them.

For the next hour, Jack showed them his recent work.

—Are both the painting and sculpture titled *Weeping Woman* related? asked the Judge.

—The painting came first, the statue later.

—Oh. Interesting.

As one would expect, the Judge was a difficult read. Jack couldn't tell if his reticence to speak was simply ignorance of the language of criticism, or he considered Jack's work a retirement hobby. Margaux, on the other hand, was enthusiastic.

—Who is the woman with the big hat in this portrait? Margaux asked.

—My estranged wife. I painted her from a sketch I made of her in Venice, Italy. I performed at the Venice Music Biennale in 2005. She accompanied me to Venice. As you can see, she has a classically beautiful face, perfectly framed by one of her favorite wide-brimmed hats.

—A beautiful woman, said the Judge, but then one would expect an artist to have a beautiful wife.

He spoke as if a *judge's* wife was not required to have pulchritude. The scowl on Margaux's face confirmed Jack's thoughts.

—Thank you, said Jack. I'll pass on the compliment. She's a scholar and writer.

—Scholar? said Margaux. Sounds so Chaucerian. "Whan that Aprill with his shoures sote ..." she recited in charming Middle English.

Jack didn't expect Margaux to know Chaucer. She was proving to be a more interesting

person than merely an athletic housewife at the gym. She was a woman worth cultivating.

—Well, my estranged wife has impressive academic credentials and a long publication list.

—About what? asked the Judge.

—Early women political writers in Britain and Ireland, but also art, medicine, and just about anything that touched women's lives in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

—Jack, who is this friend? asked Margaux, pointing to a large gray tabby cat who had stuck his head through the balusters of the staircase leading to the loft.

—That's my cat, Stretch. I rescued him from Prospect Park in Brooklyn. He talks, snores, and is a real soak for affection.

—Will he bite me? asked Margaux.

—No way. And he never uses his claws around people.

—Stretch, say hello to these people, said Jack.

—Meow.

—He answered you! said the Judge in disbelief.

—Sure, Stretch is a big talker. A fully socialized member of the studio.

Stretch sauntered down the stairs and walked up to Margaux and marked her shoe with his whiskers.

—He wants you to pick him up and praise him, said Jack.

Margaux picked up Stretch, who began to purr loudly.

—What a terrific cat, said Margaux, scratching his ears. His fur is like silk. Leland doesn't like cats. Now that the kids are gone, we don't have a dog either.

—Stretch loves everyone.

—Not to change the subject, but what is the price of the *Weeping Woman* statue? asked the Judge.

—I'd have to think about that.

—I might want it for my chambers. As you can imagine, there are plenty of weeping women in my courtroom.

—I gave my ex-wife the nude statue I carved of her. A mistake in retrospect, but it was in lieu of alimony. She sold it to a Silicon Valley millionaire collector for \$40,000, or so she said.

The Judge looked at Margaux. She gave him the "don't you dare" look.

—My nephew's wife is the model, said Jack. I promised it to her. She's in veterinary school at Michigan State. She'll probably sell it to pay her tuition bills.

Margaux looked relieved, the Judge scowled.

—I can sell you the painting for \$1000, said Jack.

- Could you make a statue of Margaux? asked the Judge, changing the subject.
- What size?
- About half life-size. Maybe three feet tall. Margaux's five-eleven.
- Bronze or marble? For inside or outside?
- How are they different?
- Marble is more expensive. I would not be carving marble from a live model but from sketches. If you want bronze, I would make a clay model from life and sketches. The final product would be cast. It could also be scaled up to life-size. Of course, that would cost serious money. For outside display life-size is the ticket.
- Margaux is a champion runner. I would want her caught in full stride.
- My neighbor has a treadmill. Margaux could run on it while I sketched her.
- Or I could video her running, and you could make the sculpture from those stills.
- That might work, but I would still need to make studies of her face, head, torso, hands, feet: The whole woman in parts. I need time to think about it. It would be a large, time-consuming project and I'm in prepublication on my new novel.
- Mahler, you think about this. It would be a good opportunity for you.
- Let's talk in a month. My calendar should be open for a commission by then.
- Would \$10,000 be an acceptable commission? offered the Judge, much to the astonishment of Jack and Margaux.

- Let's talk money when we decide on the details, said Jack. Since I don't do the casting myself, you would have to pay the foundry bills.
- Mahler, you run the numbers and then we'll talk money.

Margaux was confused. Was the Judge serious? He hadn't showered her with gifts or shown more than a condescending interest in her life since their son was born. But she was happy for Jack and gave him that seductive smile. The smile gave Jack a heartache.

2

Two Months Later

Margaux stood on a platform holding her arm as if she were running. Jack sat close to her and drew her hand in great detail.

- Is it true hands are difficult to draw? Margaux asked, turning to see what Jack was drawing.
- Please hold still.
- Sorry.
- Drawing is about seeing. If you *see* things correctly, then you will draw them correctly. You have to draw exactly what you see, not what you think or want, but what is actually before you.
- Why is it in some paintings the hands are painted so poorly? Even the Old Masters don't always paint good hands?
- The hands may not be an important part of the painting. It's like in films. Sometimes a

part of the frame is out of focus so that it won't detract from what the director has decided is important in the frame.

—I never thought of that.

—Because sculpture is three-dimensional and this is a portrait statue of you, the different parts of the body should be accurately rendered. It will be the attitude of the head, torso, limbs, facial expression and the surface that will carry the emotional weight. The integrated counterpoint of all the elements is the challenge.

—Can we take a break? I'm getting tired, said Margaux.

—Sure. Do you want something to drink?

—No, I just need to take a break.

Margaux stretched and walked around the studio.

—Is this the marble sculpture you were working on when Leland and I visited you two months ago?

—That's it. I still have more surface work to do.

—It looks like so many different things.

—I like to give viewers a few shapes and let them fill in the story.

Margaux came and stood behind Jack. She studied the sketches of her hands.

—They're not the same, my left and right hands. You've captured the arthritis in my left pinky perfectly.

—Nothing on the human body is the same: eyes, ears, hands, feet, breasts, arms, legs, testicles. Nothing matches perfectly. Unconsciously, the interplay of those differences is how we learn to "read" people. Give me your hands, Margaux.

Jack turned and faced Margaux. She put her hands in the palms of his outstretched hands.

—Your hands are so smooth, he said, gently holding her hands. But cold. Are you cold?

—No, not particularly. Maybe nervous.

—Do I make you nervous?

—No, but you look at me so intensely when you're drawing. The touch of the pencil is almost palpable on my skin.

Jack released her right hand and took her left hand in both of his hands.

—Your hands are rough, said Margaux. You should use a hand cream.

—But my lips aren't, he said, putting his lips on the back of her hand.

Margaux froze.

—You're afraid?

—No, she said, hesitating, but her voice belied her discomfort.

Jack began to trace the contours of her hand with his upper lip. She relaxed her hand. He slowly worked his way down to her fingers and gently put his lips around her first finger. She moved her finger, so it just touched the tip of his tongue. Suddenly, she pulled her hand away.

—I can't remember if I washed my hands before I came here.
 —You were eating chips, he said, smiling and looking up at her face.
 —Hah! You've found me out, she said, tossing her head and walking to the platform.
 Okay, I'm ready to continue. Please don't try to romance me, it will ruin our time together.
 —Time to make some profile sketches of your face, Jack replied, ignoring her last comment. Sit in this chair and turn sideways to me. Focus on Stretch, lying so regally over on the stairs.

Stretch uttered a soft chuff when he heard his name.

—Does he always have one leg stretched out like that?
 —Yes, when I rescued him, he was a long, skinny one-year-old starving cat. But he had style in spades, plus he talks and snores. I think there's a touch of Siamese in him. They're big talkers, you know.

She looked at the well-formed cat watching Jack. She could hear Stretch purring. Margaux swore that Stretch was smiling at her. She closed her eyes.

Jack studied Margaux's profile. He sharpened his pencil with a utility knife and began to capture her.

—Please keep your eyes open. You don't run with your eyes closed, do you?
 —Of course not, but I also listen to music. Can't you play some music, or should I use my iPhone? For a guy who was a musician, why don't you play music while you're working with a model?
 —Because when music is playing, I listen to it, I mean critically listen. If I tuned out the music, I would corrupt my ability to listen critically. I notate music in my head as I hear it. It's the same level of concentration I bring to my drawing, painting, and sculpting. I don't have enough horsepower to listen and draw at the same time.

—You can visualize the music?
 —Conservatory trained.
 —Yes, you said.

She turned and gave Jack that winning smile.

—Do you always kiss your model's hands?

He ignored her question.

—What happened to your left earlobe? Jack asked.
 —You don't miss anything. I can barely see the scar in the mirror. It happened at a high school party. Some jerk yanked the earring off my left ear. This was back when most girls didn't pierce their ears, at least while they still lived at home.

Margaux looked at her watch.

- How long will we work today? And you didn't answer my question.
- If you can stay, another half hour. That will be a full two hours, that's long for an untrained model. And, no you're the first. I'm not in the habit of kissing anyone's hand.
- Do you kiss any of your models?
- I don't often use live models. As you can see, most of my work is abstract, not realistic, though I sketch from life all the time. Could you open your mouth, like you were running?
- I breathe through my nose when I run, not my mouth.
- Impressive. Since the car wreck, I can barely breath through my schnozz'.
- I never run anaerobically, always aerobically. My dad was a marathoner all his life and he taught all us kids to run for distance, not speed, though I run plenty fast. I rarely run with anyone, so I don't talk either.

Her smile gave Jack a heartache.

- You have a delicious smile, Margaux.
- Thank you. I've never heard a smile called delicious. Lips maybe, but not a smile.
- Well, you have delicious lips, so your smile is delicious, too.
- Are you hitting on me?
- Only a little. Please, stop talking so I can draw.

They did not talk for a half hour.

- That's enough for today. A good first day. You're an excellent subject: good bones, good skin, good muscle definition.
- Can I see the drawings?
- Of course.

Margaux paged through the sketchbook.

- This hand looks alive, she said, holding the sketchbook at arm's length.
- Thanks for the compliment.

She continued to examine the sketchbook.

- Is the scar that noticeable on my left ear? I can barely see it when I look in the mirror.
- Don't forget I was looking at you from the side. When you look in the mirror you are seeing the scar obliquely. Next time when I do the right profile, you'll see an uninjured ear.
- Well, Jack, I should be going. My daughter is arriving from New York City tonight.
- She's the blogger for *The New Yorker*?
- Yes. It will be fun to have her here for a two weeks. May I bring her to the next session?
- It may be boring for her.
- If she gets bored, I'll give her my car, and you can drive me home.
- That works.

Margaux extended her hand.

—Thank you, Jack. Maybe next time you will make a sketch on a loose sheet so that I can show the Judge your work.

—Ah, yes, the Judge, he said, locking his eyes on Margaux's eyes.

Margaux lifted Jack's hand to her lips and slowly put each of his fingers in her mouth. She pursed her lips and slowly fellated his fingers while lightly running her tongue over his fingertips. Jack was sure she could taste the drawing pencil, the eraser, and the perspiration on his fingers, maybe even a hint of Irish Spring soap. She removed his hand from her mouth and kissed the back of his hand, holding it reverently in both her hands.

—Such strong hands you have. She turned to leave.

—Very suggestive, Margaux. Thank you.

She lowered her eyes but gave him that seductive heart-breaking smile.

—Remember, not tomorrow, but Thursday at two.

—Thank you, Jack. Will I see you at the gym tomorrow?

—Only if you're there early, early.

—Good-bye, Jack. I enjoyed myself. It's going to be a fun project.

3

Jack met his dealer for lunch on Thursday and arrived late at his studio. Margaux and her daughter were sitting on the front porch swing of his house.

—Sorry, I'm late. Lunch with my dealer ran long.

—It's okay, Jack. We arrived not two minutes before you.

Jack unlocked the studio and turned on the lights.

—This is my daughter Liz, said Margaux. She wants to see how you work and then she'll take my car and go to the beach.

Liz was nearly a perfect copy of Margaux, tall and lean like her mother. Her hair was dark, and she had a stronger chin. But Liz had her mother's prominent high cheekbones and winning smile with four dimples. She was a little bustier, but that may have been an illusion since she wore a bathing suit under her cover-up.

—Welcome to my studio, Liz. It's a perfect beach day. Which beach do you prefer?

—Siesta Beach. It will probably be crowded, but it's the best of the three. Also, there're more people my age at Siesta.

—Well, Margaux, shall we begin?

—The clock is ticking.

—I'd like to start with the right profile.

Margaux sat on a stool. Jack opened the large sketchbook that contained his drawings for

this project.

—What's that sound I hear? asked Liz.

—That's my cat Stretch. He's sleeping on the daybed upstairs. He snores. I'm surprised he didn't come down and check you out. He's pretty sociable.

Just then Stretch, hearing Jack say his name, came bounding down the stairs talking up a storm.

—What a cool cat, said Liz. Is he friendly?

—Look at him. He's asking you to pick him up.

Liz picked up the cat, which began to mark her neck with his cheeks and whiskers.

—That tickles, Mr. Stretch, said Liz. What a lover he is.

—Yeah, and spoiled rotten, said Jack.

He tried to ignore Liz, but she kept walking around the studio.

—Liz, let me turn on the lights in the gallery. You can look at some of my recent work.

—I'd love that, Mr. Mahler.

—You can call me Jack.

Liz put the cat down and followed Jack into the gallery. Stretch trotted alongside inches from Jack's sandals.

Most of the work here is from the last two years, he said. Larger sculptures are in the garden in the back. Use that door to see them.

—Mom said you were prolific, but this is ridiculous.

—There are lots more in the upstairs loft. Enjoy.

Liz gave a push on the back door and entered the sculpture garden.

—Now where were we? asked Jack, sitting down opposite Margaux.

—If Liz is a problem, I can ask her to go, said Margaux.

—Tradition is that when working with a live model, even a dressed model, it's better to be alone. If there's a chaperone, they should sit quietly in the corner.

—Liz will probably leave for the beach soon.

Jack made five quick drawings of the right side of Margaux's head. She had remarkably large eyes. They lent her face a charming innocence.

—Let me do a quarter-profile of your face. I'll do it on a separate piece of paper; you can show it to the Judge.

—That's thoughtful of you.

—You asked for that last time, remember?

—Do you remember last time? she said, with a wink.

- Haven't washed my hand since.
- You jest, of course. I can see you clipped your nails.

Liz walked into the studio.

- That's a very, very impressive collection of work, Mr. Mahler, said Liz.
- Thank you.
- I'm going to leave for the beach, mom. But before I go, will Mr. Mahler take a picture of the two of us in front of that big sculpture in the garden?

She gave Jack her iPhone. He took a few shots of them. They could almost be twins.

- I'll do one better for you. I'll make a quick pen and ink sketch of the two of you.
- That sounds like a lot of work.
- No, it will be a quick drawing. Two minutes tops.
- You'll draw both of us in two minutes?
- Two people, two minutes.

Jack drew the two women standing in front of his sculpture *The Origin of Dreams*. He signed and dated it.

- Who will be the keeper of the drawing?
- Give it to Liz.
- Thank you, Mr. Mahler. Mom, I'll return before five,

-
- Before we continue, I need to make a morphology chart of your body, said Jack.
 - How will you do that?
 - With calipers and a tape measure. If you're uncomfortable with that, bring Liz next time and she can take the measurements, I'll write them down.
 - I don't mind, as long as you respect me.
 - See this form I've made. It has a rough outline of your body with a column for measurements. Your face, feet, and hands are called out in greater detail. I'm going to sculpt you barefoot. Running shoes are unnatural looking.

He pulled up a chair for her to sit on.

- First your head measurements. I do the circumference with a cloth tape. The rest I'll do with calipers.
- Wouldn't it go faster if I write down the numbers?
- Great idea.

They worked well as a team.

- I wish my parents had corrected my jaw line when I was younger, she said, after Jack measured her mandible.

—Is that possible?

—Yes, my oral surgeon keeps telling me he can fix my occlusion, which will make my chin stronger, she said.

—Well, why didn't you do it?

—You don't like my face.

—I think you have a beautiful face.

—Well, the Judge refused to allow me to get my jaw fixed.

—I've got to go with the Judge. I like you the way you are.

She gave Jack that smile.

Jack started measuring her arms and shoulders.

—Why is your left shoulder more developed than your right? Did you have some trauma or illness to your right shoulder?

—No, I was a left-handed fast-pitch softball pitcher in high school and college. I pitched for several women's softball teams when we first moved down here.

—I remember trying to hit one of my neighbor's pitching as a high school kid. She pitched for some professional woman's team. The ball comes at you like major league baseball and from much closer. With your long arms, I'll bet you could overwhelm most batters.

—I had a wicked curve and slider, too.

—Could you move to this stool? I need to take your leg lengths and torso measurements.

—Why don't you measure me standing?

—It's easier to find the correct point on your hips if you're sitting.

They continued to take measurements.

—Two more, but you may want to wait until someone else can hold the tape.

—What are they?

—I need to measure from you top of your sternum to your pudendum, and I need to measure your breasts. Which do you want to do first?

—Let's get the breasts out of the way, she said, removing her top. How do you propose you make the measurements?

Jack was unprepared for such unabashed innocence. He blushed. Even though she was in her mid-fifties, her apple-sized breasts had not begun their inexorable slide down her chest. As the French say, the breasts should be angry at each other. Her nipples pointed 30° away from each other. She was more comfortable standing there half-naked than Jack, who was taken aback by her nonchalance. Her breasts cried out to be fondled and kissed.

—Don't be so timid. Give me your hand.

She took his hand and cupped the larger of her breasts. It was warm and firm.

—See, it won't bite you. Now measure it.

—Now do the other one, she said, using her best “mother says” voice.

—I would like to kiss them, said Jack, wondering if he was going beyond her sense of decorum.

—I thought I would have to ask you, she said, pulling his head down to her chest.

He began kissing her breast working his way down to her fully aroused left nipple. He kissed and sucked it as he cupped her other breast. She closed her eyes savoring his touches and kisses.

—That's enough, we have one more measurement, she said, pushing his head away from her body.

Without a by or leave, she pulled off her shorts. She wore no underwear.

—Measure me, she ordered.

Jack placed one end of the tape at the top of her sternum and stretched it down to her mons. He held the tape away from her pubic area.

—You can touch me there. You'll need an accurate measurement.

He pulled the tape down to the lowest point of her abdomen. She was ready. She loosened his belt. His cargo shorts fell to the ground. She pushed pulled his boxer shorts down to his knees.

—There's a bed upstairs, he said.

Everything clicked.

Afterward, Jack lay on his side caressing her hip.

—Thank you, Margaux. That was especially appreciated.

—Yes, I enjoyed it. I hope I didn't make too much noise.

—Don't worry about it. There's no one to hear you except me.

—You're pretty virile.

—What's that supposed to mean: More virile than the Judge? Not bad for a guy my age?

She laughed.

—The Judge hasn't had sex with me in twenty years. You're only the second man I've ever had sex with in my life. I needed that.

—I'm embarrassed to tell you how long it has been for me, but long enough that I had forgotten what a good woman can do for a man.

When they resumed the drawing session, Jack had her sit on a chair facing him. He sat an arm's reach from her.

—Please tilt you head back just a touch, he said. She moved her head. That's better.

He started a formal portrait of her face. Immediately he entered his concentration zone. Once, she put her hand on his knee and gave him that beautiful smile.

—Thank you, but don't move, please.

He returned to his work. After another twenty minutes, the drawing was 95% finished. He would finish it later. He wanted to add some gouache background.

—Time, he said. That's it for today.

—Can I see what you've done?

—Sure.

Margaux stood, walked behind Jack and looked over his shoulder.

Her face fairly leapt off the page. The portrait looked uncannily three-dimensional. Like the bronze head, he would sculpt.

—It's beautiful. You are amazing.

There were tears in her eyes.

—Don't you like it? he asked.

—These are tears of joy. It's so realistic. If you sculpt me like this drawing, it will be fabulous.

—There's something else to show you, he said, rising from his chair and walking over to a metal cabinet. He removed a clay hand and carried it to her.

—This is what's called a maquette, or model.

—I know what a maquette is. I did attend good schools, you know.

—It's your left hand, the one with arthritis in the pinky, about the same size it will be on a half-size statue of you.

Margaux looked: half in wonder and half in horror. It looked so real, yet the idea of a severed child-like hand, her hand, was terrifying. Reflexively she grasped her left hand with her right. It was still there.

—Well? he asked, handing her the hand.

—It's so, so...I don't know ... lifelike, but scary. Like holding your own head shrunk by some South Pacific Islander. But I love all the detail, she said, turning it over in her hand. Think of it, my left hand is holding my left hand. My *sinistra* hand, my sinister hand.

—That's pretty existential, he said.

—I suppose, she said. Like a Zen koan.

—One hand clapping, he replied, taking the maquette from her and returning it to the cabinet. This is my chamber of body parts. There will be a complete you in here before I

start the final statue.

—So do I drive you home? he asked.

—What time is it?

—Just after four-thirty.

—Liz said she would return before five. I'll call her and see where she is.

Margaux retrieved her iPhone from her purse and asked Siri to call "Liz mobile."

—Hi, sweetheart. Where are you? asked Margaux.

She looked at Jack. The crepuscular sunlight through the trees outside gave him a mystical silhouette.

—At the drawbridge, she said for Jack's benefit. The bridge is up ...It's starting to come down. Okay, so you'll be here in ten minutes, Liz? More like fifteen. See you soon.

—Fifteen minutes, he said, I know the beach traffic time from the bridge.

—Is there anything else you'd like to show me? Margaux asked.

He didn't reply. He sat in his old Adirondack chair he used to study works-in-progress. He studied the abstract marble piece on the carving bench. Jack knew what he would like to do, but he doubted he had a five-minute quickie left in him. Margaux had pretty well emptied the tank.

Margaux walked up behind Jack. She put her hand on his shoulder. He put his hand over hers.

—That was so kind of you to give Liz the drawing of the two of us.

—My pleasure, a little memento of her visit.

He could feel her hair on his cheek. Her hair smelled like wildflowers. He was becoming aroused. He could feel her lips on his neck. She put his hand on her mound. She was ready. He stood, turned and pulled her mouth to his. Their tongues danced in her mouth. She put her hand in his cargo shorts. His right hand kneaded her swamp. Each of their mouths fought for possession. The frottage produced the desired result. He ejaculated under his clothes. Margaux came in a leg-quivering moan. They could hear Liz in the driveway.

—Tell Liz I'm in the bathroom, said Margaux, running into the gallery bathroom

Jack did a quick clean up in the studio sink. He intentionally spilled some turpentine in the sink to cover up the funk of their embrace. He donned his dust overalls.

Liz knocked on the studio door.

—Come in, Liz.

—Where's mom?

—She's in the bathroom.

—Did you have a good time at the beach?

—It was fun. A guy I knew from high school was there flying kites. I forgot how much fun kite flying is. He has the ones with two strings that can do all manner of stunts.

—I use to make and fly kites. I still do sometimes in the winter when the wind is favorable.

—Ah, there you are, said Margaux, walking into the studio.

—Liz tells me, she was kite flying at the beach, he said.

—That's fun. Your father and I use to fly kites on Nantucket.

Jack was amazed at how composed Margaux looked, a little bloomy, but not enough to give away her recent trysts.

—Well, shall we go, Liz? Thank you for everything, Jack. We're flying down to St. Thomas for Memorial Day week. I'll see you a week from next Wednesday?

—A week from Wednesday it is. It was nice meeting you, Liz. Bye.

—Bye, Mr. Mahler. Thank you for the drawing.

—You're welcome.

He watched them back out of the driveway.

—Christ, that was close, he said to Stretch, who rubbed his head against Jack's sandals. I hope Margaux doesn't get in any trouble, Stretch. Hell, I hope she comes back. The Judge could come after me big time. The Judge is a powerful man. Jack wondered if the Judge was the jealous type.

4

Three Months Later

Margaux, still in her exercise gear, and the Judge dressed in a suit, sat in the breakfast nook of their Sarasota home. The Judge was reading the local newspaper.

—Margaux, are you going to Jack Mahler's studio today?

—No, I have an organizational meeting for the half-marathon on Siesta Key this afternoon. Jack doesn't make art in the mornings, he writes.

—Well, I think you're spending too much time with Jack. My intuition tells me that everything is not all art when you visit. And my intuition is nearly always correct.

And my intuition is nearly always correct, said Margaux to herself, in chorus with the Judge. For most of the twenty years that he had been a Judge, that was his mantra. It drove her and their children away from him.

—Well, are you having an affair with Jack Mahler? he asked, searching her face for any giveaway signs.

—Of course not. Don't be silly. Jack's a happily married man. Why would you say that, other than your intuition?

—Mrs. Mahler came to see me at the courthouse. She wants me to keep you away from her husband. She suspects you and Jack Mahler are having an affair.

—Did you tell Mrs. Mahler that you are paying Jack \$10,000 to make the statue of me? That as the subject of the statue, Jack needs me available for modeling.

Do you still want the statue?

—Of course, but I don't want you becoming his convenient mistress. It's detrimental to my reputation as a Judge for my wife to be carousing with another man.

—Look, I've slept in our bed every night of our marriage.

The Judge gave her his best Judge's ray over his reading glasses and took a sip of coffee.

—The opprobrium of your transgressions is palpable, said the Judge. Everyone can see it on your face and in your body language. You're having an affair with Jack Mahler. It's obvious to anyone who sees you.

He folded the newspaper and pushed his chair back.

—I have to go to court. I want you to move to our Santa Fe house and stay there until Mahler delivers that statue. He has to have enough sketches and photographs to finish the job. I don't need rumors and innuendo about my wife circulating in the community. I overheard two court stenographers gossiping about you and Jack Mahler. Make plans to stay in Santa Fe until Jack finishes the statue. I'll be coming out to ski over Christmas recess.

Margaux watched the Judge's back as he walked to the garage. She was starting to hate the man. She was weary of his overbearing manner. While he was a good provider and could be a good companion, their marriage was dry. After Liz was born, their sex life declined to zero. The Judge became a prudish middle-aged ephebe. His vanity was boundless; so much so, that now she wondered if maybe her husband was a closet gay and using her and their children as a foil. She shook her head. That couldn't be true, or could it?

Theirs had been a happy marriage before her husband became a Judge. He had been the youngest partner in the law firm where he worked. They had money for a get-away home in Santa Fe. Their children were healthy, talented and good students. It was the "perfect" marriage and family. Then the bar nominated him for a Judgeship and the governor appointed him. It was a political move on the governor's part to thwart her husband's political ambitions. Since his appointment, he handily won every retention election. He would probably serve for another nine years. He'd then be seventy and required by state law to retire. He would retire to a well-paid position on the board of directors of a big firm.

She cleared the table and put the dishes in the dishwasher. Standing in the shower, she thought about Jack's hands on her body. She made up her mind to visit Jack after the

meeting on Siesta Key.

Jack was modeling Margaux's head in clay when he heard a car in the driveway. He looked and saw it was Margaux's Honda. She wore a colorful full-length peasant dress and sandals.

He was washing the clay off his hands as Margaux walked through the door. He dried his hands and turned to embrace her.

—Why do I miss you so much? said Margaux, relishing his embrace.

—Because you make me so happy, said Jack.

After the initial greeting, Margaux sat on a stool opposite Jack's worktable.

—You look troubled, said Jack.

—This morning the Judge said your wife came and told him that you and I were having an affair. He's sending me to our Santa Fe house.

—When?

—Soon. He said he would talk about it tonight. Tonight is his poker night, so I'll be asleep when he comes home. I'm not looking forward to this.

Two police cars pulled into the driveway. A detective and a uniformed officer exited each car. One of the uniformed officers knocked on the screen door.

—May we come in? asked the uniformed officer from the doorway

—Of course, said Jack.

—Are you Jack Mahler? asked one of the detectives, flashing his shield. He held a piece of paper in his left hand.

—Yes. How may I help you?

—We have a judicial restraining order forbidding any contact between Jack Mahler and Margaux Howland. Are you Mrs. Howland, asked the detective, knowing full well she was Margaux Howland.

—Yes, I am, but I didn't file a restraining order against Jack.

—Mrs. Jack Mahler filed the complaint.

—This can't be real, said Jack, who felt a tightening in the pit of his stomach. Why is my wife filing a restraining order against Mrs. Howland? What are the charges?

—Sexual predation with intent to defraud.

—Are you kidding me? said Jack.

—I'm afraid not. Mrs. Howland will have to leave immediately. Jack Mahler, you are not to contact Margaux Howland. And you, Margaux Howland, are not to contact Jack Mahler, either in person, by telephone, e-mail, text or by United States mail until this order is rescinded or vacated.

—What the..., said Jack. I don't believe this. How can the order be lifted?

—Court action, like a divorce or challenge in a court of law.

- Mrs. Howland, you have to leave now.
- Show me the order, said Margaux, reaching out to take the paper.
- Not so fast. I'll read it. You will get a copy when you leave the premises.

The detective read the order out loud. It was very clear.

Margaux ran into Jack's arms. She began to cry, then sob. She clutched Jack's body. Jack tried to soothe her.

- Easy, Margaux, I'm sure there's a way out of this, said Jack, rubbing her upper back.

Jack's head was spinning. Who put his wife up to this? He thought they had arranged a detente and were arbitrating a divorce. It had to be the Judge. The bastard was using his influence to get the family court to issue the order. How can a wealthy fifty-five-year-old woman be a sexual predator? She hardly needed his money. It was all madness. Arguing with the police was futile and might lead to an arrest on more serious charges. The cops were only the messengers.

- Please, Margaux, said the detective, don't make this more difficult than it needs to be. I'll let you say your good-byes for five minutes, then get in your car and drive away. If you're not outside in five minutes, I will cuff you and take you to the police station.

The four men left the studio but stood with their backs to the couple just outside the open door.

- Jack, what the hell are we going to do? whispered Margaux, trying to regain her composure. The Judge is on the warpath, and now your wife has gotten a restraining order. I'll bet the Judge suggested this to your wife's lawyer.
- Don't panic. I'll work on this. If we make a scene here, it won't go over well later. I'll figure something out. I love you. It will all work out.
- I love you too, Jack. Don't do anything foolish. The Judge is a powerful man in this community.
- Here wipe away your tears and blow your nose, said Jack, giving Margaux a small packet of tissues.
- One last hug, said Margaux.
- This won't be our last hug. I guarantee it. I'll be hugging you again soon enough.

Santa Fe, New Mexico

Margaux watched Carlos, the Peruvian gardener, trim the hedge along the adobe walls of her Santa Fe home. Carlos was a middle-aged Amazonian Indian. His wife, Maria, was a Zapotec Indian from Oaxaca, Mexico. She was a potter. Her renown rested on her playful anthropomorphic pots. Her pottery studio was a popular Santa Fe tourist destination. Carlos had an encyclopedic knowledge of plants and possessed an uncanny ability to take

a dusty, barren yard and turn it into a stunning high-desert garden.

There were stories among some of the longtime residents that Carlos was a Brujo, a spirit man. Margaux was not a believer in those things, but the native peoples and some of the Latinos in the area would seek out Carlos to cure illness, infertility, settle disputes, and to communicate with the departed. It was said that Carlos could change himself into animals and spirits, but Margaux didn't think that was true, probably only the hallucinogenic flashbacks of peyote users.

—Mrs. Howland, said Carlos, walking up to the patio to where she was sitting at a table reading. Have you seen rabbits in your yard?

—Yes, Carlos. They usually come in the evening. I notice they like to nibble on my plants.

—They are very destructive.

—How do I keep them out of my garden?

—Coyote urine. Works every time.

—Where do I find that? I don't think it's legal to capture a coyote, much less chain him up in my garden?

—I will bring some tomorrow.

—Where do you get it?

—I ask the coyote.

Margaux laughed.

—You're telling me you'll ask a coyote to pee into a jar?

Suddenly Margaux shrieked and put her hands up to her face. For a fraction of a second, she thought she saw Carlos's head change into the head of a coyote with dripping saliva and lolling tongue.

—Did I frighten you, Mrs. Howland?

—Well, I don't know, she said, her heart still raced from the vision and the adrenaline rush. I can't explain what happened. It's too crazy to say even, but it frightened me.

—Don't be afraid.

—You have to know that I've heard rumors that you are some kind of sorcerer.

—I'm only a gardener, Mrs. Howland. I use my knowledge of plants to cure sick people. Only that.

That night a coyote howling in her garden woke Margaux from a deep sleep. When she looked out the window, she did not see a coyote. Strangely, none of the neighborhood dogs barked.

5

The next morning, Margaux's cell phone rang. She didn't recognize the number; maybe it was one of her children calling on a new phone.

—Hello?

—Do you know who this is?

—Jack! Jack! I can't believe it. How did you get my new number?

—Your daughter, Liz.

—Does Liz know about us?

—Liz knew from day one, or so she says. I bought a prepaid phone so the Judge could not trace the calls back to me on your bill. I'm in Georgia where I bought a beautiful white alabaster stone. It's large enough so I can carve you full-size. They will deliver it next week. I can't wait to start. I finished the clay model for the statue the Judge ordered. They will make the molds next week and cast it in two weeks. I think you'll like it.

—I know I will, but it sounds like you are working too hard. Jack, I miss you terribly.

—Me, too. Update: My wife has moved in with her sister and is suing for divorce. She refused the arbitration. I smell the handiwork of the Judge.

—So, what are you going to do?

—I don't have a lot of options. Her lawyer is a real feminist bulldog who has arranged to have the hearing in front of a knee-jerk feminist Judge. That Judge is a friend of your husband's. I could lose everything. They've escalated the charges to include battery, assault, rape, and—get this—neglect, i.e. failure to provide. It's all a bunch of lies. How can the legal profession allow them to calumniate like that?

—Jack, stop showing off, what the hell does calumniate mean?

—To make false and malicious statements. It was today's Dictionary.com word of the day.

—At least you're honest. You could've said you've known calumniate since high school.

—Well, even in high school my vocabulary wasn't too shabby.

—What's with the assault, battery and rape accusations? Did you do all those things to your wife? When you tire of me will you turn into a beast beating and raping me?

—Of course not. My wife and I may not have gotten along, but I'm not violent. I've been told they add on all those things as bargaining chips to increase the settlement. You know, "we'll drop the rape accusation for another \$100,000." Grifters. A bunch of low life grifters. The whole lot of 'em

Margaux had heard of this tactic. The Judge had mentioned these new feminist strategies in divorce proceedings. She was worried that Jack would become penniless. Or worse, jailed. Her situation was almost as desperate. Due to her husband's position as a Judge, he had put all their assets in a blind trust. The terms of that trust severely penalized her in the event of a divorce initiated because of her infidelities. There was no hope that she would receive anything but the most penurious alimony.

—Jack, do you have a good lawyer?

—Abe Metzinger.

—Abe takes divorce cases?

—I painted a formal portrait of him a few years back. A homebrew varnish I used ruined the painting, so I returned the commission money. When he found out about my case, he called me and said he would take my case pro bono. The divorce specialist in his office,

Sarah Epstein, will represent me. Abe said he'd been emptying the Judge's purse at their weekly poker games. He claimed your husband was paying for my divorce with his losses.

—Abe's a shrewd customer. When is the court date?

—No date yet. There's all the phony marriage counselor reconciliation dreck that we have to go through by law.

—Will the divorce end the restraining order?

—I have no idea, said Jack. I would think so. I guess we'll find out. Listen, Margaux, I want to fly out to see you, but there're two private dicks following me everywhere. The Judge hired one, my wife's lawyer the other.

—There's a posse of sleaze balls watching me, too, said Margaux, looking through the front window of her Santa Fe home at the battered Ford Escape parked across the road. A Latino in a cowboy hat was watching her through binoculars.

—What happens if you leave and we meet somewhere else?

—I assume they would follow us.

—Let me think about this. Just exactly how much freedom do you have? Are you locked up in your home?

—I am a virtual prisoner in my own home. When I run in the morning, there's always someone following me. When I go to the grocery store, a gallery, a restaurant, there's someone on my trail. Jack, it's horrible. I complained to the police that strangers were stalking me, and they gave me the "how stupid are you?" looks.

—Jesus, that bastard has everyone in his pocket.

—Jack, I have to tell you about a strange thing that happened. Rabbits were eating the plants in my garden. I asked Carlos, my Peruvian gardener, how I could get rid of the rabbits, and he said with coyote urine. "So, where do you get coyote urine," I asked. He said he would ask a coyote. I laughed and said, "You're going to ask a coyote to pee in a jar?"

—That's funny, said Jack.

—Don't laugh. At that instant, for a split second, his face turned into a coyote's. I swear it, Jack. I know it sounds crazy, but I saw it. I was terrified. I screamed, and then later that night, I heard a coyote howling in my garden. When I went out to check, I didn't see a coyote and the neighborhood dogs were silent. But get this: there have been no rabbits in my garden since.

—Margaux, you haven't been putting peyote buttons on your salad, have you?

—No way! Carlos, my gardener, is supposed to be a Brujo, a type of spirit person, like an Indian medicine man.

—Well, maybe he is a Brujo. I'm sure you read your Carlos Castaneda books back in the day.

—I was brought up a strict New England Calvinist—I couldn't believe that flaky stuff.

—Well, when you take hallucinogens, everything is possible. The whole universe opens up to you. From my experience dropping acid in the 60's, I can tell you that some of those trips were pretty wild.

Margaux was silent. Jack wondered if she thought less of him for confessing to using LSD.

—Margaux, sweetheart I miss you and love you dearly. But I better hang up before someone hacks into your phone. You never know these days.

—I love you, Jack. I miss you terribly. Please call me again soon.

—Big hugs, sweetheart.

—Kiss, kiss.

Later that afternoon, Carlos drove up with some trellises for Margaux's garden.

—Mrs. Howland, why are you so unhappy?

—Carlos, you can address me as Margaux.

—Yes, Mrs. Howland. You wear a veil of sadness. I see this.

Margaux wondered what prompted Carlos's question. After the coyote vision, she was wary of Carlos's powers. Could Carlos read her thoughts?

Carlos watched her with heavy-lidded eyes, hearing her thoughts as clearly as if she spoke them aloud.

—I will not hurt you, Mrs. Howland, Carlos said. I know you love a man who is not your husband. I know there are men watching you. This faraway man loves you. He is a creative man. He works day and night making a copy of you. Each day he toils to make the copy perfect.

—Carlos, please do not talk about this to me. It is too painful.

—When you are ready, I can help you. Do not forget that.

Carlos walked to his pick-up truck and drove away. On her dusty road, Carlos's truck didn't kick up any dust.

Two Weeks Later

The Judge sat in the fighting chair of his 42' sport fisherman docked at Marina Jack in Sarasota. He was on his third Scotch. It was close to sunset. His daughter, Liz, and her boyfriend, Charles, sat across from him in folding deck chairs.

—Tell me, Charles, said the Judge to the boyfriend, what are your intentions toward my daughter?

The boyfriend squirmed and thought the Judge a boor for asking such a question, especially using that Jane Austen language.

- Well, sir, we have discussed the future, but have decided to wait until we're more established in our careers. Liz has a good position at *The New Yorker* and I'm working my way up the Morgan Stanley ladder.
- Yes, Liz says you make good money and are well liked at your job.
- Yeah, but I'm still junior, even though I'm their best econometrics technician.
- You're an MIT man, right?
- Yes, sir, all my degrees: bachelors, two masters, and a Ph.D. The second masters is in computer science.
- Well, you might do better in a different setting. Morgan's a wealth management firm.
- Morgan Stanley's a full financial service company.
- I have contacts at the Federal Reserve, who might be able to help your career. With the knowledge you'll gain at the Fed, you will be able to name your price at any big multinational firm. Big companies want to know what the Fed is thinking.
- I'm not sure I want to work for the Fed. I received a \$50,000 bonus from Morgan Stanley this year. That's not exactly chump change.
- Charles, in the culture of big money, that is chump change.

Just then a large raven landed on the taffrail of the Judge's boat.

- Caw! Caw! said the raven, casting a cold eye on the Judge.
- That's bold, said Liz, shying away from the bird. I've never seen a bird land that close before.
- Get going, yelled the Judge, waving his hands at the bird.

The raven tilted its head, eyed the Judge, and flew at the Judge's face, defecating on his cheek. The raven returned to its perch on the taffrail.

- I think the bastard did that intentionally, said the Judge, losing his reserve. He took the napkin from under his scotch and wiped his face.
- Sure seemed deliberate, Mr. Howland, said Charles, who rose and swiped at the raven with his cap.

In a flash of blue light, the raven evaporated.

- Jesus, what was that blue light? said Liz.
- Beats the shit out of me, said Charles. But it was pretty cool, whatever it was.
- Please don't use that language in my presence, said the Judge.
- Jeez, dad, don't be so square, said Liz. When have you ever seen a bird disappear like that?

The Judge scowled at his daughter.

- Let's go to the restaurant and eat, said the Judge.

Later That Evening: Jack's Studio

Jack saw his cat Stretch sniffing around the entrance of his studio. There was something on the other side of the studio door that had the cat's full attention.

—What's wrong, kitty-cat? he asked, scratching the cat's back.

—Meooooow, said Stretch, who then took off running up the stairs, only to saunter back to the first floor where he took up his station by the outside door

—Okay, let's see what's outside, Mr. Stretch.

Jack opened the door, and there on the stoop was a raven. The bird's left wing appeared broken. He gently scooped up the injured bird and brought it into the studio.

—I'll bet he's hungry, Jack said to Stretch. He seems weak.

Jack found a cardboard box and gently placed the raven in it. He put the box on a shelf out of Stretch's reach and went to the house. He returned with corn, unshelled peanuts and dried berries for the bird. He also placed a small bowl of water in the box.

—There's something strange about this bird, Stretch. He's not afraid of you or me.

Jack decided to look at the bird more carefully. He reached into the box. The raven hopped onto his outstretched hand but instantly turned and delivered a vicious peck to Jack's left hand. He dropped the bird like a hot rock.

—I guess I spoke too soon, he said, sucking the blood from the wound.

Suddenly, Stretch puffed up in full fighting mode, hissing, and growling.

—Stretch, it's okay boy. I must have hurt his broken wing.

Jack looked in the box. The raven's unblinking eyes locked onto his. The raven's eyes began changing colors: red, green, blue, yellow, orange, and a vivid magenta. Suddenly the raven morphed into a coyote-like apparition and vanished.

—Jesus! Jack yelled, jumping away from the box. Trembling from shock and fear, he lowered himself onto his Adirondack chair. Was he hallucinating? Did he just have an acid flashback?

Stretch, now his usual loving self, sensing Jack's panic, jumped up on his lap. Stretch purred as Jack petted him. Stretch's presence calmed Jack's heart and nerves.

—No wonder you were afraid, Stretch. Pet cats are coyotes' favorite meal.

The next morning the Judge awoke at 6 a.m. He was sleeping on his yacht. He'd let Liz

and her boyfriend stay at the house. He didn't care to overhear his daughter in a full animal rut with a math nerd.

What woke the Judge was buzzing in his left ear. It reminded him of a long ago New Jersey June when the 17-year locusts hatched. The raspy whine of millions of those cicadas filled the sultry Princeton air. Oddly, the buzz was only in his left ear. His right ear was fine. He plugged his left ear with his left forefinger. The buzzing did not stop. In fact, it took on an echoic hollow sound. Listening with his ear plugged, the buzzing sounded like the supplicating cries of distressed human voices.

Confused and annoyed, the Judge rose from his bunk and walked into the head. He looked at his face in the mirror over the sink.

—Christ! he yelled. There on the left side of his face was a large red spot.

Instinctively, he tried to wipe it off with his hand. The stain was hot. He took a towel and tried to wash it off. That made the stain darker and larger. He could see the flesh beneath the stain begin to pustulate.

—God Almighty! I must have a flesh-eating virus. I've contracted a goddamn flesh-eating disease. It's got to be from the shit of that demon raven. I must get to a doctor, now! What the hell did I do to deserve this? Son ... of ... a ... bitch!

6

Sarasota Memorial Hospital

—Strip down to your shorts. Put on this gown, open to the rear, said the ER nurse, handing the Judge a disposable paper gown.

—The problem is on my face! said the Judge. I don't need to strip. Get a dermatologist in here now!

—You came to us because you have a problem, Mr. Howland. We can't help you if you don't cooperate. Please be calm. Illness can be stressful. Don't make the situation worse, by yelling.

—Well, excuse me, nurse. You must understand something: I'm a very important man. Do you know who I am? I am Judge Leland Howland.

—Mr. Howland, said the nurse, we are an equal opportunity facility. All patients are afforded the same quality of service. No one receives special treatment here. The doctor will be with you as soon as you have disrobed and donned this gown.

The Judge disrobed and sat in the paper gown on the examination table. How in the hell did this happen? he thought. It had to be that raven. That was no ordinary crow, it was huge. What was a raven doing on the waterfront of Sarasota? He'd only seen ravens in New Mexico. The raven was so deliberate, like it was on a mission. Maybe it was sick? Do birds get rabies, after all, they are warm blooded. Jesus, what the hell is going on here?

There was a knock on the door and a handsome Indian doctor entered.

—Hello, I'm doctor Shanmugaratnam. You are—ah, yes, Mr. Howland, Judge Leland Howland, he said, consulting his clipboard. You have a rash?

—As you can see, there is this red rash on my left cheek. It is hot to the touch, and there are suppurating pustules.

Dr. Shanmugaratnam looked at the left side of the Judge's face as he pulled on examination gloves.

—Can you point the rash out to me? asked Shanmugaratnam.

—You mean you don't see it? It's as big as a postcard.

—Maybe it's in remission. There are infections that can fluctuate between being highly visible and almost invisible. Here, see for yourself in this mirror.

Shanmugaratnam handed Howland a magnifying hand mirror.

The Judge could see the rash plain as day. It had grown bigger in the two hours since he first discovered it.

—Look, doctor, you can see it. It's right here. This whole area is infected, said the Judge, becoming impatient with this foreign nincompoop.

Shanmugaratnam stood behind the Judge and asked him to point out the reflection of the rash in the mirror. The Judge confidently put his finger on the mirror at the site of the rash.

—This whole area I'm tracing with my finger is dark red, he said. Can't you see it?

Shanmugaratnam donned magnifying glasses with strong lights. He touched the area with a pin.

—Ouch! That hurts, said the Judge.

—Now we're getting somewhere.

—Did you think I was making this up?

—I'm afraid, Mr. Howland, the problem may be elsewhere.

—What does that mean? Do you think I'm nuts or something? Get another doctor in here. How can you not see it when I see it plain as day in this mirror? My intuition tells me you're not fully qualified. My intuition says you're probably a fourth-year med student.

—I'm trying to help you, but your physical symptoms are not apparent. Your skin is in remarkable condition considering you live in Florida. By the way, I'm fully board certified in dermatology and tropical diseases.

—But I'm looking at it in this mirror, right now!

—I shall find another physician to confirm my observations. We may want to do a small biopsy.

—Oh for Chrissakes.

—I'll return with another colleague in a minute. Stay right here.

Margaux looked at the caller I.D. on her phone. It was her son, Troy.

—Troy, what a surprise. Where are you? Chicago?

—No, I'm in Sarasota. The Bears play the Tampa Bay Buccaneers this Sunday. There are so many defensive backs out with injuries, that they signed me as a defensive back for this game.

—That's good news. What else? Have you seen your father?

—Actually, that's what I'm calling about.

—Is there a problem?

—Mom, there's a big problem. Dad's at Memorial Hospital restrained in bed. He thinks he has a rash on his face. When the doctors told him they didn't see a rash, he lost it and tried to cold-cock the two doctors. The hospital guards restrained him. They've sedated him, and he's in a straitjacket. When I asked why the straitjacket, the duty nurse said because he was clawing his face where he thought the rash was. I saw the scratch marks on his face, but there is no rash.

—Where is he now? asked Margaux, biting her lower lip.

—Bay Side Center for Behavioral Health. It's the mental health arm of Memorial Hospital.

—It's that serious? asked Margaux, trying to think what the ramifications of a hospitalized estranged husband meant.

—Liz was here with her boyfriend, Charles. They said something about a bird dropping a load on dad's face yesterday. She thought maybe that's what caused the problem. But,

mom, dad's lost it. There is no rash or flesh-eating virus on his face. But he swears there is. He says he can see it. But, mom, no one else can. Pretty strange.

—What are they going to do?

—They're holding him for 72 hours for observation. According to Liz, dad was drinking more than usual last night. They want to detox his system and see if he comes around.

—Where's Liz?

—She went to lunch with Charles. I have to get back to Tampa. Liz said she would keep you updated.

—You know your father had a restraining order issued banning me from coming to Sarasota.

—Yeah, Liz told me. Is this Jack Mahler that much better than dad? Liz says he's creative and a neat guy. But come on mom, aren't you a little old to be having affairs, much less with a seventy-year-old bohemian artist?

—Slow down there, Troy. Your mother is speaking here. Look, Troy, believe it or not, people change. You know how estranged the Judge has been from his family. Only Liz and I went to your college football games. I don't know how long my relationship with Jack will last, but before your father stepped in and sent me to Santa Fe, I felt twenty years younger.

—Sorry mom. I was talking out of turn, but I have to go. I've got a practice session in Tampa. I'll call you later. Love you, mom.

—Love you too, Troy.

It was Liz's third call of the day to Margaux. They had been on the phone for a half hour.

—Yes, Liz, said Margaux, but as you know, I can't come to Sarasota. Your father has exiled me with that court order.

—Mom, I can't stay here and baby-sit him. I have to return to New York. Charles and I are leaving tomorrow morning on the Jetblue flight. I told you, dad's still delusional about this rash. Whenever the shrinks talk to him, he gets violent. He keeps saying it was the raven shit that did this.

—What do you mean, "raven shit"?

—We were sitting on his boat, and this big raven flew down. It landed on the rail, looked at dad and then flew at him and shit on his face. Charles swiped at him with his hat, and the raven disappeared in a blue flash.

Margaux grinned. She was putting the pieces together. Could this be Carlos's work? If he could be a coyote, couldn't he also be a raven? But how would he get to Sarasota? It would take a raven weeks to fly there, and Carlos worked in my garden yesterday afternoon. How would he know the judge's boat? It made no sense.

—Sorry, Liz, I was daydreaming. Ravens don't live in Florida. Out here in New Mexico, but not Florida.

—Well, it was way too big to be a common crow like you see around the waterfront.

—So, just what are they going to do with your father?

—Ah, correction Mrs. Howland, He's my father, but he's your husband. You know, for better or for worse. All the docs can do is keep him sedated.

—I told you he banned me from Sarasota. If I show my face, I'll go directly to jail.

—What a pig fuck.

—Lizzy! Since you've been working in New York, your language has gotten atrocious and vulgar. Please. You're speaking with your mother. Keep a civil tongue in your mouth when you talk to me.

—Sorry, mom. I'll watch my language, but don't get prudish on me like dad.

—Do they have a diagnosis?

—His psychiatrist says he has a delusional psychosomatic disorder. They're giving him some drug to control his violent outbursts, but there is no specific drug for his illness. Typically, delusional symptoms will go away, but they may return. It's an episodic disease.

—I'll call his brother and see if he can come down and care for him.

—Mom! Uncle Frank is a well-known transvestite actor in New York City. He won't come to Sarasota. There may be circus freaks in Sarasota, but there's no room for a transvestite actor. He starred in a three-month solo run of *The Vagina Monologues* for chrissake. Besides, dad's a Judge. He can't be seen with Frank. It would ruin his career.

—If the press finds out about your father and his condition, his Judgeship is history, Liz, history. His enemies will have a field day.

—But what about you? How will you survive? You've got to hope the trust keeps paying the bills. You could be in big financial trouble, mom. I can't support you on my meager salary at *The New Yorker*. Bloggers aren't high paid writers at that prestigious institution. We're all earning our stripes. I'm not Dorothy Parker, yet.

Margaux's head was spinning. She could not, would not, and wasn't allowed to return to Sarasota until the restraining order was lifted. Not even the Judge in a lucid moment could undo the order. It needed the consent of Madame Mahler's attorney, and that attorney was not about to negotiate.

—Well, Liz. My hands are tied. Your father put me in this corner, and now he will suffer the consequences.

—Well, the Judge will have to make his way as best he can. I'm not quitting my job to care for him. Besides, I couldn't handle him if he got violent.

—Liz, he's going to have to stew in his own miserable juices. He made this problem, and now he has to live with it.

—But, mom, what do you mean he made this problem? Tell me how he made the problem? You're the adulterer here.

—By withdrawing his affection from his children and me. When's the last time he kissed or hugged you? When's the last time you saw him kiss or hug me? When I conceived you, it was one of the last times he made love to me. You're twenty-four. Think about it.

Liz took the phone away from her head. She cried, a shoulder-shaking cry, muffled by her forearm over her mouth.

—Liz are you there? Are you crying?

—Yes. I didn't know mom. I truly didn't know. I can't talk anymore. I'll call you later.
Love you, mom.

Margaux sat at the kitchen counter and waited for the phone to disconnect. A profound melancholy descended upon her.

—You Jack Mahler? asked a short, heavysset man standing at Jack's studio door.
—I'm your man, replied Jack.
—I've got a big chunk of white alabaster on the back of my truck for you.
—Great! Do you think you can back your truck into my driveway?
—Shouldn't be a problem. You know you have to pay for the delivery in cash.
—Yes, sir. I've got the cash, \$736.22.
—That's the number, he said, consulting his paperwork.

Jack had spent the previous week making a carving platform that would hold a six-foot tall five-ton chunk of translucent white alabaster. It was a labor of love. All during the process of fitting the heavy timbers together, he visualized how he would carve the stone. Since the alabaster was much softer than marble, it would require a lighter touch. He had bought and assembled some special tools for the project.

When the driver backed the truck into Jack's driveway, Jack saw the stone in all its beauty. It was absolutely magnificent. As fine a product of the earth as a man could want. It was exciting and slightly erotic to see it coyly swathed in clear plastic in its custom crate.

—You all alone? Jack asked the driver.
—Yip.
—You don't have a helper? How are we going to get that five-ton white beauty into my studio?
—Watch me.

It took the man an hour to accomplish the task, but there it stood on the platform, a gleaming white potential of feminine pulchritude. A goddess couldn't ask for a more beautiful stone to enshrine her hallowed self. Margaux would be his Aphrodite. He would carve her face with that seductive smile, head erect, chest out, legs slightly bent with her knees almost touching. The same way she stood nude before him the first time.

Jack couldn't help himself. He telephoned Margaux.

—Yes, who is this? asked Margaux.
—A loving friend.
—Jack! Oh, do I need this call.
—Me, too. Guess what?
—What?

—The alabaster stone arrived today. It's in my studio. I'm going to make you famous. It is so beautiful. The stone glows with life. When I'm finished, you will appear so life-like that people will expect you to kiss them.

—Jack, that's wonderful. I'm so happy for you.

—What's the matter? You sound ... distant.

Margaux hesitated. She walked to the sofa in the living room and sat down before answering.

—Jack, the Judge is in the mental health ward at Sarasota Memorial Hospital.

—What? The Judge? Why?

—He's been diagnosed with a delusional psychosomatic disorder. He thinks there's a rash on his face, but there isn't one. He could lose his Judgeship. I could be homeless.

—Sweetheart, you will never be homeless while I'm alive. I've always been a good provider, not rich like the Judge, but more than enough to live very comfortably. If we have to, we'll move to Europe.

—Jack, you are always so confident. That's what I love about you. You're a real man.

—Well, let me carve this astounding stone into your beautiful likeness. Then, if we have to, we'll move abroad. You know if the Judge is diagnosed as a loony, then there's no reason why another Judge can't rescind the restraining order.

—Your wife's lawyer will object.

—Fuck her and the horse she rode in on.

—Jack! Don't be vulgar, though that is pretty funny. Can you see that fat lesbian lawyer astride a pony? Absolutely comical.

7

Jack, dressed in full protective gear and using an electric grinder, worked on the bronze statue of Margaux. He was removing burrs and other artifacts from the casting process. A group of foundry workers watched him.

—Jack, said one of the seasoned artisans, you can put a little more pressure on that grinder.

—What'd ya say? Jack asked, turning off the grinder and pulling off his face guard.

—You can use more pressure, said an old artisan grinning. You'll be grinding that for months at the rate you're going.

—Well, I don't want to take off too much. That would ruin it.

—There's more there than you think. Watch I'll show you.

Jack observed the man's technique. He was a master craftsman. The grinder became an extension of his hands. The burr quickly melted under the whirring wheel to a millimeter above Margaux's smooth bronze skin.

—So, how long have you been doing this? asked Jack.

—About forty years, said the old man, grinning. Now, take a fine needle file and smooth it and you'll never know there was a burr there.

—Right, but first I should practice on some scrap, said Jack.

The old man nodded in agreement and found a piece of scrap bronze.

—Okay, Jack, you can practice on this. Change the wheel often. A sharp wheel makes it go faster and it's safer.

After a few practice runs, Jack had the technique down. After grinding off the burrs, he took files and began smoothing the last vestiges of the casting process.

—Shit, said Jack, putting his finger in his mouth. A small unseen burr in the crotch seam of Margaux's running shorts had cut his finger. A few drops of his blood had fallen on the statue.

—A little blood puts some life into the work, said the old artisan smiling. The old masters thought so. It makes for a unique covenant between the artist and his work.

Jack went to get a bandage from the first aid kit in the office.

—Cut yourself? asked the office manager, a heavy-set Russian woman in her thirties.

—Yeah, my finger found an unseen burr.

—That's why the sign says: Face and Hand Protection Required.

—Well, I'm at the finishing stage of the smoothing.

—Work at your own peril.

Before Jack could take the statue from the foundry, he had to pay the bill. To do that, he needed a check from the Judge. He didn't know where the Judge was, but he started by calling the Judge's office at the courthouse.

—This is sculptor Jack Mahler calling for Judge Howland, he said to the receptionist.

—The Judge is in court, replied the woman. Give me your number and the nature of your call. If it's appropriate, he will return your call.

Well, la-de-da, a strange way to talk to a caller, he thought, "if it's appropriate."

—Tell the Judge, I finished the sculpture of his wife, but he needs to pay the balance of the foundry bill.

—Oh, the Judge will be so pleased. He is looking forward to seeing the finished statue.

—He knows where the foundry is. I've wrapped and crated the piece, so it's ready to travel as soon as he pays the bill. Or he can give me the check, and I'll deliver the statue. Meanwhile, I'll e-mail some photos of the finished piece.

—Jack Mahler, this is Judge Howland returning your call. I understand you finished the statue.

—Yes, sir. It's crated and ready to leave the foundry. You will need to pay the balance of the bill.

—My calendar is full. Can you come to my chambers? I'll give you the check. Maybe you can deliver the statue to my home tonight?

—Of course.

—Give me the exact amount.

—It's \$1,625 plus \$227.50 tax. Total is: \$1,652.50.

—That seems high. Were there hidden costs?

—No, that's the balance due. You made a 50% deposit, but you didn't pay tax on the deposit. The tax is for the full \$3,250. You should appreciate that I didn't bill you for the ten days of hand finishing I did at the foundry.

The Judge held his tongue. What about the finishing job you did on my marriage, thought the Judge? The Judge wanted to say that he should charge Mahler for Margaux's sexual favors. But then, that would be pandering.

—Can you pick-up the check at noon? We can have lunch in my chambers.

—If it suits you. My schedule is open.

—Mexican, okay?

—Works for me.

The Judge sat at his desk. He had a bandage on his left cheek. It didn't look like a professional bandaging job.

—Did you have skin surgery? Jack asked.

The Judge gave him a look that suggested the question was too personal.

—Yes, I mean, no. It's some sort of skin rash. The doctors think it's a rare tropical disease. I've had it for several weeks now.

—I guess it goes with living in Florida. Living here is hard on the skin.

The Judge was obviously uncomfortable in Jack's presence. He looked like he wanted to give Jack a good pasting. The Judge was working hard to avoid the elephant in the room: his wife and Jack's lover, Margaux.

—Are you going to have an unveiling party? Jack asked. That's traditional

The Judge gave Jack his best "are you kidding me look" and raised a skeptical eyebrow.

—You know you are not welcome in my home. I plan to take the statue with me to Santa Fe for the holidays. My wife, son, and daughter will be there, said the Judge, avoiding Margaux's name. It will be our traditional family Christmas.

—These *tortas ahogadas* are excellent, Jack said, changing the topic. Did you order them from Fonda Jalisco?

—Of course. It's the best authentic Mexican food in Sarasota.

—I use to have a studio near their restaurant. They're the real deal.

They ate in silence. Jack could tell the Judge wanted to unleash his fury. His face was red and veins were standing out on his face and neck. Any moment Jack expected the Judge to order the Sergeant-at-Arms to come in and arrest him.

There were pictures of the Judge and his family everywhere in his chambers. Jack could see that the Judge had been a dashing handsome young man. All the photos evoked a happy American family. But all the photographs were old. In all the pictures of his children, they appeared to be grade school age. Why would a man whose son played in the NFL not have a picture of him in his Chicago Bears football uniform? His daughter was beautiful and worked for *The New Yorker* magazine, but the pictures were tomboy snaps of her in pigtails. The most recent picture of Margaux and the Judge looked like it was taken twenty years ago. It showed the Judge accepting an award. Margaux beamed at his side. There was something wrong here. The Judge had effectively ended his family life when he ascended to the bench. Or was there some other issue? Perhaps the Judge had a secret.

—I hate to cut lunch short, said the Judge, but I have a trial in fifteen minutes. Can you deliver the statue at nine tonight?

—Not a problem.

—See you then.

The Judge stood and checked his hair in a mirror. Pulled a comb from his inside suit pocket and refreshed his hair-sprayed coif.

Jack stood and extended his hand. The Judge ignored him, turned and left the room scowling.

—Do you want me to uncrate the statue, or keep it crated for travel? Jack asked the Judge.

—Oh, no. I want to see it now. I trust it is as good as the drawings and the clay model, but I won't pay the balance of the commission until I inspect it.

—I have some tools in my van. I'll uncrate it and leave the crate here for you. If you want, I can crate it when you're ready to travel.

—Not necessary. I'm petty handy with tools. I built 75% of this house myself.

The Judge, dressed in khaki slacks, a coral-pink polo shirt, and shod in huaraches sandals, still had the bandage on his left cheek. His right hand held a glass of scotch. His hair was perfect.

—Do you need help carrying the statue into the house? he asked.

—I've got a dolly. It's not that heavy.

—Suit yourself.

Jack could see the crate landing on the Judge's foot. He would blame Jack, and then there would be a mess. All the Judge's pent-up rage would burst forth. Jack could tell the Judge was seething inside.

—Where is the statue going to live? Jack asked.

—Here in my den. I found this antique mirrored table at an estate sale. I hope it will fit on it.

—Good choice. It looks perfect, and viewers will be able to see the rear of the statue without craning their necks or touching the statue. Nothing ruins a piece of statuary like the acids and oils on human hands. I hand-rubbed five coats of wax on the statue; but still, over time, all that fondling could wear it off.

—Perhaps I should put a cloth down to protect the surface of the wood.

—I've put felt bumpers on the bottom to protect the table. I also drilled and tapped three holes in the base if you want to attach it to a stone or metal base. I put the mounting hardware in a Ziploc bag stapled to the crate. If you decide later to mount it on a pedestal, I can do the installation, no charge.

—Enough prattle, Mahler. Just get the wrappings off, will you. I want to see what magic you've wrought.

Jack unwound the plastic and then let the covering cloth fall slowly to the ground, as if he were performing a slow striptease. He wanted to raise the Judge's curiosity.

The Judge stood there with his mouth open, staring at the statue. He was as transfixed as he was the first time he saw Margaux at the Law School mixer at Yale. He walked over and turned the lights in the room to their highest setting. He studied the statue silently for at least ten minutes.

Mahler had put a light tan patina on the statue. Except for the shorts and sports bra, the statue could have been from ancient Greece. She was running barefoot. The muscle definition and the attitude of her arms and legs gave the impression of effortless forward motion. Margaux was not frozen in time and space, but seemed to be fluidly moving through time and space.

—You know, Mahler, this statue is amazingly real. It's Margaux in full stride. It's vastly superior to anything I imagined. I'm almost afraid she will run off the table.

—Thank you, Judge. I'm glad you like it.

—You've captured her facial expression perfectly. I'm seriously impressed.

—I'm glad you're pleased. Now, if we could finish the financial end of this, I'll leave you

two alone.

The Judge gave Jack a quizzical look.

—Leave the two of us alone? Mahler, do you think I believe that this statue is alive?

—Hey, you never know. She looks very real. She fooled me many times when I was smoothing and polishing her.

—I'm sure you've had plenty of experience massaging Margaux's body, said the Judge, giving Jack a sarcastic grimace.

The Judge put his hand on the statue and stroked its left arm. He ran the back of his hand over her cheek. Too bad he had no feelings for the real Margaux. He just couldn't let her go. No one in his family history had ever divorced. After his father's death in a gay brothel in India, the Judge had curbed his sexual appetite for preadolescent boys.

—The skin feels so life-like. How did you do that, Mahler?

—Trade secret, he replied. It is startling, isn't it?

—Could fool me.

—The statue is almost a living creature, a perfect half-size copy of Margaux.

The Judge felt something change in his body. He couldn't put his finger on it. It wasn't lust or desire. It was a quickening in his veins, but his heart rate didn't change. He suddenly realized Jack Mahler was waiting for him.

—So, I owe you \$2500, correct?

—Yes, sir. I also have the authentication papers and a certificate that the casting mold was destroyed as per our contract. No one can make copies unless you authorize it. They would have to use this statue as the model for any copies. As part of the agreement, Mahler Galleries will receive a 50% commission on the sale of any copies. I retain rights to all the preparatory materials, including the maquettes and the full-size clay model. All this is usual and customary, as you may know.

—Yes, yes.

The Judge walked to his desk, sat and retrieved his checkbook from a side drawer. After he had written the check, he stood and walked over to Jack holding the check as if it were a tainted piece of rotting meat.

—Take this, he said, shoving the check into Jack's hand. Now get out of my house. I don't ever want to see you again. Never. I should have had you shot, you bastard.

Jack took his dolly and hurried out the front door. Jack couldn't believe what the Judge had just said. The Judge's intemperate remark was totally out of character. I must be getting to that stuffy old fart, thought Jack. Just how much does he know, or was it all intuition?

The Judge couldn't sleep. Whatever change was taking place in him was keeping him awake. He also realized that he'd lost his cool with Mahler. Telling him he should have had him shot could be trouble. If Mahler filed a complaint, he could be suspended or worse. It could cost him his Judgeship. Mahler now had leverage over him. What's wrong that I lost my cool?

The Judge had no interest in Margaux other than their public life as Sarasota's most glamorous couple. Margaux's social sophistication and grace, complimented by her witty repartee, had helped cement his career. Margaux was the perfect accoutrement to his professional life and the perfect foil for his illicit passions. The thought of having sex with her was repulsive to him. After the children were born, he noticed that she lost her boyish figure and was womanlier. Now she had a woman's hips, and breasts. To tear her away from Jack Mahler, he would have to resume his long-dormant matrimonial duties. The thought gave him chills.

The Judge got out of bed and went into the bathroom. He decided a hot shower would help him sleep. He removed the bandage from his face. The red excrescence still festered on his left cheek. He leaned in close to the mirror. The activity on the rash reminded him of the mounds of 17-year locusts piled on the streets of Princeton with their millions of dying twitches.

After his shower, he donned a bathrobe, entered the den and poured another scotch. He flipped on all the lights and stood looking at the statue of Margaux.

He touched her arm. The skin was as smooth and soft as a young boy's bum. The quickening in his body started again. He couldn't take his hands off of the statue. He rubbed the lower back. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught the reflection of the left side of his face in the mirror behind the statue. He jumped back putting his hand on his left cheek. The rash was gone. He looked again. It was not there. He took a gulp of scotch. When did it disappear? He saw it not ten minutes ago in the bathroom.

The telephone rang. Reluctantly, the Judge pulled himself away from the mirror, walked to his desk and answered the phone.

—Judge Howland's residence, said the Judge in his professional voice.

—Leland, it's me, Margaux.

—Hello, Margaux. How is Santa Fe? Is there snow on the ski slopes?

—Did Jack deliver the statue yet?

—Yes, but you still can't return to Sarasota.

—Well, how does it look?

—Jack Mahler is a bastard, but he's a genius. The statue is so lifelike I expect it to run away.

—So, it's a success?

—Spectacularly so.

—I'm glad you're pleased. Where did you put it?

—I found a mirrored table at an estate sale. It's on that table in my den, just inside the door. I need to install some spotlights to properly light it. You will be pleased when you see it.

—When will that be?

—Christmas week when I come out to Santa Fe. I drive it out in your Honda.

—Troy won't be able to come, you know. The Bears play the Packers that weekend, and he's on the starting roster now.

—Our Troy starting for the Chicago Bears?

—Right! If you weren't so busy being crazy, you could have seen him play Tampa Bay. He intercepted a pass and saved the game. The coach gave him the game ball.

—I'm not now, nor have I ever been, crazy, countered the Judge. Just get that out of your little pea-brain head. You could start rumors talking like that. You know better.

All the misery of living with that overbearing and belittling man came rushing back. She never wanted to see him again.

—I think I would prefer it if you didn't come out to Santa Fe for the holidays.

The Judge froze.

—You don't mean that. It's a family tradition to spend Christmas in Santa Fe.

—You ended that tradition when you exiled me here.

—I beg your pardon, Mrs. Howland. You exiled yourself when you started sleeping with Jack Mahler. You see how correct my intuitions were?

—Go fuck yourself and your intuitions.

The line went dead.

The Judge refilled his drink and walked over to the statue. He looked at his face in the mirror. The rash was there in all its suppurating ugliness.

—Christ! Talk to that woman for five minutes and the disease comes back with a vengeance.

He was going to turn off the lights and retire, but the desire to touch the flesh on the statue one more time was overpowering. There was a sensuousness to it that was addicting. As he caressed the outstretched hand, hardly as big as a twelve-year old's, he watched the mirror. Slowly, the maculation disappeared.

—Too much scotch, he said aloud.

He returned to bed, sleeping fitfully.

In the morning, the Judge woke and checked his face in the bathroom mirror. The rash

fairly glowed on his face. After dressing and pouring a cup of coffee, he walked into the den and looked at the statue.

—Shit! Goddamn it to hell, he yelled.

A putrid red patina covered every place he had touched the statue the night before.

8

The rash on the Judge's face had become an obsession. But why could only he see it? Or were those who saw it too embarrassed to tell him? It was plain as day to him. And now the despicable abomination infected the glorious bronze statue of Margaux.

Determined to find a cure for the vile red scourge, he asked and received a three-month paid leave of absence from his judicial duties. It wasn't only a disease, it had become a threat to his sanity and livelihood. His shrink thought he was delusional. Someone, somewhere had the key to solving this mysterious rash. But who? And where? Could there be some diabolical plot against him? Some dark phenomena afoot? Maybe a person he sentenced to a long prison term had paid a sorcerer to bedevil him.

The Judge sat at his desk in the den pondering the catalog of explanations.

—Mr. Howland, said Katarzyna, his Polish maid, no work today?

—Hello, Katarzyna. No, I'm taking some time off.

Katarzyna brushed the statue of Margaux with her feather duster.

—Statue of Mrs. Howland. So beautiful. So real.

This Judge looked at Katarzyna in disbelief.

—What? There's a big problem with the statue. Look, Katarzyna, there are red spots. I think Jack Mahler ruined the statue with some home-brew coating. He ruined a perfectly good portrait of my friend Abe Metzinger with his experiments. Jack's not as smart as he thinks he is.

Katarzyna gave the Judge a quizzical look. She didn't understand what Judge Howland was saying. There were no red spots on the statue. It was pristine. She touched the arm.

—Feel like skin. You work too hard, drink too much, she mumbled, shuffling off to the living room, her vacuum cleaner trailing behind her.

The Judge watched her leave. Is she blind or am I nutso? He couldn't say anymore.

—Leland, said Dr. Galprin the Judge's psychiatrist, let's do a little experiment. Are you willing to engage in some empirical research?

—You're convinced I'm crazy. I'm convinced you're incompetent. What can an experiment accomplish?

—It might resolve that issue entirely.

—All right. I'm game. So what's the experiment?

—You're going to remove that silly bandage from your face, and we're going to walk up to Southside Deli. We'll get lunch. I want you to see if anyone notices anything unusual about your face.

—People here are too restrained, too uptight, too P.C. to say squat. Besides, it's too close to the hospital. People expect to see people around here with maladies and facial disfigurements.

—Indulge me, Leland.

Southside Deli was packed. The Judge hoped no one would recognize him. Since most of the customers were medical workers from the hospital or nearby clinics, there were no lawyers or police officers among the diners.

As they were walking back to Galprin's office, they met a retired Judge.

—Lee, what a pleasure. Why I haven't seen you or Margaux in weeks, said the old colleague clapping his hand on the Judge's shoulder.

—Well, Margaux is at our Santa Fe house. I've been busy and a little under the weather.

—You look fit as a fiddle, and you've gotten rid of that pesky rash you had on your cheek. Did they ever discover what it was?

—Some rare tropical thing. Had the docs stumped. Oh, this is Dr. Galprin. Dr. Galprin, meet Judge Marlowe. Judge Marlowe and I go way back. He mentored me in my early days.

—Pleased to meet you, said Galprin, shaking Marlowe's hand.

—Lee, we missed Margaux at the Siesta Key half-marathon. Thought for sure she would defend her title. She has won her age group six of the eight years we've held the race.

—She's supervising some renovations at our Santa Fe house at the moment.

—That doesn't sound like fun. Say, you must be proud of your son, Troy. He made a helluva play against Tampa Bay. Saved the game for the Bears.

—Yes, the head coach gave him the game ball.

—Well, good to see you both. I've got to keep moving. My granddaughter is about to deliver my first great-grandchild.

—Congratulations, boy or girl?

—I'll know by supertime.

—So, said Galprin, after they returned to his office, there is no rash on your face. If you're convinced, now we can work on why you think there is one there.

—Are you going to psychoanalyze me?

—What do you mean psychoanalyze? If you're implying, try to discover what caused you to have this problem, then yes. Having delusional thoughts is a disease. Not particularly dangerous, but in a case such as yours, it is a borderline obsession, a fetish.

—You mean like I'm a head case?
 —I would never say that to a patient. Can you come Friday, same time?
 —Yes, I told you I took a leave of absence to get to the bottom of this.
 —I don't want you to put any more bandages on your face. I want you to get out in public. Go to the beach, shopping, museums, restaurants, parks. You need to reinforce your psyche that you don't have this thing on your face.

Jack Mahler was out of steam. He sat on his Adirondack chair and studied the alabaster statue of Margaux. The physical effort of working on such a large stone sculpture was enormous. He was pushing himself to exhaustion.

He finished all the chisel work and was now power-grinding and shaping with files and raffles. As Margaux emerged from the alabaster, he had to tell himself to slow down. Be careful. Study the stone. There could be a hidden fault. A crack. The wrong force or angle of a tool could be disastrous. It could ruin all his efforts. The head and upper torso were ready for the long, arduous polishing process. He still had to finish shaping her legs, feet, and the base, probably another forty hours of filing and grinding, and then endless polishing and waxing.

To see how the stone would look when finished, he took a damp cloth and wiped the face. The face glowed. The stone was magical. On a whim, he leaned forward and kissed the moistened lips of the statue.

Did he imagine something just now? The statue's lips were warm. He kissed the lips again. They were warm. The statue's lips seemed to cling to his. Exactly the way Margaux let her mouth linger after a soft kiss.

Jack shook his head. I must be so tired I'm hallucinating. He returned to the Adirondack chair. He was pleased with his work. It would be his masterpiece.

Jack's ringing cell phone interrupted his reverie. He hauled himself up from the chair and walked to his workbench. He blew the stone dust off of the cell phone.

—Hello.
 —Jack?
 —Margaux! Oh, so good to hear your voice. How are you?
 —Miserable.
 —Why?
 —I miss you so much. I had a big quarrel with the Leland. I told him I want a divorce. He says he'll fight me all the way. He wants to come out to Santa Fe for Christmas and New Year's holidays. I told him he's not welcome. He said he wasn't welcome because I'd be entertaining you in Santa Fe. He's such an overbearing ass. I called Troy, and he has tickets for the Bear-Packers game. So how 'bout you meet me in Chicago, Friday afternoon?

—You don't have to ask twice.

—I was hoping you would say that. I've booked a room at The Waldorf.

—Great! You should see how beautiful you look in alabaster. The stone has an inner glow so like you. You are going to love it.

—I can't wait to see it. Bring photographs.

Margaux hesitated, unsure whether to tell Jack. She decided to reveal what she experienced.

—This is going to sound foolish, Jack, but I was sitting on the couch debating whether I should call you and I swear I could feel you kiss my lips. It made me so lonely for you, I said to myself, "To hell with the restraining order, I'm calling Jack."

—Sweetheart, I just kissed your stone lips, not five minutes before you called. Believe me. The statue is magical.

Carlos parked his truck on a mesa north of Santa Fe. He sat on the tailgate in the setting sun. He wore a wool shirt, a worn fleece jacket, jeans, boots and a misshapen felt hat with three eagle feathers dangling from the hatband. His dark eyes were closed in meditation. He wasn't in danger, but his coyote spirit was telling him to act. He didn't know where or how to act. He needed to summon a vision. He raised his arms to the sun and began a full-throated chant. As the sun set behind the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, his song produced a vision. Satisfied, he got into his truck and drove home for dinner. He knew what to do. Raven and Coyote were his familiars.

When the Judge arrived home from his appointment with Dr. Galprin, he went into the bathroom and checked his face in the mirror. There, bold as ever, was the goddamn red rash.

—Son of a bitch! I knew those medical people were goddamn lying to me. My intuition was correct.

The Judge walked into the den. Everywhere he had touched the statue, he saw the red rash.

—Goddamnit! I'm sick of this shit. It's time to get rip-roaring drunk.

After a few drinks and some cold pizza, the Judge's resolve to keep his illicit desires in check weakened. He showered, put on a robe, refreshed his drink and walked into the den. He booted his computer. After entering three passwords, he gained access to the hidden partition on his hard drive. He opened his man-boy porn collection. He chose his favorite video. He became aroused watching a man whip a boy's bum. On his way to refill his drink, he stopped and regarded the besmirched statue of Margaux.

Why the hell did I go through with this? he thought. I should have canceled the commission the minute I suspected Margaux was fucking that jerk. What a fool I was ... now look at me, awash in a red miasma. I could kill that woman and her lover. Ah, if it were only Renaissance Italy!

He studied the small hand with arthritis in the pinky. It looked so familiar, yet he recalled a similar hand, a boy's hand. A boy's hand with a deformed little finger. The memory of that child's hand lay buried in the forbidden recesses of his subconscious. Fondling the statue's hand, he felt a stirring in his loins. Flashbacks of smarmy sexual encounters in dark alleys and parked cars flooded his mind.

As he slowly slid his engorged penis in and out of the statue's hand, he recalled his last trip to New York City. It was raining. He was in a rental car parked on Washington Street in Lower Manhattan. Now he felt the naked boy's small hand on his cock. He remembered the boy's glistening eyes as he teased the Judge's rampant erection.

—Noooooooooooo! shouted the Judge as he came in a spasm that nearly knocked the statue off the table. The Judge collapsed on the floor.

Bleary-eyed and unsteady the Judge awoke lying on the den floor. He stumbled to his feet and went to the bathroom. As he stood over the bowl, he looked down and saw his penis covered with the cursed red rash. He screamed.

In the shower, he washed his penis with soap. He used the hand brush. He scrubbed his penis nearly raw, but still the red rash remained.

—God damn it, he yelled, throwing the scrub brush on the shower floor.

Wait, stop, and calm down, he told himself. There has to be a rational explanation for all this. Galprin tells me there is no red rash on my face. There's probably none on my cock, but why the hell do I see it? Am I crazy, or the victim of some paranormal prank? What causes these visions, if that is what they are?

After toweling off, the Judge walked into the den naked. Examining the statue he noticed that the red rash on the left hand was now gone. He looked on the floor. There on a red pool floated last night's ejaculation.

On a whim, he put his raw flaccid member in the statue's extended left hand. As it rested against the palm of the small hand, the rash on his penis disappeared. The Judge threw his head back, unleashing a long drawn out howl.

The Judge awoke to hear the maid, Katarzyna, singing some silly ditty in Polish.

—Mr. Howland, you still in bed? Almost one in afternoon.

—There was a party last night.

In a panic, the Judge wondered if he had shut down his computer. He threw on his robe and went into the den. The computer was off, but warm. Did Katarzyna turn it off? Did she see any of the pictures? His life was unraveling. How could he be so careless?

He looked to see if his jizz was still on the floor in the red pool.

It was not there. Katarzyna must have cleaned it up. The Judge stood holding his head. He was going crazy. He wasn't going crazy; he was already there. Something was controlling his mind.

—Katarzyna, do you believe in spirits?

—Sometimes. Before we left Warsaw, my sister foresaw the death of our brother. Mama, she dreamed Papa died the night the Russians shot him.

—If I thought some spirit was interfering with my life, do you know anyone who can help me?

—My grandmamma. She a spirit person.

—What does that mean?

—She can detect good and evil spirits.

—Does she live here?

—She live Tampa.

—Can I meet her?

—I bring her here next time.

—No, tomorrow.

—Okay, you want? Tomorrow afternoon. Okay.

—Judge Harland, this my grandmamma. She called Urszula, said Katarzyna.

Katarzyna's relative looked like a caricature of a fairy tale witch. She was short with a long nose, thin lips, pointy chin, and a few warts. A babushka covered her thinning gray hair. She had a widow's hump that forced her to walk staring at the ground in front of her feet. She used a cane and wore gold lamé slippers. She wore numerous colorful scarves. The Judge assumed there was a shift or caftan under all the scarves.

—Pleased to meet you, Urszula, I'm Lee.

—We sit table?

—Let's go into the kitchen so we won't disturb Katarzyna.

The Judge sat opposite Urszula. She took the Judge's left hand in both her hands. Her hands were very warm, almost hot. The Judge expected such an elderly woman to have

cold hands.

—You sick, said the old woman.

The Judge didn't know if that was a question or observation.

—Yes, I see a red rash on my cheek, he said pointing to the spot. The doctors tell me there is no rash on my cheek. But I see it plain as day when I look in a mirror.

Straining her neck, the crone twisted her head to examine the Judge's face.

—I see it. Come close.

The Judge rose from his chair and squatted next to the woman. She put her lips exactly where the Judge knew the rash was. Suddenly the old crone's head snapped back. It was as if she had received a powerful electric shock.

—What was that? asked the Judge, steadying the old woman on her chair.

The woman didn't answer. When the Judge looked at her face, the pupils of the woman's eyes were rolled out of sight. Her fluttering tongue was dripping red foam between her swollen lips. A red froth floated in front of her chest.

—What the hell! Urszula, are you okay? Are you sick? Speak to me.

The woman sat shaking in the chair. After a few moments, the color returned to her face, the swelling subsided and the red cloud disappeared.

—What was that? asked the Judge.

—Strong hex. I fix.

The Judge looked at the old crone. Should he believe this hokum? He had just witnessed the old woman's involuntary reaction to the rash. There must be something on his face that shocked the old crone. Or was it a ruse? Was he being conned? His intuition told him what he witnessed was real.

—Sit, said the old hag, pointing to the chair across the table from her.

She took his left hand in both her hands.

—I see man. He makes people and animals. His spirit here.

The woman released the Judge's hand.

—That's it?

—Done, said the old witch, giving the Judge a wan smile.

Dr. Galprin looked at the Judge. He was not the vain, fastidious man he knew. The Judge's face was unshaven, his clothes disheveled, his hair uncombed, his eyes red-rimmed. An astounding transformation from the man he had seen on Tuesday.

—Do you still see the rash? Galprin asked the Judge.

—Of course, but you tell me it's not there, so I didn't bandage my face.

—You look distressed.

—I couldn't sleep last night. When I finally dozed off, I slept through my alarm. I didn't have time to shower. I barely made our appointment. You have to believe me. I see the rash. It's real. It's contagious.

—Contagious? asked Galprin, folding his hands on his desk and wondering how far afield his patient's mind had gone. Explain this to me.

—I commissioned a bronze statue of my wife from Jack Mahler, the author, painter, and sculptor. He delivered it earlier this week. That night I was admiring it. It is quite a remarkable work. Mahler apparently has some secret process because the surface of the bronze feels like actual skin. The next morning, I looked at the statue. Everywhere I touched the statue the night before was covered in a red rash. I know it sounds crazy, and it is crazy. Believe me, as a Judge, I've heard more than my share of outrageous stories. But I swear this is true.

—Has anyone else seen the statue? Your wife or your children?

—My wife is at our Santa Fe house. My son's in Chicago and my daughter's in New York City. My maid saw it but didn't mention the red rash. But then, her English is limited.

The doctor looked up from his yellow notepad. He noticed that the Judge hadn't mentioned any of his family members by name.

—Did you ask the maid if she saw the red rash?

—I don't recall, said the Judge, hoping the doctor wouldn't catch the prevarication.

—Too bad, that would have been valuable information.

—What are you implying, Dr. Galprin? If she didn't see the green rash, it would prove that I'm delusional or hallucinating?

Galprin didn't answer.

—Well? asked the Judge.

—Look, Lee, I'm going to prescribe group therapy.

The Judge stood and began pacing the small cramped office.

—Me? Do you know who I am? I can't go to group therapy. I'm a state Judge. If it gets out that I'm in therapy for a mental disorder, I'll be relieved of my Judgeship.

The Judge wondered if he should tell Galprin about the old crone. If Galprin discovered

that he was consulting some Polish witch, it would confirm that he was losing his marbles.

—Lee, relax. The group is non-judgmental. We can make sure no one in the group knows your identity. No one will know you're a Judge. It will help you. The group will consist of people with similar disorders. It will be a small group of four or five.

—Come on, Galprin. I'm not hearing voices. I don't want to be thrown in with a bunch of schizoids.

—Well, you think about it. I believe it is the best course of treatment. Lee, you've got to pull yourself together. You're letting yourself slide. That doesn't bode well for your future. We find being in the company of people with similar problems is beneficial in maintaining one's self-esteem.

—I have plenty of self-esteem, Dr. Galprin. You know that. My intuition tells me you are setting me up for failure.

—Frequently, even a well-educated individual is not qualified to judge his or her problems. The group finds the chinks in the personality and helps heal the fissure. I've witnessed it time and time again. It's in your best interest.

9

Saturday night. The Judge, dressed in paisley print pajamas, sat in his living room watching Visconti's film adaptation of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*. Gustave Mahler's poignant *Adagietto* from the *Fifth Symphony* awoke the forbidden longings in the Judge's psyche. The purity and beauty of the music reinforced his smoldering longings. Though the boy in the film, Tadzio, was older than he preferred, the Judge's body ached for the beautiful boy. Suddenly something clicked.

—Mahler! shouted the Judge. That's it. That bastard Jack Mahler, he creates people. His spirit is in this house. He's the cause of my curse. That old Polish crone figured it out. She could see the rash! The rash is real. It almost killed the old crone. What was I thinking when I allowed this statue into my home?

The Judge stopped the film and walked over to the statue. He dropped his pajamas. Reflected in the mirror on the stand were his genitals covered with a red rash. He checked his face. There it was: the red splotch. He grasped the extended left hand of the statue and squeezed. The rash disappeared. He checked his face. The rash was gone. The Judge pulled up his pajamas.

Now he tried to remember: Did the statue give him the rash, or did he give the statue the rash? He was confused. Then he remembered the bird. The big raven with malevolent gold eyes. It was no ordinary bird. It had to be a messenger. Well, he got the message. He was infected. Now was the time for action.

He went to the garage and grabbed his Milwaukee Sawzall, inserted a new metal cutting blade and returned to the den. He would cut off the left hand of the statue at the wrist.

Then he would dispose of the statue. Margaux wanted a divorce. Well, he'd get rid of her right now. He sure as hell didn't need this statue to remind him of her, or the misery her boyfriend, Jack Mahler, inflicted on him.

The fresh Sawzall blade made short work of the task. He took the amputated hand, still hot from cutting, into the bathroom. He stood naked in front of the full-length mirror. He experimented. When he touched the statue's hand, the rash faded. When he didn't touch statue's hand, the rash reappeared.

He had a plan. He took the severed hand out to his garage workshop. Using files and a sander, he smoothed the edges where he had made the cut. Knowing he could master the rash, he had the confidence to move forward. Variations on his plan filled his thoughts. His mind flew from idea to idea.

Back in the bedroom, he took a jock strap from his dresser. He carefully inserted the hand in the pouch. He liked the feel of the hand on his genitals. It was sexy, and it made a nice satisfying lump. All the horror of the ailment drained from his body. In Margaux's vanity mirror, there was no rash on his face. He checked his crotch: no rash. His intuitions were correct. The beauty of the solution was that no one could tell he had the amulet in his pants, and he no longer had the red rash. Now for part two of his plan.

The Judge took the keys to Margaux's Honda CR-V from the pegboard in the kitchen. He went into the den and lifted the statue off the table.

—Christ, he said, putting the statue back on the table. He tried several different handholds. Finally, by holding the statue's left arm and left leg, he could carry the statue.

This statue is heavier than fifty pounds. It must weigh a hundred pounds, he thought. Mahler picked it up effortlessly. For sure the S.O.B. has some special powers.

As the Judge carried the statue to Margaux's Honda, the statue's left arm would come close to the severed hand nestled around his genitals. Each time the arm was near the hidden hand, there was an attractive force, pulling the statue against his body. It seemed as if the severed hand wanted to reattach itself to the arm. The arm kept twisting the body to be near the severed hand. It took the Judge several tries to overcome this attractive force and wrestle the statue to the back of the Honda. With a final heave, the Judge threw the statue into the rear of the SUV. He covered the statue with a striped beach blanket.

Jack Mahler, Margaux Howland and Margaux's son Troy, were dining at Gibson's, one of Chicago's favorite steak restaurants. The Saturday night clientele was a mix of sports and entertainment celebrities, tourists and neighborhood regulars.

Troy had never seen his mother so lovely and radiant. Margaux was all smiles. Her lover, Jack Mahler, wasn't at all what Troy imagined. Jack was six feet, moved with grace

and had the gnarled hands of an artisan. Jack looked closer to fifty-five than his seventy years. Jack's rugged masculinity was the opposite of the Judge's pampered good looks.

—I don't know about you, Troy, said Jack, folding his napkin and putting it on the table, but that's enough protein to fuel me for a week.

—Mom, said Troy as if Jack had offered a challenge, if you're not going to finish your steak, I'll take it.

Margaux held her plate while Troy transferred the remains of her steak to his plate.

—My growing son, said Margaux, patting Troy's hand. Here, take the potatoes, too.

Troy was tall and lanky like his mother. He looked more like a major league shortstop than an NFL defensive back.

Several of Troy's Chicago Bear teammates were also dining at Gibson's and visited their table. Troy introduced them to Margaux and Jack. On the Q.T., they all complimented Troy for having such a hot babe as a mother. One of Troy's teammates, who had also been a teammate of Troy's at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, asked Margaux if Jack was the Jack Mahler who wrote *The SoHo Quartet*.

—Yes, he is, replied Margaux, beaming with pride.

—My name's Steve Harris. I really enjoyed your books, especially the first one: *Francesco Martinelli*.

—Thank you, Steve, said Jack. That's my favorite, also

After dessert and coffee, Troy said he had to study game films.

—I'll see you after the game on Sunday, said Troy, kissing his mother.

—Glad to meet you, Mr. Mahler, said Troy, shaking Jack's hand.

—My pleasure. I'm looking forward to watching you play.

—Maybe, said Troy, with a shrug. Bear-Packer games are bitter rivalries. Coach may not want a rookie in a game against Aaron Rodgers. I might get some playing time on kick-offs and punts.

—You could have a chance at a game-changing moment, said Jack. Be ready for it.

—We'll see. Goodnight, mom. Don't do anything I wouldn't do, said Troy, winking and climbing into a cab.

The Judge drove into Jack Mahler's studio driveway. Jack's van was parked next to the studio. The Judge couldn't remember if Jack owned a car or motorcycle in addition to the van. The lights were off in the studio. The yard lights were on a motion sensor and lit up the driveway and parking area.

The Judge peered into the studio from the window in the door. He could make out a large object. It was too dark inside to know what it was. The Judge returned to the Honda and

looked for a flashlight. There was a flashlight, but the batteries were dead.

He walked to the house and rang the doorbell. A gray cat sat in the bay window watching the Judge with the disdain domestic cats have for cat-haters.

If the cat's in the house, thought the Judge, then Jack is probably away.

The Judge leaned on the doorbell for twenty seconds. No answer. The cat had jumped from the window and now sat on the back of a sofa watching the Judge.

That's good. No one's home, thought the Judge. What are the chances the studio is alarmed? Probably pretty good. He walked back to the studio. Sure enough, there was a decal on the door window: Secured by ADT.

The Judge looked at his watch: 10 p.m. Plenty of time to attend to this later, thought the Judge.

He backed the Honda out of the driveway and drove to Marina Jack. He loaded the bronze statue on a dolly and wheeled it to his boat.

—Evening, Judge, said the Harbor Master, an energetic red-haired woman in her forties.

—Evening, Cass.

—I hope you're not planning on going out tonight.

—No, tomorrow.

—There's a big sea running from those strong northerlies we've had all week. Big Pass is treacherous, and the sand bars probably have shifted. The surf has washed a lot of sand off of South Lido beach.

—If things have calmed down tomorrow, I might venture out.

—Well, be prudent. I pulled a lot of living and dead yachtsmen and fisherman from the water during my twenty years with the Coast Guard. These Florida inlets can be as wicked as anything up north.

—Judges are nothing if not prudent, said the Judge.

Cass turned her electric cart around.

—Are you staying on your boat tonight? Cass asked, pulling even with the Judge.

—I have some case reading to do. It's more peaceful here. The morning leaf-blower fest in my neighborhood is not conducive to serious study.

—I know what you mean. Well, goodnight, Judge.

—Goodnight, Cass.

The tide was at maximum flood. The Judge's boat, docked at the A-Dock along the sea wall, floated too high above the pier. He couldn't lift the hundred-pound statue aboard now. He left it in the cart. On board, he set an alarm for four a.m. The tide should have ebbed enough to allow him to load the statue aboard his boat. He made a peanut butter sandwich and poured a generous scotch.

The Judge woke at 3:30 a.m. He put on jeans, a T-shirt and deck shoes. With the tide ebbing, the rail of his boat was below the level of the pier. He lowered the bronze statue of Margaux into the aft cockpit. He covered it with the beach blanket and lashed it to the fighting chair.

He gathered up a flashlight and the heavy axe he used to deliver the *coup de grace* to big sharks and strode to the parking lot. That bastard Jack Mahler was going to pay, thought the Judge, and pay big-time. Two could play at these games. Mess with my head, you'll wish you never met me. I am going to render final judgment on your art, Mr. Mahler.

It was pitch-dark on Jack's street. The Judge decided to park the Honda on the street. He walked up to Jack's studio and gallery. First, check all the doors and windows, he said to himself. He had to be careful not to become alcohol-brave and trip the security alarm.

He found where the telephone line entered the studio. He knew from countless robbery cases that a telephone line connected the central alarm center to the studio. He cut the line with the axe. Now he had to find a way to enter the studio.

He couldn't believe his luck. The bathroom window in the gallery was open a crack. The Judge pushed it fully open and wiggled through the window. He didn't hear an alarm.

—Shit, said the Judge under his breath. Squirming through the window his right hand had gone directly into the toilet bowl.

—Doesn't that jerk know to put the toilet seat down? he said to the empty building.

The Judge rinsed his hands and dried them on a towel. He grabbed the axe and flashlight and entered the studio. He saw the alarm panel by the front door. A red LED on the box was blinking. He walked to the panel. Printed under the blinking LED: SYS ERR.

I probably have a half hour before some factotum from ADT arrives, calculated the Judge.

He flipped on the work lights. There on a wooden stand was the life-size alabaster statue of Margaux. It looked almost finished.

The Judge's eyes gleamed. He relished the thought of destroying this replica of his unfaithful wife and her lover's efforts. He came to destroy paintings, but now he could extract his revenge on Jack and Margaux.

He studied the statue looking for the best place to inflict damage. He didn't know what kind of stone it was, but he figured a few good blows from the axe would crack it apart. He couldn't believe how desirable Jack had made Margaux. She was fairly dripping with

sexuality and beauty.

That Jack Mahler is some piece of work, thought the Judge. Didn't he see the post-menopausal sagging of the flesh, the flaccid breasts, the thinning of the hair, the cellulite on the back of the thighs? Jack wasn't as good an artist as he thought. It was obvious his ego surpassed his talent. What made him think he was one for the history books?

The Judge raised the axe over his head and brought the butt down on the crown of the statue's head. The axe stopped short of the statue's head and bounced out of the Judge's hands, slithering across the studio floor.

—What the hell?

The Judge looked at his hands. Red slime dripped from his arm.

—Goddamit to hell. I forgot to take the hand! Gaaahhhhhhh! he yelled in frustration.

He retrieved the axe and looked for a new place to strike.

—Take this you whore, he howled, aiming the axe at Margaux's right arm. Again it rebounded out of his hand before touching the stone.

He studied the statue. He touched it with his bare hand. Instantly, a red cloud hid the statue. A pestiferous stench filled the air. He could barely make out the statue in the red fog.

—What's going on here? he said to the statue.

The Judge retrieved the axe. He swung with all his strength where he thought the belly of the statue was. Again the axe rebounded as if it had struck a force before it touched the statue.

—Ah ha! Why is there no sound when the axe flies off the statue? Something is wrong here. What is protecting the statue?

The Judge stood panting. The stench of the red cloud made him nauseous. But, his blood was up. Years of withholding his real feelings about Margaux now came forth as rage. Unmitigated hatred. He looked at his hands and arms. Red sludge covered his arms. The red growth was making him crazy. His fury overwhelmed rational thought.

—Play with my head, Mahler, this is what you're going to get. You're going to suffer. I'm going to erase you from my life. You're going to wish you never met me.

The pestiferous cloud became stronger. Nausea overwhelmed the Judge. He ran to the studio door and flung it open. He tripped on the doorsill, falling he vomited in the driveway. White maggots crawled in the red spew.

Standing in the driveway, he couldn't make out Margaux hidden in the red fog. He decided to push the statue over. The Judge ran at the cloud full-tilt. When he entered the enshrouding cloud, there was a bright blue flash. The force of the blue spark threw the Judge on his back. He didn't remember hitting the floor.

When he came to, he saw the statue of Margaux standing above him with that familiar seductive smile on her face. He thought he saw one of her big toes twitch. He crawled to Margaux's alabaster foot and bit the toe. Immediately his body convulsed and began to shudder.

—Ahhhhh, yelled the Judge, running from the studio, blood gushing from his mouth.

Outside, he stopped and spat a tooth onto the gravel driveway. He wiped his mouth with his hand. The blood on his hand was red.

He spotted the gold-eyed raven. The very vile bird that delivered the rash. It stood on the ground its eyes changing colors. The raven plucked the Judge's tooth from the gravel, and flew away disappearing in a blue flash.

Margaux screamed. She was writhing in pain. Jack snapped awake.

—What the hell? Sweetheart, what's wrong?

Margaux sat perspiring and holding her head with both her hands.

—Jack, it feels like someone hit me with a hammer.

Just then her upper body shuddered as if struck. Margaux's right arm snapped into an unnaturally twisted position. It was as if she was suffering from a stroke or some neurological attack.

—Christ, what's going on here? Should I call the hotel doctor? Jack asked.

—Just hold me, she said, wincing from another attack.

Jack took her in his arms. He could feel the tremors in her body. Not minor twinges like a muscle spasm, but gut-wrenching convulsions.

If she was having a seizure, he had to make sure she didn't swallow her tongue.

Jack pried her mouth open. At that moment, Margaux convulsed and bit Jack's hand. Blood poured from the wound. Margaux reflexively swallowed the blood filling her mouth.

Jack felt her body relax. Margaux gave him a tired smile.

—What the hell happened? asked Jack, wrapping his bloody hand in a towel.

She screamed again and shook her right foot.

—Something is biting my big toe.

Margaux lay back on the pillow covered with perspiration. Her nightgown and bedding were soaked. Her eyes smiled at Jack, but she looked exhausted. She held Jack's hand for comfort.

—Something weird was going on, said Jack. Sweetheart, I thought I was going to lose you. What was it? A stroke? A seizure?

—No, I'm okay. Nothing like that. It was something Carlos was doing.

—You mean Carlos, the gardener in Santa Fe?

—Carlos, she whispered. It was Carlos. When I bit you and your blood dripped into my mouth, for a brief moment I saw your studio. The Judge was trying to destroy your statue of me. Then I saw Carlos morph into a raven. I saw the Judge run from your studio.

—Jesus Christ. Damn it to hell. I've gotta call ADT. What was the Judge doing in my studio?

10

After his failure to destroy the statue, the Judge drove to his boat, retrieved the hand and drove home. He took a long shower then poured himself a generous scotch and leisurely pleased himself with the magical bronze hand. This small talisman protected him from the red plague. He kissed the hand and placed it on his erection.

It was after noon on Sunday when the Judge woke. It was late. He had a severe case of cottonmouth. He drank two glasses of water, ate a banana, and drove to his boat.

When he passed the charter boat docks, he saw that the *Flying Fish* day boat was out; also two of the larger charter sport fishing boats. Big Pass must be navigable. He parked and boarded his boat, *Justice*. He started the two diesel engines and disconnected the shore power.

—You going out? asked Cass, the Harbor Master.

—Yeah, going up to St. Pete. I'll go up the bay.

—Good idea. Captain Mike said he had a rough go navigating *Flying Fish* out of Big Pass. The channel has moved about a twenty yards south-southeast. Mike said one of his guys dropped a black and white buoy near mid-channel.

—Will you take my mooring lines, said the Judge, passing the boat's stern lines to Cass.

—When are you coming back?
—Probably tomorrow.
—Have a safe trip.

The Judge saw the buoy in the Big Pass channel. He passed it close aboard. He could see plenty of breaking waves. It was white-knuckle navigating. He knew from long experience how one could be in nine feet of water and two feet away the water depth was less than a foot.

Once clear of R2, the most seaward channel buoy, he set his course due west, not at all toward Tampa Bay.

The confused seas became more regular the further from shore he sailed. On his westerly course, *Justice* shouldered the waves off her starboard bow. *Justice's* motion in the seaway was easy with no pounding.

The Judge set his engine revolutions and the autopilot. He was feeling a little queasy. He'd never been seasick, but he was having all the symptoms. He took to his bunk and dozed.

When he woke, it was after five. Sunset was less than a half hour away. He better finish his mission. He stood up and stretched. He put the severed hand in the pouch of his jockstrap and went up to the bridge.

He throttled back the engines and then put the shifters in neutral. *Justice* was rolling and wanted to lie broadside to the waves. By giving the boat a little throttle, she moved slowly ahead quartering the waves. *Justice* now had a better motion for working in the aft cockpit. Occasionally, a bigger wave would push *Justice* off course, but the autopilot brought her back.

The Judge unwrapped the three-foot bronze statue. He grunted as he lifted the statue onto the stern rail. It lay on its right side, back to the Gulf. The wind flensed the red patina off the statue.

—Ah, my little hand. My talisman is keeping me safe and cleaning you, too, Margaux, said the judge to the statue. Your bronze hand protects me from your lover's nasty tricks. And now, my whore-wife, you shall swim with the fishes as pristine as the day that bastard Jack Mahler created you. Say your prayers. I am The Judge, and the verdict is to condemn you to the deep for adultery and disloyalty. Say hello to Davy Jones, you bitch. Try fucking him you bronze slut.

Jack's cell phone rang.

—Hello, said Jack.

- Manny Ramirez from ADT, calling Jack Mahler.
- This is Jack Mahler.
- Do you know the password for your alarm system?
- 8836-5397.
- What's your mother's maiden name?
- Erika Swann, Erika with a "k" and Swann with two n's.
- And the name of your first pet?
- Boulder, a Maine Coon cat.
- One last thing, do you remember your four-digit token number?
- 6996
- All correct. Mr. Mahler, I'm standing in your studio. The studio door was open, and the telephone line was cut. I don't see any obvious damage or missing items, but you'll have to make an inventory.
- What about the big stone statue in the studio?
- Looks perfect. That's some woman you used as a model.
- She was a wonderful find.
- Jack, who is that? Margaux asked.
- ADT, mouthed Jack pointing at his cell phone. Excuse me, Mr. Ramirez, what about the gallery? Does it look like anything was stolen?
- It appears they came through the bathroom window, replied Ramirez, avoiding the question. It's open. Looks like they left a flashlight and an axe behind in the parking lot.
- Well, I didn't keep an axe in the studio, said Jack. What's the next step?
- I closed and locked the window. Later this morning the Verizon techs will come and restore the phone line. Until they arrive, I'll keep watch in my car. I doubt they will return.
- Anything I can do?
- Nope. It looks like they were sick in the parking lot, whisky and peanut butter. Probably kids.
- Yuck. Thank you for getting back to me so quickly.
- That's why you pay us. Have a good day, Mr. Mahler
- Thanks, said Jack ending the call.

The Judge waited for the perfect wave. He needed to use the motion of the boat to help him push the statue clear of the swimming platform and the attached fish roller. *Justice* rose, tilted, and slid off the waves. He balanced the statue on the edge of the rail.

Maybe I should try to stand it on the swimming platform, he thought. He had to think this through. In this seaway, putting the statue on the swim platform would be tricky, but once it was on the platform, a gentle push and splash, bye-bye Margaux.

The judge lifted the statue off the rail and laid it down next to the fighting chair. He took two large seat cushions from the lazarette and placed them on the stern rail. He grasped the statue by the left leg and hand. He slid the statue over the rail and onto the swim platform.

the top of the mountain, the face of the Laughing Coyote appeared on the surface of the sun. Carlos smiled at the image.

—Coyote, you owe me one.

Margaux and Jack sat in field level seats at Soldier Field behind the Bears' bench. Margaux liked them because she was near Troy, who sat unused on the bench. So far the game was not going well for the Bears. Packers' quarterback Aaron Rodgers was picking apart the Bears secondary. The Bears were scoring, but only field goals to the Packers touchdowns. It was the fourth quarter, and the score stood at Packers 28, the Bears 12. The Packers had the ball on their own 42-yard line.

—Jack, said Margaux, clutching Jack's arm, look! One of the coaches is talking to Troy.

—Good! He might get to play after all.

Troy ran onto the field donning his helmet, said something to the defensive huddle and lined up.

Rodgers took the snap and fired at his tight end. Steve Harris, Troy's former college teammate at Michigan, timed his rush perfectly. Steve tipped the ball in the air. Troy caught it, eluded a tackle and ran down the sideline. Aaron Rodgers bumped him out of bounds four yards from the goal line.

Margaux jumped up and down, screaming and hugging Jack, who yelled and celebrated with Margaux. Soldier Field erupted.

Troy came out of the game holding the ball. His teammates pounded his back and helmet-bumped him. The defensive coach grabbed his arm and slapped him on the butt. Troy saw Margaux in the stands and saluted her with the ball.

The Bears scored, but it was too late to win the game. Final Score: Packers 28 Bears 19.

Margaux's cell phone rang. She and Jack were asleep in their hotel room.

—What's that? Jack asked.

—It's my cell phone.

—Maybe you should answer it.

—I'm too sleepy and had too much wine.

—I'll get it.

Jack got out of bed and took Margaux's cell phone from her purse.

—Hello?

—I'm trying to reach Mrs. Margaux Howland. This is the Chief Petty Officer

Cunningham with U.S. Coast Guard, Cortez, Florida.

—Please hold.

—Margaux, it's the U.S. Coast Guard for you.

Margaux felt a tightening in the pit of her stomach. She had expected this call for twenty years.

—One minute, please. She is asleep.

—Take your time. We know it's early.

Jack handed the cell phone to Margaux.

—This is Margaux Howland.

—This is Chief Petty Officer Susan Cunningham, U. S. Coast Guard, Cortez, Florida. Is your husband Judge Leland Howland?

—Yes. Has there been a problem?

—Mrs. Howland, Judge Howland's boat, *Justice*, was discovered motoring on autopilot by a commercial fishing vessel early this morning. There was no one aboard. Your husband is presumed missing.

—What does that mean?

—He may have fallen overboard, or committed suicide by jumping overboard. He was last seen leaving Marina Jack about one-thirty yesterday afternoon.

Margot felt her stomach knot. Even though she despised the Judge, this was not how it was supposed to end.

—What should I do?

—Can you come to the Coast Guard station in Cortez?

—I'm in Chicago. I'm here because my son plays for the Chicago Bears.

—Hey, are you the mother of Troy Howland who made that incredible interception against the Packers yesterday?

—Oh ...yes, yes I am. But what about Lee, my husband? Is he dead?

—Without a corpse, I can't confirm that. One of the commercial fishing vessels from Cortez spotted *Justice* approximately fifteen miles west of Sarasota. How soon can you come to Cortez?

—I've been living in our Santa Fe home, so I'll have to change my flight plans. Maybe Tuesday or Wednesday.

—There was no note on the boat. Suicides usually, but not always, leave notes. We're assuming he fell overboard. It frequently happens with men his age. They urinate over the side of the boat, suffer a heart attack and fall in the water.

—Well, I know Lee hated anyone to use the head. Women used a bucket and men let go over the side.

—Sorry, ma'am, that's our experience. Will you call me when you return to Sarasota so we can arrange a meeting? There will be an investigation. I will tell the Sarasota police I have contacted you.

—Yes, Officer Susan Cunningham?

—Yes, ma'am.

—I'll call as soon as I arrive in Sarasota.

Six Months Later

Jack entered the back door of Margaux Howland's Sarasota home. Margaux was sitting in the breakfast nook writing e-mails.

—How did it go, Jack? asked Margaux, rising to give him a kiss.

—They bankrupted me. That bull dyke judge let my wife's attorney out-maneuvered my lawyer. I've lost almost everything. Her lawyer made a fool of us. I'm lucky I didn't end up in jail. I have 72 hours to vacate my studio and home. All I have is my art, my van, my cat and you if you'll have me.

—Jack, don't say that. I'm not going to abandon you.

—But I have nothing.

—But you're here. We're here together.

Jack took Margaux in his arms and gave her a long kiss.

—I love you, Margaux.

—I love you too, Jack. Why don't you open that bottle of champagne in the fridge?

—Good idea. You always have good ideas.

Jack opened the champagne and filled two flutes.

—To freedom, said Jack.

—To freedom and us, said Margaux, clinking Jack's glass.

—The Coast Guard telephoned while you were in court. A shark fisherman caught a bull shark off the Manatee River two days ago. In the stomach was Leland's Rolex watch engraved with his name.

—Yikes! That's not a good way to go. I wonder what happened.

—There's more.

—More? What?

—Some diving students taking open-water tests found the bronze statue and Leland's belt.

—That's curious. Sounds like some foul play.

—A Detective Martin McGinnis thinks Leland was trying to dump the statue in the Gulf and might have accidentally fallen into the Gulf. It was pretty rough the day Leland disappeared.

—Why would he want to dump the statue? He paid \$10,000 for it plus the foundry bill.

—Who knows? Why was the statue in the boat 15 miles offshore? Leland was mentally unstable. He thought he had a rash on his face.

—So, who has the statue now?

—The dive school. I offered to donate \$1500 to the school in return for the statue. I'm

anxious to see it.

—Let's do that tomorrow. I've got to get over being financially raped today.

—Jack, don't worry. I have a home to sell, one-third of the judge's big trust fund, and his \$500,000 insurance policy. The children and I have decided to keep the Santa Fe house.

—So, I guess you're now officially a widow? asked Jack.

—Not officially. It will take some time and a court order.

—Well, we're both single and fancy-free, said Jack, trying to be upbeat. What should we do?

—Let's move to Europe. I don't want to live here anymore. Jack, we're free to do as we want. Where should we live?

—I always wanted to live on the Côte d'Azur.

Carlos sat on the patio in Margaux's Santa Fe garden. The firmament of the Milky Way glowing overhead illuminated the scene. The bronze statue of Margaux gazed upon him from atop its fountain pedestal. Did Margaux know his magic? Did Jack know the power Carlos invested in Margaux's likeness? Carlos shrugged and walked to his truck. Coyote still comes at sunset to keep the rabbits away.

Finis